

Chapter 190: Contacts and Contracts

Jayce couldn't remember what had happened. He only remembered fire and then falling before he found himself floating in a void. "Not again," he immediately stated to himself. "Am I really dead, again?" he questioned, looking around for anything familiar. He floated in an endless expanse of darkness, periodically he spotted near-translucent lines – rings – that surrounded him in every direction. As they stretched further away from him, they appeared to get closer to each other, eventually collapsing into a white horizon in the darkness.

No, he thought, not dead. This is different. A border between life and death. But I've died before, and I've also nearly died before, so what's different this time? "The Demons," Jayce realised, feeling something observing him. He twisted in the void, spotting two creatures floating in the aether with him. "So am I dead or not?" Jayce questioned to Asmodeus and Paimon. Asmodeus looked monstrous in the void. The giant bat normally looked rather cute in Jayce's eyes. He typically looked like a small fruit bat, only radiating a considerable amount of heat, smelling of smoke, with glowing lines amongst his black fur, like embers in a fire. Here, he was colossal, dripping with magma and with a pair of red and orange eyes that glowed in the darkness. Paimon's crown of golden horns also seemed to glow in the void, her brown fur looked fuller and the golden patch on her chest shone. Her flame-like black and orange eyes were alert and watchful.

They both watched him curiously, before seeming to take note of each other. "I thought I was doing this?" Paimon questioned to Asmodeus. The bat shook his head. "No, I care not for what you have foreseen – of either of us, Jayce and I are the best match," Asmodeus stated. Paimon shook her head, turning instead to look at Jayce. "You have not yet died, however the wounds you have sustained are... intense. It may be time before you are healed... if you are healed. You were not the only injured amongst the crew so resources are divided," Paimon stated.

Jayce glanced between the two. *Even with some of us injured... there should be enough to keep me alive. Yuthura knows what she's doing and, if not her, then Morgana and Astris are capable of keeping me alive until resources are freed up.* "So you're here to offer me a contract?" Jayce presumed, looking between the pair. "Yes," both Demons stated. Jayce folded his arms, glancing between the two. "You have a choice to make. One of us, or risk your crew with your absence," Asmodeus laid out. *Cunning bastards.*

"So what's the situation? Did we win? Are there more enemies on the horizon?" Jayce questioned. Both Demons remained conveniently silent. "Ah, I see," he

stated. "It is nothing personal, Captain, but an evolution from pet to Captain is hard to pass up," Paimon stated honestly. Jayce nodded, thinking up an expansive string of swear words. "How much time has passed?" he questioned. "As humans go, you're stubbornly clever. I will say nothing, nor will Lady Paimon. Pick between us. As far as your crew are aware – this was Caelie's suggestion."

Jayce looked between the two Demons. They had both asked him already, and he had been tempted before, but the risks were unknown – despite the benefits. *Look like a bat or look like a bear?* He shook his head, frustrated, curious and mostly angry at getting into this situation to begin with. "What can you offer me?" he questioned. At the very least he was going to get the best deal out of it. "Raw destructive power," Asmodeus stated bluntly, but Jayce was looking towards Paimon – his choice already made.

"You know my gifts, you know my magic. I hold the power of foresight," she stated plainly. "I offer much more than-" Jayce dismissed the Demon, Asmodeus vanishing from his body in an instant. Paimon looked surprised, but her expression quickly changed as she realised that Jayce had accepted her offer. "How does your power work?" he asked plainly. She thought for a moment, thinking about how best to explain it.

"You have spoken of your girl, the Mage, who has dabbled with the future before. She saw a glimpse of what was to come and acted swiftly to change it. Time, as I understand it, is a river. It flows and is continuous, but it can be dammed or rediverted, yet it will always reach its natural conclusion. I can reach into these conclusions to leave a moment there. I cannot change the past, only tamper with the future. But it may not be enough to have a permanent effect. I could not stop you capturing me. I could not stop myself falling from the Heavens. I cannot prevent the war that will come, but I can put myself in the best position I can be: with you. So, I ask you, Captain – what are your terms?"

Jayce thought for a moment before nodding. "Show me everything that you can about the future. Everything. I will remain in control but you will have a say and - when the time comes - we will part ways and you will leave with your kind. You may not be able to change the future, but I can. So show me the worst of what is to come, and I will show you the best outcome that we can reach together," Jayce bargained.

