

Chapter 191: God of War

There was a nervous, fearful, yet excited energy to the city of Novalis. Everywhere that Silena walked she could see people waiting, all gossiping to each other about what the upcoming Guild announcement could be about. The other street urchins were all taking bets on it; an announcement this big could only mean one thing: a Pirate Lord had something to say. That or the Sea Sovereign herself.

She approached a stall gently. For once the teller didn't scream at her or tell her to run to her parents – as if that was possible. "Excuse me, can I watch from here?" she asked carefully, patting out her rag-like dress and fluttering her eyes to the elderly man. He observed her cautiously: she wasn't yet old enough to flaunt herself in a way that would allow her into the places she wanted to go, but that didn't mean she didn't have other tricks she'd learnt. "A pearl cost," he stated.

She faltered - that price was extortionate to watch something he was going to watch himself. "Half," she countered, sacrificing the next couple of meals. If one of the legends from the strange northern realms was going to make an announcement, and with only a month to go – twenty-eight days – until the Revelry, she couldn't miss it. It could be world changing. "Deal," he stated. She reached for her drawstring purse but he held up a hand. "Pay after, come round here," he stated, inviting her around the small stall to where he had set up a small display screen that was currently rolling through the daily announcements.

He stood up, letting her hop up onto the rickety wooden stall he spent the day sat on. The screen changed. "It's starting!" clamoured a series of voices in all directions. "Good afternoon, welcome to this special broadcast. A little under an hour ago we received a special message from Ex-Pirate Lord Jayce Exarga. We have just verified its validity and permission has been granted from her Supreme Excellency, the Sea Sovereign herself, to share it with you. Please listen closely."

The screen shifted, changing to display a bounty poster of a scarred and dark-haired man with piercing blue eyes and a not-so-serious grin. Silena gasped at the amount displayed beneath it. She could hardly count that many zeros. "Hello world!" came a deep yet soothing voice from the device. "Now, I'm more than certain most of you know of me, or at the very least have heard of me. Some of you have even tried to kill me. So let me introduce myself to the rest of you: I am Jayce Exarga, Pirate Lord of the past and Pirate Lord of the future."

The screen changed, showing the bounty poster of a giant, polar bear therian. 'Bjorn,' it read. Silena was again surprised by the image shown: it showed the bear from afar, towering over people around him - children like her that looked miniscule next to him. They clung to him and he was laughing, happy. He had one less zero but the amount was still more money than she believed any one person could have.

"Time is running out," Jayce stated. "The deadline to stop me from reclaiming my title is ticking away. I will be making my way to the Revelry. I will be there." The screen changed again, this time showing a woman with pointy ears, and long canines. Her eyes were different colours: one white, the other black - but the insides seemed to glow a bloody red. She was stood leaning against the wall in the shade of a building, one hand on her large hat, the other hand on the holster of a large pistol. She stared directly at the camera, in a way that caused Silena to shudder unconsciously. 'Astris Kai'.

"But for my sanity, and the safety of everybody on that route, I invite everyone wishing to try to stop me to come straight at me now," Jayce continued. The bounty poster changed again, this time displaying a young girl with flame-like orange hair, amber eyes, and large glowing book floating in the air before her. She was saying something, her arms outstretched and blue flames flowing around her. 'Wicke'.

"You will find us just north of Novalis. On top of an island with a split peak. The island will move every five days, but will remain in roughly the same region, amongst the other rokken," Jayce stated. Immediately voices of excitement spread around. Crews that had been lying in wait rushed to their ships. And all around the world, Jayce's allies grew wide grins and shook their heads, their thoughts uniform on his strategy: it was very Jayce.

