

Chapter 193: Where the World Resumed

“Morgause, cover me!” Damian yelled out, darting between breaths of acid, fire and lightning from the colossal hydra in front of them. “Always!” she roared, following closely before leaping and slashing upwards with her sword to sever the neck of one of the heads as it slammed downwards towards Damian. The creature reeled backwards, steam bellowing from the severed head as the neck began to split and divide. But Damian charged forwards, focusing everything he could into his metal gauntlet before he struck the body. He felt bone crack and then crunch beneath the impact, the hardened scales over the creature’s torso breaking. An opening had been made.

They had made it all the way to the ninetieth floor. It had been a marathon, one which they were leaving nothing behind for. “Wicke!” Damian yelled, making large backwards leaps to weave away from the thrashing beast. She chanted loudly, a huge pile of magic stones at her feet. “Hellfire!” she screamed, unleashing a burning plume of blue fire. The stones melted away at her feet. “Echo!” she screamed, another eight plumes of fire spreading around her and blasting at the multiheaded serpent. The creature writhed in the flames before its eyes snapped towards Wicke. “The chest! There’s a hole!” Damian yelled, as he, Enki and Sabine all lunged to defend Wicke.

Morgause held her sword firmly in both hands. It felt lighter than it ever had, and throughout the last months she had swung it thousands of times. She felt the blade vibrate in her hands, her exhaustion rampant, but her adrenaline coursing through her veins. She felt one with the sword, and a small whisper echoed in the back of her mind. “It’s time,” she told herself, surging forwards with the sword low by her side as she locked her eyes onto the gap in the creature’s torso. *For my sisters.*

“I vow to let no evil escape my sight. To let no foe push me aside. To let no glory fail to fall upon me. I will be the greatest, the strongest on the battlefield. And I will protect my friends and my family until the end of days! I will leave a legacy like no other! Divine Smite!” she yelled, leaping and lunging forwards with the greatsword through the flames and the thrashing of heads. The tip of her sword bounced off a neck, reangling before entering the crack in the scales. She yelled as she pushed with all her might, the blade pressing deeper and deeper into the creature’s flesh until it staggered backwards and began to topple. She kept pushing, a golden glow around her blade, the flesh parting beneath her, until – with a crash – she found herself stood atop the corpse of the hydra. She panted

heavily, reaching up and taking off her helmet before throwing it aside. The corpse bubbled and then burst into a shower of white particles as she fell to the floor.

Cheers spread around the arena. "We did it!" Wicke screamed, dropping to her knees – her hands steaming and tears in her eyes. "We actually did it," she said more softly to herself. They had made it through ninety floors. The end was in sight – it had to be. They collapsed one after another as exhaustion set in, the battle long and fearsome, but injuries minor. "Come on," Damian said at last, offering a hand towards Wicke and helping her to her feet. She took it with a groan, looking over to Cinderlee as she checked over the others before making her way over to Wicke. She took the young girl's hands, pouring a healing potion over them before bandaging them up.

Wicke approached the magic stone on the floor. It was massive, larger than any she had seen before, and amongst the purple crystal were swirls of gold. With help she put it in her bottomless bag before the six of them turned their attention to the door leading to the next floor. "Onwards," Wicke stated, leading the charge with the others following cautiously and closely behind her. "Nice one," Damian said softly to Morgause. She nodded appreciatively, a small smile on her face and her hands on the hilt of her sword as she awaited their next battle.

But there was no next battle. For multiple days and seven more floors they encountered nothing. It was expansive, empty, and, to all their surprise, they found what looked like old outposts. There were ancient forts of stone that had been half-built, as if to guard in one direction – in the direction they were coming from. "Wicke, what is this?" Damian questioned, as they continued walking onwards.

"I-I-I don't know," Wicke returned, pausing to take in her surroundings. She looked towards Cinderlee. "Little is known about the end of the past," she stated. Wicke nodded, reaching into her bottomless bag to pull out a notebook. "A little over five hundred years ago there was an apocalypse. One that sent the people of the New World into the Dungeons, and led to the creation of the Frontier," Wicke recited. "Nothing is known about the apocalypse but it happened." "Perhaps all those exposed to it perished, it would explain the sole perspective of the past," Morgause suggested, glancing around for anything that looked hostile. "Then these forts are checkpoints against anything trying to force their way into the Dungeons. The monsters are guardians," Wicke theorised.

