

Chapter 196: Damnation

"Jayce, they're not going to stop!" Marisha stated, the faintest traces of the Brunxchume fleet still on the horizon. "It's been nearly two weeks already, we have to stand and fight," she stated. "Barca Khalid is pissed, and he has that entire nation under his command." Jayce looked down at her and shook his head. "They're innocent in this, we can outrun them. I know we can. If we can make it to the Frontier then they'll give up the chase – we just need to stall until Alara and the fleet make it across. Their supplies will run out eventually," he stated. "Their supplies? Ours will long before them – they have an entire nation-"

"Uh, sorry to interrupt," Morgana stated from atop her broomstick, "they're turning away." Jayce looked from Morgana to Marisha, pulling a face. She glared back. "See," he stated smugly. She shook her head, verifying it for herself – the ships were indeed turning away. "This isn't over, and you know it!" she stated to him before storming off to listen to the transceiver. Jayce maintained his smile, his people were looking to him although he knew as well as they all did that this was far from over. Something was coming. Something far worse than a fleet of Navy warships.

"Falconer, take over from Bjorn," Jayce ordered, looking to his first mate and gesturing with his head towards his quarters. "Astris, join me inside my quarters," Jayce then added through his communicator. She entered moments after them. "It's coming," he stated, as soon as they looked to him. Immediately all of their heartbeats sped up. "The Sovereign herself?" Astris questioned, folding her arms as Jayce stepped past her and looked out of his windows towards the retreating fleet. Jayce shook his head. "I doubt it. She'll want to send a message to the world. It'll be a Betrayer. Maybe even multiple."

There was a flash of purple lightning on the horizon, Jayce's hairs immediately standing on edge and a cold feeling spreading throughout his body. "Who?" Bjorn questioned. Jayce glanced towards him, his mind pondering that very question. "I'd send Vexx," he said quietly. He'd kept the conversation between the three of them precisely not to cause panic. "Or Elaine," Astris suggested. Jayce nodding. A shadow was darting across the ocean towards them. It then flew over the top of the ship, the windows rattling as Jayce, Astris and Bjorn looked at each other. "Captain," came a nervous Zeta across the communicator.

Jayce stepped outside. It felt like the entire world was holding its breath. The seas were calm, the skies overcast but darkening on the horizon – a storm visible beyond the bow. Jayce walked forwards, Falconer bringing the ship to a stop so

that the main cannon remained locked on the figure stood on the air above the surface of the ocean. She floated on nothing, her eyes locked ahead on the Stacked Hand and its crew, and her arms folded.

She had dirty, shoulder-length golden hair that curled forwards around neck and chin. A black, studded leather jacket lay around her shoulders, her black trousers ripped over her thighs as if a creature had raked its claws across the fabric. She wore matching boots and had no visible weaponry. Her skin was fair, a flash of freckles across her somewhat large nose – the bridge firm and strong like the rest of her features. But it was her eyes that drew Jayce's main attention: they were a firm gold – her pupils reptilian.

"You've made me come a long way, Exarga," Kaina stated, her arms folded and expression cold. Jayce approached the bow, placing a firm foot on the edge of his ship as his crew braced for battle. "Sorry for making you come this far. How about we have a chat – talk about this before anything brash happens?" Jayce proposed, quietly praying that she would listen. *There is something... familiar about her.* Jayce tried to ignore Paimon, but Kaina's eyes seemed impossible to look away from.

"There won't be any talking. I have been given my commands, and unlike you – I follow what the Sovereign tells me to do!" Kaina stated. Jayce pointed. "Fire!" he yelled, the Stacked Hand lurching as it fired its forward cannon. A black void flew towards her – the shot instantaneous and practically point-blank, but she swung outwards with her arm – slapping the shot aside like it was nothing. The ball split the water to her left before sinking harmlessly into the depths.

The entire crew of the Stacked Hand froze, their bodies reacting to a carnal feeling of terror as Kaina brought her right hand up to her mouth. She opened wide, a long and forked tongue extending outwards, her mouth full of canines. She seemed to smile as she took a deep breath in and Jayce's eyes widened. "Get down!" he yelled, a small blue flame emerging from her mouth before a colossal stream of golden flame flooded towards the Stacked Hand.

Soteria and Tempest lunged forwards to create a protective barrier, alongside the wall of thorns that Gaea erected between the fire and the ship, but the flames seemed to continue to flow and burn. The sides of the ship slammed open, Zhurong and Taranis bursting through before taking to the air on a pair of large arcs. The flames died and Soteria cowered on the floor, covering her head with

her wings. "Fear!" she said, Jayce's mouth dropping as he heard the Dragon speak for the first time. "Afraid!" she cried.

