

Chapter 195: Biting The Hand That Feeds

The Rising Aces gave Crach a brief funeral. A few of his loyalists came to see, but the sudden betrayal of Xerxes revealed just how quickly Crach's people would move on from him. "I will kill him," Thalia said softly to her grandfather's corpse before pushing him overboard. He sank quickly, his body becoming one with the ocean that he had made his home for so long. The loyalists departed and Jayce turned to Kitty and Tim. "Let's go rescue the Republic."

Alara sat back in the seat, her mouth half-open as she and Cyrenna listened to the news. "Crach, the Governor, Ruyn... all dead?" she questioned in disbelief. "Good riddance," Cyrenna said coldly, shotting the rum in her glass before refilling it from her collection. Alara shook her head. "Perhaps, but I'm more concerned about who has replaced them. Xerxes is a nasty piece of work, let alone the Machinist, an ocean crawler, the Engines..." Alara said, looking over towards her friend. "A problem for once we're established, for now we--"

A swirling portal appeared in-between them, the technicolour surface shimmering before she saw a face in it. "Pirate Lord Kane?" Alara questioned, Cyrenna rounding to her side. "Vanathur, long time no see. I've got a message from a friend of yours," he stated curtly before stepping aside. Jayce appeared instead, Cyrenna dropping her glass on the floor as she saw her sister beyond. "Sorry for the interruption in girls' night, you've got a problem. A big one. The Sovereign has dispatched all Pirate Lords to your position, with orders to wipe you out. I don't know what operations you have going, but get out of the Old World. Get out now!" Jayce warned.

"No," Cyrenna stated. "That's not possible, we've worked so hard to establish a foothold. We can't just up and run now. There's too much--" Jayce stared at her in disbelief. "Are you insane? None of that matters, it's over – the Pirate Lords are coming with the Betrayers after them if we fail to stop them. We'll try and hold the Pirate Lords off as much as we can but they're much more mobile than we are. You need to get out."

"Exarga, you misunderstand me. We can't leave now because we have ships away from our base. They are weeks away and if we leave, we leave them to die!" "You need to mobilise everything. With Crach gone the therian ships are under Xerxes' command. The Machinist has her own fleets, the Engines are everywhere and Thákane and Ningyo are highly mobile. They're coming, and they're coming for you fast. Alara, get out!" Jayce stated, an unnerving level of panic to his voice that Alara didn't recognise. "How much time do we have?" Alara questioned.

Jayce turned behind him and then turned back with a map in hand. "This is your location, right? This is what we received," he stated, pointing to the map. Both Alara and Cyrenna swore loudly. "We have a new toy that we're going to use to get closer to you. Kitty and Somme are going to lure some of the others away. Tim and I will reach you in a week or so. But I would expect the first wave to arrive before us. You have a month at most before your location becomes indefensible."

Alara and Cyrenna looked each other. "Less than that," Alara stated. "We pissed off Khalid, he's got a Fortress ship – the second it becomes known that you and the others have rebelled, he's going to be on his way." Jayce grit his teeth. "We'll handle that. Get your pieces moving, and moving for the border. Don't stop, don't stop until you see the Republic. We're on our way," Jayce concluded, the portal disappearing. Cyrenna looked towards Alara. "Rouse everyone, I want this station defensible until our people get back to us," Cyrenna ordered. "Yes, ma'am!" Alara stated, rushing off.

"Are we sure this will work?" Jayce questioned to Tempest, watching as Kitty and Somme sailed off to distract Xerxes. "In theory," Tempest stated, writing down a series of symbols on some paper before handing it to Tim. Tim nodded and raced off to his own ship. "Theory is not reassuring," Jayce stated. The djinn shrugged. "It will work then. We do not have any teleportation circles near to our target, but we will get close enough," he reassured. Jayce sighed and nodded. "Better than nothing."