"Hey, I see light ahead," Sabine stated, pointing onwards and hurrying forwards. "Wait up, who knows what it could be! Sabine! Sabine!" Wicke called after her. "She'll be fine," stated Cinderlee. "I've packed enough explosives in her bag to end her quickly if not," she added. Wicke stared in horror at Cinderlee before looking down at her own gear out of worry the same had been done for her. "You'll die slowly I'm afraid," Cinderlee said, in a most unsettling manner.

They broke into a run after Sabine darting out of the cave into the light. It took several moments for their eyes to adjust but when it did Wicke let out a large gasp. They were outside, underneath a bright blue, sunny sky. The breeze was strong and cool, and endless expanses of farmland lay ahead of them. The crops had grown wild, and were dotted with all manner of greenery amongst the wheat, corn, and vegetable patches.

"Are we... are we outside?" questioned Morgause. Wicke crouched down and picked up a clump of dry dirt. It felt real, but there was something off. "What's the time?" Wicke questioned to Cinderlee. She looked at her wristwatch. "Midday," she answered. Wicke looked up towards the sun. "Oh, midnight," corrected Cinderlee. "That answers that," muttered Enki, wandering over to a running stream and laying down in it. "Oh that's nice."

"So we're still in the Dungeon? This is all an illusion?" questioned Morgause. Wicke approached the field, reaching down and taking a piece of wheat. She chewed it before spitting it out. "No, it's real. Look there's tools over there. Someone made this," she stated. Several pieces of rusted farm equipment lay amongst the fields. "Well," Damian said cautiously, "let's carry on. See what we find."

They spent several hours walking, passing ruins of houses and an old town. Eventually they came to another floor. "Wicke, we should sleep, search the next floor properly tomorrow," Damian said cautiously to her. She turned on him in disbelief. "Stop? Now? We're here Damian, everything we've been searching for. This is what my sisters wanted me to find! What Jayce wanted me to find!" she stated. Damian pointed past her: Sabine was already asleep on the floor, her head in Cinderlee's lap as she stroked her hair with one hand and read a book with the other. Wicke looked down, her fists clenched. "Tomorrow. We've done it, okay?" Damian settled. Eventually she nodded, resigning herself to rest.

Wicke was the first on her feet after approximately eight hours of rest. Damian could have sworn she'd counted the minutes, but he vaguely remembered stirring in his sleep and seeing her snoring away with her grimoire over her face.

"Come on," she ushered, shoving jerky into her mouth and stomping forwards along the tunnel. "Can I tie her up?" Morgause questioned to Damian. He shook his head, dragging his feet after her.

The five of them all crashed into her as they stumbled forwards, unaware that she had stopped. She turned at them with a look of frustration. "What?" Damian questioned. She then extended her arms outwards. They were stood at the top of a plateau, a giant city in front of them. "Woah!" Damian exclaimed, stepping forwards and taking in the view. The city was entirely white, each cube-like building made of a white stone not too dissimilar to the outside of the Dungeon. It sat in a colossal ring, circling another Dungeon built in the middle. There were gardens, a river that ran through the middle, playgrounds, a large forest on the outside with its own lake. And just like the floor above there was a sky above, only now there was a bright moon.

"I don't believe it," Sabine muttered. "We've actually found the city of the ancients. This is where they took refuge. It has to be." Wicke pointed to a long and wide path leaning downwards. "This way," she stated, surging forwards down the path. The others looked at each other before following. They passed through the surrounding forests - eerily there was no life other than plants - then through the open gates guarding the city wall before splitting up.

Damian pushed open a door to a house. The door was unlocked and the inside was covered in dust. He checked the bedrooms, finding clothes still in a cupboard, toys on the floor. There was even the traces of ancient food in what must have been a fridge. It was strange, creepy, and he quickly stepped outside. The others found the same, only to almost immediately notice the absence of one member of the group.