The screen shifted, rolling through the rest of the crew's bounties. "So," Jayce finalised. "Come and find us. We'll be waiting for you. But put your affairs in order first, and don't waste your lives without thought to your loved ones. Happy hunting." The screen changed, immediately showing a map of the Old World and a red cross marked in the location Ex-Pirate Lord Exarga had mentioned. "We will now resume with normal programmes," stated the Guild presenter. Silena hopped off the stool and reached into her coin pouch, but again the old man held up his hand. "What are you buying? Fruit, vegetables?" he questioned, turning his hand towards the produce across his stall. Her eyes

widened as she glanced from him to the people rushing to their ships. Perhaps not everyone was as evil as she thought.

"We've really done it now," Bjorn stated, as he and Jayce rushed around the Stacked Hand making their final preparations. Jayce's heart hammered in his chest, both out of excitement and with the heavy weight of grief over the blood they were about to shed. "Better now than on the way," Jayce rationalised, coming to a stop outside of Tempest's workshop – the djinn hard at work. "Are they ready?" he questioned. "Soon, Captain. These alloys are not as refined so it is taking longer to forge the weapons, but they will be ready. I have sent the first batch up." Jayce nodded appreciatively.

"Status?" Jayce questioned to Bjorn, as he returned from his own inspection. "Ready," Bjorn stated. "Shifts are assigned, the first combat crew is ready. The ship is concealed, thanks to Gaea, and Falconer is taking note of the first wave as we speak. Medical supplies are beyond capacity, food and drink stores are filled. Golems are on guard, on and off the ship. The Dragons are fed enough to follow orders, but still hungry for a fight. And I'm ready to give those idiots one hell of a beating," Bjorn concluded. Jayce nodded in agreement. He'd given a fair warning. Only scum would show themselves. "Captain, they are here," came Falconer's voice through the communicator. Jayce and Bjorn looked at each other. Jayce extended a fist and Bjorn bumped it. "Let's send them to the abyss." "Good luck, Captain."

Jayce stepped out onto the main deck. Even the crew that weren't due to fight for a few hours were stood waiting, eager to see just how many ships had come. There were several fleets of foes, dozens of ships in all directions. "Target is not here," confirmed Falconer. Jayce nodded to himself before looking towards his first combat crew: Astris, Mai Lu and Thalia. "Do we get to go all out?" questioned Thalia, practically salivating as she looked at the foes in all directions. "We do," Jayce confirmed. "But first, let's send a repeat of our warning. Boys! Caelie!" Jayce called out. Caelie conjured a portal in front of the forward gun, creating the other side of it in front of the closest fleet. "Fire!" yelled Fenn, Ohno pulling the lever.

The entire ship shifted on the dry dock that Gaea had made as it launched a sphere of death through the portal. The sound was awesome, deafening and animalistic in its ferocity. "How's the barrel?" Jayce questioned, as an explosion consumed the north, the entire ocean folding beneath the tear in existence that the blast had ripped. Ships that hadn't been obliterated on the cannonball's path

to its destination found themselves dragged into the canyon that the wave of air had created, before the rest found themselves reeling from the swell created from the detonation. "At least two more before repairs are needed," Wam returned.

"Send another - same type, different fleet. Then keep the last in reserve, but get Tempest to do some maintenance," Jayce commanded, turning to find Thalia missing. "Where'd she go?" he questioned, only for Astris to pull a face at him. "You told her to go all out, did you honestly think she'd wait?" she questioned. He rubbed his forehead, he should have known better. "Right, try not to hit-" The cannon roared once more, a feeling of dread crossing Jayce's chest as he questioned whether Caelie had looked before they fired. "Oi!" came an immediate response from Thalia. "They were mine!"

Jayce sighed, turning to Astris and shaking his head. "I've got this," she stated. "Dragons, go!" she commanded, the hull clanging open as Taranis and Zhurong surged forwards. "About time!" came a voice that Jayce didn't recognise. He turned to Mai Lu. "Was that you?" he questioned, a boom of thunder silencing Mai Lu's response. He shook it off and turned to the mayhem that had been unleashed. The Dragons had immediately set their eyes on the flyers and ships in the air, a considerable amount of them dispatched by the Machinist, based on the reddish colours they had been painted. From their initial ferocity, it was clear they wanted payback for the last time.