A loud whizzing and whining built up to the starboard side, a large purple circle surrounding Tim's ship - the Old Librarian. There was a flash of purple lightning and it vanished. Jayce looked to his crew, who looked to him and then Tempest. "All crew brace," the djinn warned. "Sudden movement could send you elsewhere." Jayce didn't like the sound of that. Tempest began to chant, lightning sparking off his body before Jayce felt the entire world lurch around him and they landed with a splash in a completely different environment. Zeta ran to the edge of the ship and threw up. "All okay?" Jayce questioned, receiving a reassuring series of responses. "It worked," Tempest said with relief. Jayce looked at the djinn in horror before shrugging it off and giving the 'okay' symbol to Tim. "Bjorn, get us moving!"

"Incoming!" Alara yelled, a barrage of rockets raining down from the skies above as the Machinist's flyers unleashed their latest wave. She twisted her glaive, slamming the weapon down in the ground to emit a large protective bubble

around herself and the Marines with her. The assault landed, detonations occurring all around her. Screams came from those caught in the blast, her gunners unleashing their own return fire to the flyers in the sky. Death lay all around her, friends and foes alike. "Captain, how much longer?" questioned Ashton Braze, the others around him looking to her.

She glanced out towards the Courier, unleashing it's ordnance upon the skies and the ships on the waters. "Soon," she reassured. "Help is coming, and our forces are on their way to us. We just have to hold on a little longer." A Marine pointed in horror, a fresh wave of enemies on the horizon. More flyers were coming, as well as what looked to be some kind of giant carrier in the sky. "Captain, I don't know how much longer we can hold this," Braze stated to her.

She shut her eyes, a bright blast consuming the horizon. A moment later the explosion reached them, knocking several Marines off their feet. The horizon was consumed in flame in an instant and from the flames emerged two ships. She breathed a sigh of relief, the familiar blues, whites and blacks telling her that help had arrived. A moment later a blue portal appeared behind them and a friendly face stepped out. "Lower your weapons!" Alara ordered as Jayce looked down at her bunker. "Captain. I heard you needed some help," he said with a smug grin. She wanted to punch him - that or kiss him.

"Situation?" he questioned, as she escorted him to the main bunker. Her face must have answered for her. "That bad, huh?" he questioned. She nodded trying not to think of the casualties they had already suffered. "It's bad, Jayce, and you say this is just the first wave?" she questioned in sharp disbelief. He nodded, letting her escort him through the guards until they came across a reinforced room. "Commodore," he greeted, an immediate sigh of relief emerging from Cyrenna as she turned to face him. "You're here, good," she stated, looking to her advisors who quickly stepped back to show Jayce the main table.

"I've ordered our forces to head straight for the Frontier, but we can't leave this position until they have all crossed this line," Cyrenna explained, showing markings on the map and the rough current position of the almost dozen ships away from the base. "Otherwise they will be locked behind us. I have no doubt in my mind that the Sovereign has ways to find out just how many ships we have, and once she knows that, she'll know what to look for. They're good people, I can't doom them." Jayce nodded in understanding.

"That's a long time to hold out," Jayce stated, estimating the numerous days it would take for them to cross the line and then the further month or so it would

take to reach the Frontier. Cyrenna looked down and then towards Jayce. "We have no choice." Jayce took a step back and thought for a few moments. "Okay, we can hold the line for a few days, but you have to use that opportunity to close shop. That Fortress Ship will now be on its way. Once that gets here you're leaving regardless of your thoughts," he stated. Cyrenna nodded appreciatively and he then gave one longing look towards Alara before departing. "He's not wrong..." Alara said softly. "Beo... he'll make it in time – I'm sure." Cyrenna didn't look certain.

"Days? They want us to defend them for... days?" Tim questioned, as they stood together amongst the island's bunkers. "Jayce..." he said softly, glancing towards the Marines and Navy watching them. "It goes from plausible deniability to this will outright get us killed. The Sovereign is going to be pissed." Jayce nodded, looking out towards the horizon: the combat had lulled ever since they had arrived. "I know. Days is ambitious, but they've been caught off-guard and they can't do much for their people. I think giving them the best chance we can is the least we can do. I will take the heat, tell whoever is sent your way that I coerced you. That I-"

Tim looked at Jayce sternly. "I could never do that to you. I'm only here because of you. In more ways than one. Jayce, I will follow you into whatever hell you run towards, so tell me there is a plan? A strategy. Anything more than stepping in between those guns and these ones," he questioned. Jayce didn't have an answer. "My hands are tied. I'm not in command here. We can only react to what comes our way."