Wicke had left the others behind. She hadn't meant to but they were so slow and had ignored the most interesting part of the city: the tower at the centre of it. She approached it immediately, her heart hammering away in her chest. She touched the stone, it vibrated the same as the Dungeon's outer tower. It felt like the same material, it even had the same shell-like engravings buried within the rock. Yet something felt different. She turned her attention to the main doors, both of which lay wide open, a set of stairs leading inside. Wicke didn't hesitate.

With every step the world seemed to get cooler and then colder, before outright freezing. She descended into darkness, before a blue glow illuminated the path ahead of her. She stepped forwards with baited breath, her eyes and then mouth widening as she entered into a large circular chamber. Before her lay a large

machine, a huge glass chamber of a round metal base covered in buttons and dials. Mist flowed off the glass, the outside frosted over and the inside a glowing ice cyan.

Wicke edged forwards, her eyes locked on the chamber. She walked right up to it, carefully reaching forwards to touch the glass. She wiped the frosted surface, the inside becoming clear and revealing a brown-haired man floating in the ice. He wore long orange robes, and his arms were outspread – as if he was still casting a spell. Beneath him lay an orb, a crystalised ball of shadow contained wisps of purple and red.

“Wicke!” came a voice from the entrance, but she ignored it, instead looking down at the buttons and dials. They all looked the same, but a lever drew her attention. She grabbed it and pulled it down, her hand locked onto the lever as the entire room began to shake. “Wicke!” yelled Damian once more, dashing forwards into the room. She turned and looked at him, but then he froze in place and everything turned white.

“Oh,” said a soft voice behind her, “hello?” Wicke snapped around, turning to find the man who had been in the chamber in front of her. He was taller than she had been expecting, his beard well-kept but medium-length hair messy. His eyes bore down at her, both a soft brown, but also merged with a curious red colour. “Who are you?” Wicke immediately questioned. He frowned, analysing her closely before bursting into laughter. “It has been a long time since anyone asked my name. Called me Porthos,” he stated. “And you are?”

“Wicke,” she returned. “Are you a Mage?” she questioned. He nodded and she folded her arms. “I am the Archmage of Fire, young girl. Do you not know of me?” he questioned. She shook her head. He faltered for a moment and then held up a finger. “You’re not from here, are you?” Wicke shook her head. “The inhabitants have left the Dungeons already?” questioned the Wizard. She nodded. “Some time ago?” She nodded again. “Ah, how long ago?”

“Five hundred years, give or take,” she answered. His eyes widened and then his face darkened. “Ah, I see – then that doesn’t give us too much time,” he stated with a hint of regret. “What do you mean?” Wicke questioned. He looked her up and down. “Too much time has passed and I am too spent to answer too many of your questions. So please, little Wizard, ask quickly what you desire of me before I am released from my mortal bindings.”

"Oh, uh, I need guidance. My sisters asked me to reach the end of the Dungeon, they wanted me to find something but I don't know what. Any ideas?" she asked. He shook his head. "I'm sorry, I do not know. However, my colleagues may have the answers you seek – I was always the weakest amongst them so they may be in a better state to answer your questions. Anything else?" he questioned, a genuine look of wanting to help on his face. "The Dungeons, how were they made?"

"These things, oh simple. Well, from a certain point of view. They were created from a unity of divinity and the arcane. You may have noticed my friend: the Demon inside the chamber. She sacrificed herself as a raw conduit to protect her people whilst I, a Wizard, channelled the magic to create the life that protected the people within the Dungeon," Porthos explained. Wicke nodded along. "I am rather disappointed I wasn't able to sense the doors had opened and people have left, but I suppose that's part of my duty."

