

Chapter 198: Lost Without Leadership

Teleporting felt far stranger than it had before. Last time it had been almost instantaneous for the Stacked Hand and its crew, yet this time the process seemed drawn out – stretching from one moment into multiple before into several seconds. Wam gripped onto the wheel of the Stacked Hand for dear life. A purple maelstrom surrounded the ship, the vessel caught into a swirling tornado. Periodic strikes of purple energy struck the still-burning ship.

Screams filled his ears and mind as he watched his fellow crewmates disappear into the surrounding vortex. A glimmer of golden scales drew his attention to the colossal form of the Dragon Betrayer, Kaina, tumbling in the air before she vanished through the spell's wall. A heavy crash drew his attention to the other side as the Gambit broke free of its restraints, the flyer crashing into the side of the ship before vanishing. The deck seemed to groan beneath his feet, cracks spreading, Gaea's scream breaking through everything as she held the Stacked Hand together. Tempest floated before her – the djinn desperately trying to finish the spell.

There was another crunch, the Last Card breaking free and then orbiting the Stacked Hand before the small ship swept its way across the deck. "Bjorn!" Wam yelled out, staring in horror as the vessel collided into the large therian and swept him off the side, alongside several others, into the vortex. The ship seemed to separate, a layer peeling off everything as purple energy bled from every surface. But then with a heavy splash, the ship snapped together and everything quietened.

Wam dropped a knee, a wave of exhaustion consuming him, his arms desperately grasping the Stacked Hand's wheel for support. He paused, regaining himself, waiting for someone to speak up. Nothing came and he raised his head, his eyes widening as he found the deck of the Stacked Hand practically empty other than Gaea, Tempest and Red. "Are we all okay?" Wam called out, standing up – his stomach churning. He pushed the discomfort aside, reaching up to his communicator as the other three nodded. "Can anyone hear me? Bjorn? Marisha? Captain?" Wam questioned. Silence followed.

"Fire!" Gaea called out, gesturing to the flames persisting near the ship's bow. Red darted to the edge of the ship and leapt overboard, returning and spraying water out of his body at the flames. "Use your own powers!" he stated forcefully towards Gaea. She looked at him with both offence and confusion before her eyes widened and she thought through what he had said. "Oh," she said daintily,

huge paddles emerging out of the sides of the ship and then throwing water across the deck – dousing the flames in a strong wave. “Foolish girl,” Red stated, shaking his head and looking around. “Rude!” she returned, vanishing in a cloud of golden spores.

“Guys, guys!” Wam stated, dropping the anchors and stopping the ship before stepping down onto the main deck. “This is not the time to be picking fights with one another,” he attempted. Red scoffed and immediately stormed to the edge of the ship before leaping overboard – leaving Wam alone with Tempest. Wam looked up at the djinn, desperation in his eyes as he hoped the floating armour would offer something – anything – whether words of encouragement, a suggestion of an idea – something to change their situation for the better. Tempest floated silently, small charges of electricity bouncing across his metal armour. “Is anyone there?” Wam attempted desperately, once more.

A rattle drew his attention to the stairs leading below deck, his chest tightening as the hatch failed to lift. He stepped forwards and pulled it open, a pair of Demons staring up at him. “Fuck!” Wam screamed, Asmodeus and Byleth looked at each other before up at Wam. “I hope that is not due to our presence,” Asmodeus growled in his bat form. “Is the battle won? Our victory, yes?” Byleth questioned. Wam shook his head, grabbing the ears on the top of his head and pulling tightly. “Where is the Captain?” Asmodeus questioned. “Where is Lord Baal?”

“Gone!” Wam snapped, the Demons flinching and backing slowly away before looking at each other. “Dead?” Byleth asked softly, looking up at the sobbing badger therian. “I... I don’t know,” Wam said quietly, sitting down on the floor and looking through tears towards the still silent Tempest. “It is unlikely,” Tempest confirmed. “The magic was... distorted. Our crew is lost, but I doubt they have fallen. It is not a great concern, Wam, do not shed your tears.”

Wam clenched his fists. “Not a great concern? How?” he challenged, wiping his face as his anger grew. “Jayce was always good at looking forwards. We have plans for such an eventuality – albeit I very much doubt he could have ever foreseen a splitting of this magnitude. First we must figure out our location.” Wam looked down at his feet and nodded. “I will follow your lead,” he stated, looking up at the djinn. Tempest shook his head. “No,” he said firmly. Wam frowned. “No?”