The combat seemed to diminish over the following days, changing from a continuous stream into clear and definitive waves of ships and flyers – a predictability that Jayce, Tim, Cyrenna and Alara continued to exploit in turn. It also opened up cautious periods of downtime that Cyrenna seized upon to slowly dismantle the base, whilst Jayce seized upon the time in a different way – mainly with Alara.

"This is wrong," she said, dressing quickly as Jayce lay under the covers of his bed. "You're allowed time for rest, right?" he said in response, laying back on his pillows and quietening the Demon chirping idly inside his mind. "Yes, but there are better things I could spend my time doing," she stated, with a hint of irritation. "Better?" Jayce questioned, raising an eyebrow. She snapped her head towards him and pulled a face, his demonic eyes glowing in the darkness –

something she couldn't help but find unnerving. "You know what I mean – you're fine."

"Fine?" he questioned, with a soft and subtle layer of hurt. She glared at him. "You're great, this whole world is fucked! This whole mess is fucked!" she said with increasing volume, her shoulders shaking. "Hey," Jayce said more carefully, getting up and immediately placing his hands on her shoulders before cradling her. "I've ruined this, Jayce! I gave our position away, I've killed all of those we've lost. We'll flee, abandon the Old World and my parents – they may already be dead. There's no value in them as hostages, why would Khalid keep them alive?" she sobbed.

Jayce faltered before he gave an answer. "As a means of taunting you and the Republic. They're trophies, prizes, he won't kill them unnecessarily – he has no need to," he answered honestly, the volume of her tears increasing as she sobbed harder into his chest. "It's okay," he said softly. "This isn't your fault – it was always a bad idea to send you. To send all of you against a threat and a world you never stood a chance against."

The sorrow disappeared in a flash, her head raising and eyes staring at him with an intense anger. "What is that supposed to mean?" she questioned, pushing him away. "Alara..." he said softly. She stamped her foot and shook her head, pointing at him. "You have no grounds to stand on! No right to belittle us! Those rules you trample over to get your way nearly got you killed – hell, I'd argue they did from those eyes in your thick skull that aren't yours. We were doing fine, we succeeded!"

Jayce held his tongue, but her anger only seemed to grow. "Speak. Say it," she ordered. "Alara, it's not an attack – you categorically were outgunned. A group of Commodores never stood a chance. You wouldn't have stood a chance against me... let alone the Betrayers, least of all the Sovereign – she's..." He shook his head and sat down on his bed, looking up at her. "That's what it comes down to, doesn't it? What it always comes down to? Power. Personal glory. Strength and broken ideals. You. The great beacon, Jayce Exarga – Pirate Lord – and me... his little mistress who always needs saving."

"Alara--"

"No! No... just... without you we'd all be dead already. And I'm grateful for that, Jayce, I am... but it's not enough anymore. I'm lost... I can't be like you – I can't break rules and shrug off the consequences. I can't rush across the world to-to...

to save the ones I love. I can't protect you, and I think I've just killed my parents." "Alara, I don't need protecting," Jayce stated, immediately regretting his answer from her immediate expression. "That's not the point!" she screamed, through tears and frustration. She looked at him with disappointment. "Perhaps we just don't understand each other anymore..." she said quietly.

He shook his head, extending a hand towards her. She looked at it before cautiously taking it. He pulled her in to his side and sat her next to him. "I have consequences too," he said uncertainly, staring at her through unfamiliar eyes. "I make mistakes. I pick fights unnecessarily and I have... I have so much blood on my hands. So much blood I could drown cities in it. The world looks to me for answers to problems I barely understand. My crew look to me to provide them not only safety for the now, but a world that they can live free within. A world where my family is safe," he said, gesturing towards the photos of his crew on his walls, his eyes looking towards the photo of him, Wicke and Caelie. "A world where you're safe. A world where our children can live without fear. And I have that vision, I see that future, but I don't know the path there anymore than you do. I can only take the next step in front of me. The same with you."