"Our turn," Jayce stated, turning towards Caelie. "I'll take the west," he stated, a portal opening in front of him that he immediately leapt through. He found himself a few hundred metres up in the air above one of the fleets. *You asked for a ringside view.* Paimon laughed inside his head. *Not what I had in mind.* Jayce's clothes disappeared beneath his suit of armour, Sola and Luna both extending outwards into a copy of his mother's greataxes. They sparked with red lightning, the crews below immediately pointing upwards in desperate panic as he tucked and dove faster before slamming the weapons down in a ship shattering strike.

"Ugh," Red stated, a week later as he wandered up to the Stacked Hand from his shift. "Are you injured?" Morgana questioned as he collapsed onto the main deck. "No, but the ocean is filthy. It's like swimming through a broken house. So many bodies, so many scavengers, so much debris!" he protested. "How much longer, it's been a week?" he questioned. Jayce nodded with sympathy. There had been a definite drop in activity, but ships were still arriving. Most turned away upon seeing the smoke-filled, corpse-ridden, and apocalyptic scene that

surrounded the Stacked Hand in all directions. But a few were still foolish enough to attempt navigating the flotsam.

"Are those ships over there just waiting for something?" Zeta questioned, pointing east. Jayce shook his head. "No, Astris dealt with them the first night. They're dead ships," he stated. Zeta shuddered, imagining the terror those crews had experienced with a blood-gorged vampire unleashed upon them in the middle of the night. She faltered. *Could make a good song, or at the very least a good painting.* "Right," she stated. "Well, how much longer are we going to wait for that Demonlord? He may not even be coming and we do need to start making our way to the Revelry soon. I'd also like to do some shopping in Novalis."

Jayce opened his mouth to respond, but Falconer's voice interrupted him. "Captain, I believe the Piper is here," he stated. Zeta's eyes widened and she beamed. "See, I'm just that good at manifesting," she stated proudly. Morgana shook her head. "Sure, you are. Jayce, I'm still not sure if it will work. It's still a longshot," she stated. Jayce nodded in agreement. To forcefully pull a Demon out hadn't been attempted yet, but if it worked... "Mai Lu, Caelie, I need you both on the main deck."

Jayce looked at his assembled squad and then at the secondary squad. "Follow the plan," he stated clearly. Zeta began to chant before silence filled everything but Jayce's mind. Caelie opened a portal and he, Ordo and Mai Lu marched through. They landed on the main deck of an unfamiliar ship, the crew freezing in place as Jayce unleashed a wave of Panic. Mai Lu transformed, revealing Baal from within herself before she pointed at the Piper – a tall and skinny man dressed in an extravagant dark purple suit, with a dark goatee, pale skin and long greasy hair under a top hat. "Kneel, Byleth!" Baal commanded, his words silent to Jayce and Ordo. The Demon emerged from within, confused and surprised before he was forced back in by his host, but by then it was too late. Jayce and Ordo grabbed the Piper, forcing a gag over his mouth before Mai Lu severed his legs with a sharp shard of black-red crystal.

He screamed as Jayce and Ordo dragged him back through the portal, throwing him down onto the ritual circle Morgana had painted on the floor. It matched the one that they used to get Paimon and Asmodeus into their doll forms. The portal closed before the crew could attempt to rescue their Captain, Bjorn holding down the man in the circle before Mai Lu impaled him from above with a large and brutal shard of blood. His pleas were voiceless, his magic useless, as they fell on

deaf ears. He writhed beneath the shard, his body trying to regenerate the lost limbs and the gaping hole in his shoulder.