His eyes fluttered open and Jayce found himself in his bed. The room was not empty, far from it, with Little Witch sleeping on a nearby pillow, Caelie curled

up by his feet at the base of his bed, and Astris snoring away in his chair. Jayce immediately looked down at his body: he was wrapped in bandages, some stained with blood. *Paimon?* Jayce thought. A moment passed and he questioned whether it had all been a delusion. *I am here*, returned the Demon in his mind.

A soft purring drew his attention elsewhere as Little Witch noticed his stirring and curled up into his neck. He pet her and then slowly sat up, failing to not disturb Caelie as her eyes shot open and she bolted upright. "Jayce?" she questioned, faltering before deciding against caution and diving into his chest. "Hey, hey!" he told her as she cried with relief into his chest. "I'm okay, I'm okay," he reassured.

"Gods," muttered Astris, waking and standing up before approaching Jayce. She unconsciously reached out and placed a hand on his cheek, staring intently at him. "I'm not a bear, am I?" he asked with genuine concern. She cracked a smile, placing a reassuring hand on Caelie's head as she pulled back and wiped her tears before laughing. "No, and don't say that to Bjorn – he's been half-hoping you would be. Your... eyes – they've changed," she stated. Jayce stood up and immediately rushed to his bathroom, Caelie and Astris both following. "Not bad," Caelie said softly, her own demonic hazel and gold eyes full of hope and relief. "I'm going to miss the blue," Astris stated, her heterochromic white and obsidian eyes full of caution and concern. Jayce's eyes radiated like fire, the irises orange and black.

"So where are we?" Jayce questioned, unsticking the bandages from his body before hopping in the shower. Astris leant next to the slightly ajar door of his bathroom whilst Caelie played with the black cat on Jayce's bed. "Somewhere quite special in full honesty," Astris stated. "After we annihilated the Machinist's fleet we sailed north a little, finding refuge amongst the Rokken islands. We're on top of one, but it seems to settle every couple of days before marching onwards. No one is going to find us here and there is a surprising amount of natural resources we can use."

Why do you use so many hair products?

"Quiet," Jayce said assertively to the Demon in his head. A noise of curiosity came from the bathroom door. "No, sorry, not you," Jayce quickly clarified. "Right, uh, I guess you now know what two voices in one head is like," Astris stated with a small smile. Jayce rolled his eyes, stepping out of his shower and grabbing his towel before emerging into his quarters. Caelie turned and looked away, whilst Astris struggled to do the same. "Ahem," Jayce uttered. Astris

flushed red and stepped towards the door. "I'll tell Bjorn you're up, come on Caelie."

They both departed, leaving Jayce a moment to change before he felt an uncomfortable stretching feeling in his neck. "Perhaps I underestimated just how much attention you receive from the crew. Here I was hoping for mostly peace," Paimon stated from a mouth on his neck. A horrific thought popped into Jayce's mind of how Alara would react to his new addition, before an even more horrific thought of having a Demon copilot whilst he was with her. "Ugh," came Paimon's voice, reminding Jayce that she now shared his thoughts. "Oh Gods, what have I done?" he muttered.

Bjorn was waiting for him outside, a clear look of disappointment on his face. "What?" Jayce questioned. "Where you hoping for another bear aboard?" Bjorn chuckled. "Is it so wrong that I was hoping we could be brothers in looks too?" Bjorn responded, placing a firm hand on Jayce's shoulder as his smile faded and an expression of concern and guilt crossed his face. "I'm okay," Jayce stated, wincing a little as a spark of pain crossed his mind as a future event flashed though his memory. He shut it away. "Okay, just let me know if that changes," Bjorn stated.

"Oh, uh, so Caelie can make portals, Asmodeus controls magma, Baal controls blood – what did Paimon give you?" Bjorn questioned. Jayce faltered. "A... small bit of foresight," Jayce lied. Bjorn nodded, folding his arms. "Lucky for some. Does it show you how the Revelry is going to go?" he questioned. Jayce shook his head. "No, only big events," he stated. Bjorn frowned. "How is the Revelry not a big event?"