"I can guide my crew, give them orders, but they still exist without me and I'm not always there. The Rising Aces are more than me. The Republic is more than you. We can't do everything. We can do what we can. Nothing more. Nothing less. This isn't on you. You can't take responsibility for the whole Republic." "But I broke the rules..." she said quietly, her eyes on the floor, her fingers over her face. He placed a soft hand on her back and rubbed it gently. "And there are consequences," he said truthfully. "But with or without you – this would have happened eventually. It would have happened inevitably – trust me on that."

She looked at him, her eyes mingled with curiosity and enlightened worry. "I've put you in so much danger," she realised. He shrugged, forcing a cocky smile to his face. "Different level of danger, a different playground of enemies. My game to play, yours to survive. We'll get through this – together – like we always do. But I can't bring you to my field of play, I can't put you in that level of danger without preparation. So trust me, Alara, I will get you to the north and from there you will forge your own route to your parents. One where your people, your crews, stand a chance against Khalid. Okay?" he questioned.

"Am I speaking to you or the Demon?" she asked, sensing he wasn't being fully open to her. "Me," he answered. "Just with a bit of information I can't share yet." She shook her head and leant back into him. "You're an idiot," she said softly,

shutting her eyes and listening to his heartbeat. "Definitely. Doesn't stop you from loving me though." She looked up to him and leaned forwards to kiss him. "Sometimes it brings me close. You better have a plan to survive all of this." "Of course I do. It's you."

"I want all communications running through me," Cyrenna stated, her eyes giving one last glance to the world map and Beowulf's last position – still behind the line. "Aye, Commodore," came her communications specialists as she stormed out of the main bunker. "All eyes, what do you see?" Cyrenna questioned as the island shook, the latest wave hitting hard and fast. "Commodore," came Alara's voice, a slight tremble to it. "It's here. Khalid's Fortress Ship is here."

It sat on the horizon, tiny in the distance but distinctly visible behind the waves of local Navy ships ahead of it. "What is it doing?" Cyrenna questioned to Alara, the pair of them stood in the forwards bunkers assessing the situation. The other Captains were moving their ships to form a perimeter, preparing for the incoming onslaught as Jayce and Pirate Lord Kane mopped up the Pirates. "It appears to be holding back, ma'am," stated Riley, scanning the enemy through her sniper rifle. "What of the ships in front?" Cyrenna queried. Riley lifted up her rifle. "They're continuing onwards. We've got time before they're in range."

The Fortress Ship flickered, its surface flashing red in a wave-like pattern. Alara froze before her eyes widened as her body went cold. "Evasive manoeuvres! Get down!" she screamed into her communicator, dragging Riley and Brett down into the bunker as a barrage of explosive shells rained down across the ocean in front of them and then the island. The noise was devastating, the blasts threatening to shake the flesh off Alara's bones as she ducked beneath a wall of metal, rock and mud. "How the hell is that in range?" Cyrenna questioned, her expression a mixture of horror, fury and jealousy.

The shelling lasted for several minutes before it suddenly vanished. Alara and Cyrenna looked towards each other before Alara darted forwards to get a better look. A bubble had enveloped the island, a shield catching the shells in the air before they harmlessly detonated. She half-hoped to see Tempest floating in the air, but instead she saw the large and magnificent robes of Tim. "You're out of time!" he yelled down.