The circle glowed a bright red, blindingly so. "I command you, Byleth – accept this new body!" Baal commanded. The magic faded and the circle disappeared, the Piper laying limp on the floor with his eyes glazed over – he was still breathing and his wounds had healed. The small clay doll next to him wriggled and writhed before gaining shape. There was a burst of long orange fur that spread out in all directions. It grew a tail, whiskers, and then pointed ears on top of its head. The cat stood up on his hind legs, stretching before turning to the group. His eyes were a brilliant green and blue mixture, and, bar standing on two legs, he didn't look particularly demonic. He said something, pointing to his previous host before folding his arms.

The Piper sat up, staring at the crew in terror. Jayce stepped forwards holding out his hand but a shard of red-black crystal flew past, decapitating the powerless man. In an instant, Zeta's magic disappeared and Jayce rounded on Mai Lu. "He was defenceless!" he snapped, a hiss coming from Byleth as he scratched Jayce's leg. "How dare you speak to the King like that, mortal!" Byleth snarled. Jayce reached down and picked up the cat by the scruff of his neck. "Put me down!" protested the Demon. "I'll get to you in a minute!" Jayce commanded, Byleth silencing immediately.

"Lord Exarga, the host retains its abilities – even without the Demon inside. He was a danger and would have realised it quickly. After a week of death, one more cannot weigh on your conscience," Baal countered. *It's true, it's in our pact.* Jayce grit his teeth before letting out a sigh. "There was more we could have learnt. We don't know for certain if the process is lethal or not," Jayce stated. Baal, or Mai Lu, shrugged. "Byleth's return is all that mattered. Welcome, my friend, there is much to fill you in on."

Jayce tossed the cat to Mai Lu, turning to the corpse of the Piper. "Caelie, open a portal back to his ship, please," Jayce stated. She did so and he tossed the corpse and its head through. "At the least it should deter any others from coming at us. Once word spreads that even the Demonlord was killed by us, I think most people will turn away," Bjorn stated, wiping the blood splatter off his chest. Jayce hoped so. He really, really hoped so.

It was few hours later before the word truly spread about the Piper's demise, and the result was immediate. Anyone who had thought the risk was worth it now had undeniable proof that it wasn't – especially once the Piper's crew started

speaking of how their Captain had died. As the survivors fled, the Rising Aces took their first breaths of true freedom. It was over, truly over, and now no one would mess with them. No one would try to stop them on their journey to the Revelry. They had won.

They let the peace sink in for a few days, letting the smoke fade and the debris sink, and during that time Byleth was brought up to speed. The walking, talking cat settling in quickly amongst the crew. His first action was to remove the rats from the hold. The days on dry land had brought numerous critters aboard, and Jayce couldn't help but feel pity for them as the Demon marched them out – their wills taken away from them by panpipes that the cat played. It was a trick that Zeta immediately grew curious about.

With the crew rested, the way clear, and the days counting down, Jayce turned his attention to the south. "Onwards to the Revelry!" he declared to the cheers of the Rising Aces.

Seize the Seas Tales: Once More Into the Breach

Wicke looked across her crew as they nursed their bruises and egos with good food in one of the best pubs in Caedom. The last run had hurt, it felt like they had come so close, yet it all felt like they were still so far. The Dungeon seemed never-ending, and perhaps it truly was. There were no records on its true size, no notes, nothing they could ask for or bribe to obtain. It was a mystery and they were, as far as they knew, the closest people had ever come to the truth. It was waiting for them. The Dungeon was waiting for them.

The night ended early, all of them aware of the task they were about to undertake once more. They had agreed this was the last one, and Wicke couldn't help but feel like she was failing them. She sat there in the darkness of her room, hugging her knees and looking towards the stray strand of moonlight peering through her curtains. *What would Jayce do?* She questioned to herself. There wasn't an answer. She didn't know.

She could feel it, as much as the others could, that time was running out. Their endurance was fading with each failure, and without a significant breakthrough it was all going to be over. "Less than two months," she told herself. "Less than two months until the Revelry. Until Jayce comes home," she stated naively. She lay back in her bed, looking up at the ceiling. "Once more. Once more and we

will have done it. I swear. Once more into the breach and I will have the Dungeon's secret."