Jayce dismissed the question, turning his attention to their surroundings. He was immediately surprised by how high up they were. The island was only a few hundred metres wide but from the stationary position the rokken was sat in they were nearly a hundred metres above the ocean. The sun was beautiful as it lay just above the ocean, the morning coming to a close. The horizon was mostly empty, bar a few other rokken marching in the distance.

"So what's the plan then?" Bjorn questioned, stepping forwards and leaning against the aft-deck railing. "We stay here for a while and prepare for the Revelry. I'm going to send out some letters to our allies, try and get in contact with them. I think we're overdue a catch up with Tim and Kitty," Jayce stated. Bjorn nodded in agreement. "Tempest put in a request for more resources. He has an idea of where we can restock on energised alloy for the main cannon but will find out in

a few days if that's for real," Bjorn stated. Jayce smiled, looking towards the forward cannon. "Then that's the plan."

It was several days before Jayce received a response from Kitty, and after scanning the letter for anything inappropriate Jayce sat down in the living quarters with Bjorn and Astris to go through it.

My dear Jayce,

I am so so happy to receive your letter, I was beginning to worry someone had sunk you or taken off with your head. I apologise for my own inability in making contact, I have been dealing with my own problems: a Dragonlord to be precise. She's been a real pain in my... but that's beside the point. I am sorry to say I will not be able to meet up with you, I really, really, really wish I could, but this hunter is tricky and she's obsessive and I do not want to put you (or your crew) in harm's way.

I would advise wearing contacts over your eyes. Although my own little friend is bemused and excited to hear you have your own headache, it would be an advantage to keep it hidden. Some fool has been filling the Guild papers about having a headache of their own and people are starting to take note. It's not too much of a problem for me, but for both our sakes it's an advantage you shouldn't waste. I am also in agreement with Commander Kai about the loss of those blue eyes of yours.

I saw your better half not too long ago and she's looking well, and strong (not us strong, but... maybe someday). I wish you both well.

Say hi to your crew for me.

Much love,

Always,

Pirate Lord Kitty Deliver of the Delivery Kats xxx

P.S. Keep your eyes on the skies for the bitch known as Dragonlord Thákane, kill her for me if you come across her. The boys say hi.

"She doesn't change, does she?" Bjorn stated, glancing over the letter as he leant back in his chair before passing it over to Astris. Jayce smiled and shook his head. "No, but it does raise some fair points. Who's she talking about?" Jayce questioned, looking to Astris. "Marisha, could you come to the living quarters?" Astris questioned into her communicator. "Only one real expert on world affairs aboard this ship, and it's not me. Which of the two are you referring to?"

"Either," Jayce returned, "there's more she's not saying but she wouldn't mention them without reason."

The door opened and Marisha stepped inside. "You called?" she questioned. Jayce gestured to a chair and she walked over to Bjorn's side before sitting in his lap. Jayce passed over the letter and she read it quickly. "The Demonlord or the Dragonlord? Which do you want to talk about first?" Marisha questioned. "Start with the Demon," Jayce stated, standing up and retrieving their mugs from the kitchen before taking some beers from the fridge. He slid them across the table before sitting back in his chair. "He calls himself the Piper."

"A Bard?" Jayce questioned. Marisha nodded, but there was some ambiguity amongst her expression. "I think so... it fits Zeta's description and the arrogance and bombastic nature of his actions would account for it. He charms people, a thief, but also... I've no other better word for it – an amateur Pirate Lord. He's said loudly and clearly that he has a Demon within him: Byleth," Marisha explained.

"Byleth? That's one of ours, we must retrieve him," stated Paimon in Jayce's head. "A loyalist of Baal's," Jayce stated. "We should try and get the Demon out." "If he's looking to become a Pirate Lord then odds are he will come to us if we try," Astris stated. "It might be a good chance to see if we can pull the Demon out of him without killing the host," she added. Jayce nodded. *Forget the host. No,* Jayce thought back. *We may need this in the future.*

"And the Dragonlord?" Jayce questioned, shutting out the Demon. Marisha faltered as she read Jayce's expression, but she ignored his clear annoyance. "Thákane, a princess of some tribe. Supposedly she has a water dragon of sorts bound to her, a giant flying snake of sorts. She's a rumoured replacement for one of the empty seats. People like her, and she's powerful - we'll probably see her at the Revelry unless Kitty kills her," Marisha concluded. Jayce nodded. "Sounds simple enough. Three Dragons to one shouldn't be a problem." They concluded their meeting a little while later.