"But what of the magic stones?" Wicke questioned. "How do you make them?" "The stones? They're just raw mana. Can you sense your mana fountain within you?" he questioned. She nodded. "Visualise a bit of that coming out of you into your hands, then condense it like your squeezing it with all your might." The empty space they were in began to shake, the white space beginning to crack. "Damn and blast. So fast, well that's life for you. I'm guessing my apprentice is long dead, so better you than no one," he stated, reaching out to his side. A huge, orange tome flew into his hands. He pressed it into her hands. "I'm sorry we couldn't talk more, you seem like a sweet girl. Find the other Archmages, they'll help! Run through the portal before everything collapses, I'll try and get everyone out! Good luck, goodbye, don't forget me – it's Porthos, fire guy!"

The vision faded but the room continued to shake. "What did you do?" Damian questioned, pulling her away from the machine. She looked down, the orange grimoire was in her hands – the grimoire of an ancient Archmage. "I spoke to him," she stated, her eyes lighting up with excitement before she turned back to the chamber and heard a loud crack. The ice cracked and then shattered, the Mage and Demon inside both certainly dead. "Portal!" yelled Sabine, pointing to the stairs leading out of the chamber. "Go!" Wicke yelled, the six of them running for the technicolour swirl. The others darted through, but she faltered, turning and taking one last glance. There were paintings on the walls, images of shadows with red eyes that looked exactly like the numerous people and animals in front of them. "Mimics?" she questioned, before a hand grabbed her shoulder and dragged her through as the ceiling collapsed.

Wicke coughed dust as they emerged out into the morning air. There were numerous other adventurers emerging through portals, and the entire region seemed to be shaking. "My gods, the tower!" called out a fellow adventurer, the white tower shaking before cracking apart. "Move! Move!" yelled Morgause, grabbing Sabine and Cinderlee and pulling them away as the Dungeon fell apart. Damian, Wicke and Enki raced after them. "Don't stop!" Wicke told them once she caught up to the trio, racing past them with the grimoire still in her arms.

They didn't stop until they made it back to their accommodation, the six of them collapsing through the doorway onto the floor. Almost immediately the numerous eyes fell upon Wicke, who had set upon devouring the magic in the tome for all it was worth and was flicking through pages one after another. "So many spells..." she muttered, half drooling over the book until a hand slapped her leg. "Ouch!" she protested, returning to reality. Damian glared at her for an explanation. "Oh," she said softly.

"Oh? Oh! You collapsed the Dungeon! What do you mean 'oh'?" he exclaimed. "Wicke, what did you see? What happened in there?" Sabine said more gently. "There was an ancient Mage – an Archmage – a Wizard. I asked him about my sisters and he didn't know. I asked him about the Dungeon and he said it was made from him and a sacrificed Demon. Uh, he told me to find the others. His lifespan was spent so we didn't get much of a chance to speak," she rattled off. The others seemed to deflate, sitting back on their spot before all slowly huddling up into balls. "So it was for nothing..." muttered Damian.

"Nothing? Nothing! What do mean nothing? I got the grimoire of an Archmage – do you not know how big this is?" she questioned in disbelief. The others all slowly looked at her. "Could we sell it?" questioned Sabine. Wicke almost lunged at her. "Come on, we saw an ancient city and solved the mystery of the Dungeon. The next one should be easy-" Sharp anger crossed the numerous faces. "You want to do that again? We nearly died!" Damian stated. "The Guild is also unlikely to take to the loss of the Dungeon well," Cinderlee said softly. "Fair."

Wicke bit her lip and then sighed. She shut her eyes, focusing on the pool of magic within her before she dragged a bit of it out of her and squeezed in her hands. When she unclenched, a small purple stone sat in her hands. Damian, Sabine and Enki all leapt to their feet, their eyes wide, mouths open and fingers pointing at the stone. "How did you do that?" Damian questioned in sheer shock.

Wicke took a breath and settled her heart before she put on a smug expression and looked at the disbelievers. "He taught me how to, and I can teach you how to as well," she offered. Damian and Sabine both got down on their knees and bowed their heads in apology, as Enki sat down more casually. "Teach us!" they both said. "Teach us how to make infinite money," they stated, almost pleadingly will praying to her.