Jayce summoned RK into his ball, commanded Sola and Luna into a pair of swords and then darted off the side of the ship and around the wall of thorns. Kaina slammed into Zhurong, sending the Dragon spiralling out of the air towards the water. "Weak!" she yelled, turning her attention downwards as Taranis lunged out of the water to bite at her. The hit landed and she was caught entirely within his large jaws – the teeth beginning to rev.

The Dragon then faltered, his eyes going wide as his mouth was forced open. Kaina stood up straight, and looked towards Jayce with a grin. "You brought children?" she questioned, golden scales spreading across her face. "To a massacre?" In a flash of gold, Taranis was dragged downwards by a sudden and forceful change in mass – a colossal golden Dragon appearing in Kaina's place in an instant.

The pair disappeared beneath the waves before Kaina reappeared alone, taking to the skies in a wide flight. She had a pair of huge horns that curled forwards and around like a rams. Six large wings adorned her back, each flapping in a continuous pattern before all linking together as she glided. Large hook like talons ran along the bones of her wings. A long tail led from the back of her body, the end tipped like a large trident. Along with the wings she also had four limbs, but unlike Zhurong, the front pair looked different from the back pair – they looked more like arms and Jayce questioned for a moment whether she could stand in a near bipedal fashion. As she flew over the Stacked Hand, Jayce also immediately realised just how much larger she was than the other two already-large Dragons. Kaina was colossal.

"Take her down!" Jayce commanded, his crew rushing to action. Falconer took to the skies aboard Wren. Soteria and Morgana darted into the skies. Ordo and Arthuria dashed towards their Dragons as they surged from out of the ocean. Bjorn and the Beastly Boys brought the ship about, trying to bring it away from the combat before Bjorn handed the wheel to Wam. Mai Lu flung large shards of blood into the air. Caelie conjured portals to bring herself and the crew closer to Kaina. Tempest and Gaea formed a shield of lightning and thorns around the Stacked Hand. Zeta sang and Red stabbed with a trident. The whole crew fought for their ship. Fought for each other. Fought for their lives.

"Enough!" Kaina yelled, twisting in the air and throwing off the bodies that had landed on her. "You will all burn!" she roared, pulling back and taking in a deep

inhale. She then unleashed flames upon them all, the crew desperately diving, falling, or teleporting to avoid the colossal streams of fire. Jayce pushed forwards, darting around the flames to swing his blades down towards her eye. They landed, but bounced harmlessly off – her gaze immediately turning towards him with a flash of frustration.

“Why use a rifle to squash insects?” she questioned to herself, her scales shedding away to reveal her original form. She lunged for Jayce, grabbing his throat and squeezing. A bullet hit her temple before exploding – her grip breaking as her head tilted away, momentarily stunned from the blast. Jayce fell and she turned on Astris – the others desperately moving to block her from view, buying any moment they could to split the Betrayer’s attention.

“Jayce, this isn’t working,” Bjorn stated, the deck on fire and those on board desperately putting it out. Jayce grit his teeth, the Dragon form had been huge, weighty and cumbersome – but in human form, Kaina faced no such issues. Her Focus was of equivalent level to Jayce’s, and when she needed distance she would unleash a burst of flame from her mouth. All hits seemed to do nothing to her, and a single hit from her was almost certainly lethal. “Jayce...”

Jayce nodded, darting forwards towards the Dragon with every ounce of energy he had. He combined Sola and Luna into a heavy maul before he slammed it hard into her head. She flew backwards from the impact, a tiny trickle of golden blood flowing down from her temple. “Back to the ship, everyone!” Jayce ordered, pursuing after her as she recovered from her fall – her jacket morphing into six large, golden, draconic wings. “What?” Thalia questioned. Jayce glanced to her, a sliver of fear in her eyes. “Go!” he reinforced, swinging his maul into Kaina again before darting past her to lure her away.

“Tempest!” Jayce yelled into his communicator, darting across the surface of the water with the Dragon in hot pursuit. She threw a clawed fist at him, the ocean erupting in a colossal splash. “Teleport us out of here!” Jayce commanded, diving into the ocean to avoid a heavy blast of fire before clambering out of it and continuing to run. “Where to?” Tempest responded, much to Jayce’s drastic and immediate ire. “Any-fucking-where!” he screamed.

“I need you back, or you will be left behind, Captain,” Tempest returned. Jayce stopped in his tracks and jumped back and then down, propelling off the air as he created multiple platforms to leap off. Kaina darted right beneath him and he broke off running towards the Stacked Hand – his crew hovering around it on

their various brooms, Dragons and birds. "Start casting!" Jayce screamed, a few seconds between him and Kaina with her rapidly gaining on him.