It was a few days more before Jayce heard from Tim Kane and the response came in a very different way from what he had been expecting. He was sat on the deck, enjoying the spring sun when he heard a whooshing sound next to him. Jayce immediately sat up, setting his romance novel down and looking towards the portal that had manifested. It swirled in a mixture of pink and green before eventually the inside shimmered into a transparent window. On the other side was Mirabelle Delyth.

"Howdy Jayce, how you doing?" she said, her high-pitched voice immediately irritating. "Mirabelle? What? Why? Uh, hi," Jayce stammered, confused by her sudden call, the portal only showing her upper body. "You messaged, right?" she questioned. "Uh, for Tim – yeah?" Jayce returned. She sighed and pulled a face. "Fine, I'll get him. Tim! Call!" she yelled out, somewhere behind her. "Just a moment," she stated, holding up a finger before turning and walking away.

Jayce stood up and leaned forwards towards the portal, the inside showed a castle of sorts, or at the very least the inside of a dark stone tower. He could see a laboratory of sorts, and a large pink bed. Tim swiftly emerged to block the view, his face flustered. "Jayce, hey, sorry, I was going to call later," he said to the side with clear frustration. "All... good," Jayce returned. "Did you get my letter?" Tim nodded.

"Yeah, I did," he stated. Tim didn't look particularly different from before, he'd grown a little bulkier, with more muscle on his frame. He had light-brown skin, had grown out his messy black hair, had grown a thick mess of a beard, and his eyes held an adult level of fatigue to them. "You look... different," he stated, his eyes locked onto Jayce's – reminding him once again to ask Yuthura to make him contacts. "You too, you look older – you alright?"

Tim nodded, letting out a weary sigh. "It's been a trying few months. Too many fools have come for Mirabelle, we're set up in the east waiting for the Revelry." "Are you two...?" Jayce questioned. Tim nodded, and Jayce chose to ignore the blatant age difference. "Good for you," Jayce stated. "So are you in her crew?" Tim laughed. "No, she's in mine. After a bit of duelling, she admitted I'm the better Mage--"

"That's a load of crap, don't listen to him, Jayce," came Mirabelle's voice, from out of the view. Jayce laughed as Tim dodged a glass vial thrown at him. "Anyway," Tim stated. "I'm glad to see you're still alive, I was worried after seeing the images of the battle near Novalis. I'm guessing you'll be at the Revelry?" Jayce nodded. "Good, we're staying put, but things have eased up after we made our point to the hunters."

"Made your point?" Jayce questioned. Tim nodded, turning and looking in Mirabelle's presumed location. "People won't give up unless they understand the danger a Pirate Lord presents. We made that point very clear, you should too. Establish yourself as something not worth touching, as long as fools think they have a chance, they will try you - and with time running out people will be getting desperate."

Jayce nodded. It made sense. "I need to go, I've got duties to tend to before bed. I will see you soon. Stay alive, Pirate Lord. Good luck!" Tim stated. Jayce nodded in appreciation. "You too," he stated, the portal disappearing. Jayce sat back and thought on what Tim had said before eventually he got up. "Bjorn, it's time. Let's get that alloy and then we're going to make a stand."

Seize the Seas Tales: Eighty-Four Out of Unknown

Damian lay face down in a pool of his own blood and drool. Sabine let out a scream as she popped her shoulder back into its socket. Enki lay slumped against a toppled and cracked stone pillar. Cinderlee knelt next to Morgause, nursing her with healing potions, one after another. But Wicke stood tall, and - for the most part - proud. They had made it to the eighty-fourth floor, and had found the stairs to the next level. They had beaten the cyclops, outsmarted the sphinxes, and now had killed the werewolves. There was little mythology left for the Dungeon to pull from – they must have been nearing the end.

Wicke turned and looked at her crew. They had gotten stronger over the last few months, and with every push they came closer to the end. "We'll be back, Dungeon, just you wait. One last time. One final push. The last and final run," she stated.