“No. I will not lead. I am not qualified to deal with interpersonal relations, nor do I have any wish to. Provided Chalakon has not departed, I would advise

placing him in command. However, that is at your discretion, Acting Captain," Tempest explained. Wam faltered before glancing towards the Demons. They both looked up at him. He then spotted Gaea observing quietly from inside Jayce's quarters. He sighed. "Fine," he said begrudgingly.

"Red, return to the ship," Wam ordered, glancing around the horizon for anything that stood out. A few islands lay on the horizon and the air held a surprising chill for the time of year. A splash announced Red's return. "What is it?" he growled, looking towards Tempest. Wam cleared his throat and stood up straight – his large size still far smaller than both the djinn and the jiaoren. "We need to work together in order to get out of this mess. It's not the time for arguments," he stated cautiously.

Red glared at him menacingly. "I have no reason to listen to you, nor remain aboard this vessel. My debtor is lost, likely dead, as such I am forever exiled. I have... failed," he said firmly, but with a distinct layer of contemplative mourning. Wam nodded. "I get that. And you're free to leave. I cannot stop you and I respect you enough not to try to trick you to stay. But they're out there – I know it. By brothers, Bjorn, Jayce – all of them. They have to be, something like this wouldn't be enough to take them down. Those islands over there, the coldness of the air, the waters, the skies – we've been here before. I think we're southwest – near the therian lands. I could be wrong, but maybe they landed there. I - we - could use you," Wam stated, glancing towards the observing Gaea and gesturing for her to come closer. She glared angrily at Red and at Tempest.

Red looked towards her before letting out a bubbling sigh. "I apologise, dryad. My anger is misplaced. We should work together to protect this vessel," he stated. The planks next to Wam split open and Gaea appeared in a flash of golden light. "Forgiven," she stated. "You're not," she added, pointing at Tempest. Tempest looked at her blankly. "Do you not even care? Are you that cold and soulless?" she accused.

Tempest floated silently for an uncomfortable length of time. "I care," he sparked quietly. "I am to blame for this disaster. If there is any to blame for failure it is me. I apologise. I will do what I can to make amends, but emotion will not change the situation. I concur with Wam's idea – those islands should clarify our location, and should they not be Belluabella then they should at least help identify the region we are in." Gaea looked awkwardly at the deck. "It's not your fault," she said softly. "Sorry," she then added. The djinn nodded and floated below deck. "Acting Captain, the golems are still available to be used,

the night is coming and we are mostly defenceless. We should get moving,” Tempest advised from below. Wam nodded and headed towards the Stacked Hand’s wheel. “Right, you heard him. Let’s get going!” he declared.

The islands were not what Wam had initially believed them to be. “You are in the right region, however,” assured the Dockmaster, analysing the damage to the Stacked Hand. Wam and Gaea’s faces lit up. “Belluabella is a little more than a week west of here,” he confirmed, the silver fox therian pondering for a moment. “Damage to the deck and masts shouldn’t be too difficult to fix, may be costly if you have any particular rush.”

“We should be fine without external assistance,” Tempest inserted, an aggressive tinge to his voice. “Very well,” the Dockmaster stated, raising his hands up. “I take it you will still need the materials?” he pressured, smelling money in the air. Tempest sparked angrily. “Indeed,” he zapped, his eyes glowing as he looked towards Wam. “We’ll, uh, get back to you, Dockmaster. Just need to discuss finances with my shipwright,” Wam stated. The fox nodded and then departed. “Do we have money? I have a bit in my bottomless bag but Marisha normally stashes our pay somewhere,” Wam questioned. Gaea looked towards Tempest. “Let us visit the vault,” he stated.

Tempest led the way to the main cargo hold. Where there were usually stacks of crates carrying resources and supplies for the Stacked Hand’s typical long voyages, Wam instead found it, for the most part, empty – the rear vault door exposed for all to see. It was something that Wam had rarely been allowed to go to, least of all with no one to supervise him and his brothers. It opened on simple command as Wam placed his palm to the surface and stated his name, allowing them to step inside.

The vault had slowly turned over the years into a large golden corridor lined with smaller vault doors. Each circular door held the markings of a specific crewmember – all of them sealed and only unlockable by the Captain, Bjorn, Astris, or whoever owned the individual vault. Sitting at the end of the long corridor sat a colossal spider-like sorting machine, one with pipes leading up and into each of the separate vaults. At the base of the terminal was a large hole containing a swirling black void.

“So...?” Wam uttered, looking from Gaea and Red to Tempest for guidance. The djinn floated forwards, gesturing to an open vault sat behind the sorting machine. “Ah,” Wam stated, faltering before taking a gulp as he looked at the mass of colourful pearl decorating the vault. It was a considerable sum, a large

and sizeable fortune, but something in Wam twinged as he felt disappointment. "I was... expecting more," he stated. Marisha had never shown him the ship's vault, likely to prevent any ideas of pocketing extra cash, but for a crew like the Rising Aces he would have expected more. A lot more.