"Pirate Lord Kane is shielding us," Alara stated into the bunker, Cyrenna emerging a moment later. "Indeed he is, but look – the shelling has stopped," Cyrenna stated, the bubble clearing as the explosions faded. Tim kept the bubble

up, turning and looking down towards Cyrenna. "Your fleet is in ruins, Tempest and Jayce's Dragon protected what they could. It's time." Cyrenna looked down and shook her head. "We have to hold out. We have-"

A cyan light illuminated the skies, three arcs of energy flying from the horizon from three different directions. "Get back!" Tim yelled, the first impact dissipating against his shield before the next sent large cracks across its surface. The final arc tore straight through, hitting another bunker and atomising it in an instant. "Alara! Get out!" came Jayce's voice through her communicator. Alara turned towards Cyrenna – her obsidian eyes wide in terror. "Commodore, orders?" Alara questioned. Cyrenna had frozen up. "Commodore? Cyrenna!" "Retreat..." Cyrenna whispered, before regaining control of herself. "All forces retreat! Do not stop until you have made it to the Capital of the New World!" she ordered, all Marines and Navy grabbing anything and everything they could as the few remaining ships came closer to the shores – the Courier amongst them.

"Jayce?" Astris questioned, as Bjorn yanked the wheel of the Stacked Hand and angled them away from the Republic forces – towards Khalid's Fortress Ship of death. "Jayce, we can't!" Astris stated, stepping in front of him and grabbing his shirt – his eyes glowing a flaming orange and his expression full of blatant rage. "We have no choice, this is the only way they survive!" he growled. Astris glanced towards Bjorn, hesitation on his face but his willingness to follow Jayce to the end unwavering. "This is a direct attack on the Betrayers! They'll come for us!"

"Since when have we ever been afraid of that?" Bjorn stated to her, his eyes locked ahead as the enemy fleet turned towards them. Jayce glanced towards the ruins of the Republic base, the fleet sailing quickly away. There was a large flash of purple lightning and Tim disappeared along with his ship. *We're on our own now.* "Boys, fire on the Fortress Ship – hit it hard!" Jayce ordered, looking towards Astris. She bit her lip, tasting her own blood before she forced a nod. "For the Republic!" she screamed, as the world turned white before a black ball carved its way through the sky.

The front of the Fortress Ship tore open, cheers erupting amongst Alara's crew. She felt her knees wobble, the weight of Jayce's actions crashing down upon her as she watched the Stacked Hand turn away – the enemy fleet following closely and Khalid turning his ship to return fire. Several bolts of cyan energy appeared on the horizon before impacting around the Stacked Hand, sending huge blasts of steam into the air. "They did it," Cyrenna said softly, as she stood next to Alara

– her own flagship destroyed. She reached to Alara’s neck and grabbed her pearl necklace. “Astris, if you can hear me – thank you,” Cyrenna said softly, before releasing it as no response came. Cyrenna nodded to Alara and then began to bark out orders.

“Jayce... thank you,” Alara said quietly, uncertain if she’d ever hear from him again.

Seize the Seas Tales: Money Talks

The return to the oceans brought both an immediate boost in Wicke’s mood but also a great sense of ease as she and her group left the ruins of the Dungeon and Caedom behind. She felt like she could finally breathe, like she was free to leave her worries behind and just be. “Wicke, look!” Sabine stated excitedly, bounding along the main deck towards her spot by the Recluse’s bow. She held a tiny purple stone in her hand, showing it to Wicke like a proud mother. “I made this,” she said with a big grin. Wicke placed a somewhat patronising hand on her head. “Well done,” she said half-heartedly, not that Sabine seemed to notice nor care – herself too proud out of her own achievement. Wicke had taught the entire group the process, something they had almost all struggled with – the exception being Cinderlee. “So, uh, did you hear?” Sabine questioned.

“Hear what?” Wicke questioned, turning to face her fully. Sabine reached into her bottomless bag and pulled out parts of a newspaper. She showed Wicke clippings talking about the Revelry, about the deaths of the old Pirate Lords. Wicke faltered as she read about Rebel Red’s death at the hands of Somme Ankor. She then presented a more recent clipping: a request by the Guild for information on the cause of the Dungeon’s destruction. “Looks like we got away with it,” Sabine said with a nervous smile. “Perhaps. It may not take them long to figure out we were the furthest in, but hopefully the fake names buys us enough time to move onwards to the next ones. Still...” Wicke stated, looking at the reward for information. She then looked down at her palm, visualising as big of a magic stone as she could. She condensed the energy in her palms and then looked at the gold and purple stone. “No, I think we’ll be fine.”