A large purple circle began to surround the Stacked Hand, flashes of purple lightning filling the air. "No!" Kaina screamed, somewhere behind. But Jayce didn't care, he didn't dare look back – the moments ticking away before the Stacked Hand vanished. "Jayce!" Astris cried, rushing to the edge of the deck with Caelie. "No portals!" he yelled, afraid Kaina would make it through before it would close.

Wren flew up, Falconer unleashing an arrow towards the Dragon in hopes of slowing her down. Morgana slung a red spell and Soteria forged a shield behind Jayce, that Kaina slammed straight through. Zhurong and Taranis both unleashed blasts of fire and lightning, but Jayce and Kaina both weaved through the Dragon breaths. The circle span faster, the lightning flashing brightly as the spell neared its end. Jayce lunged, landing on the edge of the Stacked Hand as the numerous Rising Aces darted down to the deck with him alongside Wren and the Dragons. "Go!" Jayce commanded, the spell finalising and a wave of purple energy surrounding the ship and its crew.

Then with a heavy slam, Kaina threw her full Dragon-sized body into the side of the ship, the entire thing lurching as the spell executed. The edge of the Stacked Hand swept Jayce's legs, his body tumbling over the side. Little Witch darted across the deck and leapt towards him landing in his arms. He grabbed and held her tightly as they twisted, the ship spinning in a vortex of purple lightning and magic.

It then faded and Jayce hit solid ground, rolling across rock and dirt with his eyes shut as he hugged the ship's cat tightly in a desperate attempt to protect her. He rolled and rolled and rolled until finally coming to a stop, the world spinning around him. The black cat wriggled out of his grip before stumbling away from him and throwing up her breakfast. Jayce nearly did the same as he opened his eyes and lay on the floor. "Ugh," he groaned, turning over and pressing down onto the red dirt beneath him.

He frowned, faltering as he slowly lifted his head up. "Little Witch?" he questioned, the cat stumbling her way towards him before brushing her body against his arm. "Where are we?" he questioned to himself, looking around at the endless expanse of red nothing in all directions. "Good question," Paimon answered, from his neck. "Wherever it is, we are alone," she added. Jayce glanced

around: the Stacked Hand was nowhere in sight. He reached for his communicator. "Hello? Is anyone there? Bjorn? Astris? Yuthura?" he questioned.

He waited for a few moments. There was no response. "Hello?" Jayce questioned. "Is anyone there? Can anyone hear me?" he questioned, panic in his voice as he stood up and looked around. Every direction looked the same: flat red-orange rock and dirt in all directions. He looked up. The skies were flat grey cloud, with no hint of sun or blue. "All Rising Aces, please respond? Arthuria? Ordo? Thalia? Zeta? Falconer? Anyone..."

Nothing.

Jayce looked down at himself: he still had his bottomless bag. He breathed a sigh of relief. *We have some food and water.* He then patted his pockets before he felt RK's orb. He pulled it out and released the rokken, the giant stone creature immediately landing with a crash and looking for enemies. It saw nothing and then slowly turned towards Jayce and Little Witch before letting out a long grumble. "Yeah, I know. We're lost," he answered, placing a hand to the rokken's side before resting his head against the stone. "You have no idea how happy I am to have you with me."

RK grumbled and then settled down onto the dirt. He scooped a handful up in his giant arms before carrying it to the volcanic core on his back. His entire body shuddered and he staggered backwards before slamming the ground in a rage. "Woah, woah, what's wrong?" Jayce questioned, trying to tame the giant angry pebble. A useless grumble came in response. "Right, not good dirt or rock – I get it. Then, given the colour, the nothingness and the general feeling of death and dread... I guess we're down south – in the Scourge," Jayce theorised.

"A sensible conclusion," Paimon stated. Jayce shook his head. *A grumbling golem and a Demon in my head. Oh and the cat. Just great.* Little Witch brushed his legs and he looked down, reaching down to pick her up. She purred in his arms, bashing her head into his chin. "Well, at least you're happy with our situation," he said to her, placing his head to hers before setting her across his shoulders. Jayce reached into his bottomless bag, pulling out a compass. It span wildly. "Oh great."

He put it away and looked up, trying to see any spot of sunlight. He then checked his watch before aligning the two. "North is roughly that way," he told RK, Paimon and Little Witch. He picked the cat off his shoulders and placed her onto RK's huge back before clambering on himself. He rapped his knuckles on the

rock's head. A grumble came in response. "Let's go this way," he told the rokken, pointing vaguely north. "There's got to be someone around here. Somewhere... hopefully..."

The rokken trundled forwards, the group departing for the empty horizon.