Gaea and Red both bore similar expressions. However Gaea almost eternally found money to be both a bemusing concept and something she had no real means of measurement to compare her thoughts with. "Isn't it a lot?" she questioned back. Red, on the other hand, let out a disappointed sigh and shook his head. The Forgotten Prince treated anything other than an absolute fortune as poverty.

Tempest held up a hand to interrupt Red's incoming scathing comment. "You may remember that a little over a year ago we were part of the Therian War. Jayce found it appropriate to give the Republic the spoils we obtained. Since then we have been moving from battle to battle with little in the ways of financial victory. This will have to do, for however long we need it to do for. Should it not then I shall offer my own funds to the cause," Tempest offered. Wam looked down before nodding. "I will too," he affirmed, before looking towards Gaea and Red. "Fine..." they agreed, one with reluctance, the other with enthusiasm – even though she had next to no real funds of her own.

They stayed in port for a few days, ensuring the Stacked Hand was repaired and stocked up for their next voyage, before setting off for Belluabella. Without Falconer to act as the ship's navigator, Wam found most of his time was spread between ensuring that Gaea was kept focused on her task of steering the ship and also his own task of plotting their route. He had initially passed it off as a task that didn't require much effort and energy, but after waking one morning to find the ship facing in completely the wrong direction it almost immediately dawned upon him that it required far more than just following a rough heading.

But, after a few close encounters with rocks, reefs, and the odd storm, the crew set their eyes Belluabella. "We may not find the friendly welcome we are looking for," warned Tempest, as Wam took control of the Stacked Hand's wheel. "Maybe not, but it's the best chance we have at finding help," Wam returned, slowly easing the ship into the central channel. He shivered as he felt numerous eyes fall upon him from all directions, and a seedling of doubt quickly began to grow inside his mind.

He wondered just what it all looked like to the outside. A nobody sailing the Stacked Hand, the ship empty apart from four unheard-of members of the Rising

Aces and a pair of toy-like Demons. He shook his head. Tempest was heard of, few would not recognise the djinn. But the dryad, the jiaoren and the badger therian – who had heard of them? Something brushed his leg and he looked down, only for the creature to move and flap up onto the railing next to him.

“Ease your worries,” Asmodeus calmed, either seeing or sensing the panic quickly growing within Wam. “They will not attack, this ship’s legend stands on its own – it’s colours known across the world.” Wam looked to the large bat. “How can you be sure?” Wam questioned, the ship exiting the mountain back into bright daylight. “Because this is the ship of Jayce Exarga, and even without him here it is still his. And what fool would pick a fight with that man?” Wam nodded, a soft smile crossing his face. “Only a Betrayer, I suppose.”

They docked in the bay they had used previously, the process reliant entirely on Gaea using her connection to the ship to guide it’s mooring, and it wasn’t long before a small group arrived to say hello. “Captain,” Tempest stated, providing a mental push of encouragement to Wam. Wam took a nervous gulp and made the first move, clambering down over the side of the ship to the pier below. “Hello!” he greeted boldly, looking at the large group of armoured therians.

“Where is your Captain?” questioned a hyena therian, the clear leader of the small group of guards. “Unavailable at this very moment, you’ll have to deal with me,” Wam stated firmly, glancing briefly backwards to ensure that both Red and Tempest had joined him. Fortunately they were there, and - from the quick glance of the therians to Tempest – Wam quickly sensed it would have been trouble had they not been.

“I see...” said the hyena. “Well, a message was to be passed onto Pirate Lord Exarga upon his arrival. Are you willing to accept the duty of passing it forwards?” he questioned. Wam nodded, his fists clenched and chest puffed out as he stood as tall as he could. “Lord Magnus of the Frostbear tribe wishes to see him at the soonest convenience. That is all, good day.” The delegation turned and marched away, leaving a short moment of confusion behind that quickly fell into a patch of disappointment.

“So no one is here then,” Wam realised, looking towards Tempest. The djinn nodded. “That would seem probable. A shame, but we at least have a direction.” Wam nodded. “Is it possible for us to take the ship with us?” Wam asked. Tempest shook his head. “No, although I have successfully reverse-engineered the runes on the ship’s original container – I have failed to replicate the original

in a manner that functions with the Stacked Hand. The Captain is in current possession of the ship's container. It will have to remain here under Gaea's care."