Wicke glanced towards Morgause. "You could destabilise the entire Guild economy with this knowledge. This must be shared with the Republic," she stated sensibly. Wicke bit her tongue before eventually nodding. "When the time comes, I will. But first, I need you all to agree to continue travelling with me. We've beaten one Dungeon – we can do the rest too." The group looked at each other. "Sounds good," Enki said casually, for the most part unbothered.

"Of course," Cinderlee stated, analysed the magic stone Wicke had made for any imperfections. Wicke looked towards Damian. "Need you ask?" he responded. She smiled at him and looked towards Sabine. "Teach me how to make money." Wicke rolled her eyes and looked towards Morgause. She nodded. "Great." "We should leave promptly," advised Cinderlee. "The Guild will want answers and it would not be wise to be here when they start pointing fingers at whoever they believe ruined their bottom-line."

"Agreed, pack your bags and let's get out of here!" Wicke stated, swapping her grimoire for Porthos' and standing up. "Hey, uh, what's the date today?" she then asked Cinderlee. "Today? The eighteenth of Fragaria," she stated. Damian and Wicke both looked at each other. "Shit! It's the Revelry!" they both exclaimed.

Seize the Seas Tales: Difficult Positions

"I warned you how risky this was and you did it anyway!" Cyrenna scolded, as Alara and Riley sat in her quarters. "You've put us all at risk for this, and you didn't even get your parents out!" Alara opened her mouth to speak but Cyrenna glared at her. "If there's anything other than an apology... Alara, I mean it – this is a bad look for you and one I do not want to deal with right now." Alara looked down at her feet. "I'm sorry. I've put you in difficult position and I will accept any and all punishments. I take responsibility for Riley's actions, she was coerced."

"Bullshit," Riley inserted. "Sorry, Commodore," she immediately followed with as Cyrenna glared at her. "Don't worry Lieutenant Commander, I know you well

enough to know you aren't coerced into anything. It's hard enough getting you to follow orders as is." Riley muttered something under her breath. "Sorry?" Cyrenna growled. "Nothing..." Riley said wisely. Cyrenna nodded, stepping away. "Riley, get out."

Riley needed no further words, practically running for the door and leaving Alara to her fate. Cyrenna walked slowly towards the door, locking Alara in before returning to her desk and sitting behind it. She glared at Alara but eventually the expression softened. She sighed. "What was their state?" she asked, mostly from professional stance, but also as Alara's friend. "Alive..." Alara said quietly. "Okay. I'm... glad to hear that. I'm sorry we can't do more for them, but until the situation back home is resolved we're on our own."

"I've compromised us..." Alara said weakly, her eyes brimming with tears as she came to terms with her mess-up. "You have, but you're not the only one. Our supply runs have not gone unnoticed, there was... a brush with the locals." Alara looked up at Cyrenna who was sat casually biting her nail. "How bad?" Alara questioned cautiously. Cyrenna shook her head. "I can only hope this base is defensible. I'm hoping the Revelry takes the heat off us. Jayce and Astris will undoubtedly do something that draws the world's gaze, and hopefully the Sovereign's too."

A silence fell across them both, neither of them certain. "My punishment?" Alara questioned. "A demotion," Cyrenna said bluntly. Alara's heart dropped in her chest, her eyes widening. "Fortunately, I was going to recommend you to the rank up. You found your parents, survived an encounter with the Machinist, and an unofficial encounter with a Betrayer – all whilst training Witchford and others on your crew for further duties. Truth be told, Riley had requested to go on your unofficial mission without you. I almost let her because of how well you've managed her and the assassin."

Alara smiled. "Wipe that smile off your face. I now have to deal with all this upcoming shit as your CO not as your colleague," Cyrenna stated. Alara forced a frown. "Sorry," she said softly. Cyrenna rolled her eyes and gestured to the door. "Come back for drinks this evening. We can talk about the results of the Revelry then." Alara stood up and nodded, slowly walking to the door before unlocking it. "I owe you."

"No you don't. I would have done the same in your shoes if it was Beo or Tris. Just... don't force my hand again – trust me to handle things." Alara nodded and stepped outside. *Commodore... Fuck!*