Seize the Seas Tales: Bribery of the Highest Office

"Ah," Damian said with a wide grin. "Do you hear that? That is the sound of civilisation, commerce and a nice bed," he declared as he, Wicke and the others departed their ship and stepped into the large dockyard of the Capital. "We're not here for taking it easy, we've had enough of that on the ship," Wicke stated, stepping forwards and turning to the group. "We're here to repeat Caedom and to secure another Grimoire," she stated, much to the lack of enthusiasm from the others. "Food first?" Sabine questioned, her stomach rumbling loudly. Wicke grit her teeth, delays were not a part of her plans. She sighed. "Fine. I know a place, and I need to book a meeting with the Admiral in charge anyway. I don't want another telling off."

The food quickly turned into a few other side quests, that soon led to the day ending – much to the group's relief. But the following morning, Wicke found a letter waiting for her in the lobby, and along with the others, she quickly set off in the direction of the Republic High Office. The city was abuzz with excitement, people were talking about some group of Navy that had just returned from an away mission to the Old World, but Wicke ignored it – her mind was too preoccupied for world affairs.

"Good morning," she stated formally to a receptionist. "I am Wicke, of the Rising Aces, here to see Fleet Admiral Exarga." The receptionist nodded and then started to flick through a large binder of appointments. "Oh," she said. "Uh, please follow that man over there. They're waiting for you." Wicke nodded to him and then looked towards Damian. "I guess your mother is in this time, perfect – this should be much easier."

Wicke's face immediately fell as she saw a dark-haired man with glasses behind a desk in the room they were let into. "Ah, Wicke, Damian, and... others," Admiral Exarga stated, standing up and nodding to the escorts who shut the doors behind Cinderlee. Philip Exarga hugged his son tightly before doing the same to Wicke. He then looked towards the other four and nodded before gesturing to various seats. "Please sit," he ordered, his voice firm.

Wicke and Damian glanced at each before sitting at the two seats positioned directly in front of the huge desk. "I saw you wanted to speak to my wife about entering the Dungeon. Unfortunately Damian's mother is still away doing her duty, so you'll have to deal with me," Admiral Exarga stated, sorting from papers before setting them aside. He then leant forwards, his chair creaking and glasses glinting in the light as he set his green eyes on the pair. "So I heard you've come from Caedom?"

Uh oh, Damian and Wicke both thought. "How was it? I've heard repairs have really come along," he stated with a smile. Wicke felt sweat begin to form on her forehead, the light awfully bright all of a sudden. "It was... nice," she said cautiously. "Good to hear. I've been meaning to visit. Anyway, Damian, I very much like this little group you two have formed." Damian began to turn his head. "Look my way," he said in a gentle command, that caused Wicke to gulp.

"Now, I'm aware the pair of you have been Dungeon diving – as is the intention of your visit after all. I am also aware that about two months ago, the Dungeon in Caedom collapsed – about the same time as you and your group departed the area. A coincidence maybe? I think not. So, what do you have to tell me before I let you visit this crucial source of magic stones to fuel our war efforts and economy? Perhaps it's best we go to separate rooms so I can have a chat with each of you individually."

Wicke and Damian both remained silent, neither of them daring to say the wrong thing. A squeak came from behind. "It was us," Sabine said quietly, immediately folding. The pressure in the room immediately dispersed and a soft smile returned to Admiral Exarga's face. "See, I just knew it." He turned and looked plainly at Wicke. "We have just had a major battle at the Frontier, and that is not even factoring the countless rebellions scattered across the New World. The Dungeon is allowing us to keep our Navy and the Marines alive. So why should I let you destroy another Dungeon?"

Wicke held out her hand, concentrating before forming a magic stone. Philip Exarga's eyes narrowed. "How?" he asked cautiously. Wicke produced another of a different size. "I was taught by an Archmage within the Dungeon. I will give you the method, and teach anyone you ask me to. Even Damian can do it," she stated, turning to him. He sighed and made his own tiny stone. Admiral Exarga gave her some paper and she wrote down the instructions. "Can you use magic?" she asked him. "An appropriate amount," he answered carefully.

“Focus on that source within you and try to force it into your hands, you’ll feel a bubbling or fizzing sensation. Squeeze that both physically and with your mind. Condense it. Keep doing so. That’s all.” Philip looked down at the rock in his palms. He shook his head. “How could a process that simple have been hidden for so long?” he questioned to himself, pocketing the paper and the stone. “The Dungeon is yours. Destroy it if you see fit. It’s loss is an acceptable risk, and whatever you find inside I’m sure is a suitable reward for this.”

Wicke nodded and got to her feet. “Thank you,” she stated, stepping away and walking towards the door. “Oh, one more thing. The Dungeon changed in response to the destruction of the first. It has gotten more difficult. Good luck.” Wicke smiled and led the way towards the door, the others following behind. But as Cinderlee stepped forwards she felt something hold her back, her gaze turning towards the Admiral.

Philip stared at her, his eyes cold and face expressionless. “Harm them and you will never see the sunlight again,” he warned. She left without anything more than nod and a feeling of eyes on the back of her neck.