"Great, just great," Wam said with a sigh. "Red, stay here with her. Just in case. Tempest you'll come with me to visit the Frostbear Tribe." Red nodded, climbing back aboard. "An excellent suggestion. Should something occur I am able to bring us swiftly back aboard," Tempest advised. Wam smirked, nodding appreciatively before beginning to walk towards the exit. "Wait!" called down Asmodeus, the large bat gliding down from the Stacked Hand to land on Wam's back. "I will join you." Wam shrugged and continued onwards.

It took several hours before they arrived at the Frostbear village, and by that point Wam was starving. Something Magnus sensed almost immediately. "Come come, there is no point discussing whatever has occurred whilst you're in this state," he quickly advised, the polar bear therian hobbling forwards towards his home and gesturing for Tempest, Wam and Asmodeus to follow. "Welcome home," came numerous voices from the locals, as Wam followed after him. He nodded and smiled awkwardly, each pat and greeting alien to him.

He flinched as Magnus finally stopped and embraced him tightly. "What?" Wam questioned, trying to push back only for the large bear's grip to feel inescapable. "It is okay, you are safe here," Magnus assured, keeping hold tightly until he felt Wam's rigid body soften. He pulled back, placing both hands on Wam's shoulder and looking at his face. Tears flooded silently down Wam's face, his body shaking as for the first time since the crew's separation he felt safe. "Eat, drink, tell me what has occurred. Where is your crew? Where is Bjorn?" Magnus questioned.

"I see..." Magnus eventually stated, sometime later, holding his chin in his hands and pondering quietly. "This is quite an issue." Wam scoffed and shook his head. "You think, old man?" he stated, looking towards Tempest and the otherwise empty hut. "I suppose you are correct. This is a real mess. Unfortunately this has also occurred at quite possibly the worst time. There is little I can do to aid you, as much as I wish I could."

Wam looked towards him, frowning with quick confusion. Magnus held up a hand. "Crach's death has opened a dangerous line of thought within these lands. King Xerxes is now faced with numerous challengers, all seeking to be the Therian King and seize both the title and the now associated Pirate Lord position. Crach bastardised the crown, and now Xerxes has turned it into something that anyone can steal without an honour duel. Something that both hinders and helps you."

"How so?" Wam questioned, not exactly certain how any of this could possibly be helpful. "Well, in simpler terms, Xerxes' hands are now so full with quelling rebellions and reunifying the therians that he may not be able to turn his attention to his true task: getting revenge on the Empire – apologies – Republic. He seeks vengeance for his imprisonment, and is using his War Hounds to ensure that little stands in the path of his goal. I fear that soon we shall have to fall in line as well, but for now the attention is not on us. I wish I could help you, Wam, Tempest, Asmodeus, but I cannot split my people. Not so soon after Inger joined the ancestors. You may stay here for as long as you need to – we will hide you."

Wam looked down. It wasn't what he had been hoping for, but if there were any Rising Aces nearby then perhaps waiting in Belluabella was the best idea. "I-" "Wam," came a voice from his communicator. "There's trouble," said Gaea, his heart twisting as he shot to his feet. "The ship is being boarded. Come back, please come back," she pleaded. Wam looked to Tempest, who looked back blankly – waiting for a command.

"Go. Sail to the New World. It's a long journey I know, but you'll find safety on the other side. Perhaps your crew, if not then friends. I believe in you, young cub. Prove us proud, as I know you already have Bjorn," Magnus reassured, placing a gentle hand on Wam's shoulder. Wam nodded, stepping back. "Tempest, take us back to the Stacked Hand!" he ordered, resolute in his only real option. The djinn began to chant, a purple swirl surrounding both of them before in a flash of purple lightning they landed on the main deck.

Blood covered the deck beneath his feet: a therian corpse lay sprawled on the ground. It was a hyena, the one that Wam had seen earlier that day on arrival. He had been gutted, the wound clean and from a blade. Wam faltered – unless the golems had struck first - neither Gaea nor Red used a blade. "How curious?" came a gnarly voice that sent a shivers down Wam's back. He looked up, glancing towards the helm where Gaea and Red both stood in defensive positions. Stood on the stairs beneath them were another two hyenas, both dressed in sand-coloured, long and loose-fitting robes, with a rectangular headscarf over their heads – their eyes hidden behind black visors. Armour made of numerous metallic rectangles sat over their loose clothes, and they both held a pair of long, curved swords.

But behind them, stood initially with his back to Wam, Tempest and Asmodeus was another hyena dressed in the same uniform – only his was a blood-red colour and one of his blades dripped with blood. He turned, his eyes visible and an

unusually human green colour. "So, there are more of you," he said, his voice grating and dripping with cruel malice. "But not the great reinforcements you spoke of," he then added, with a high-pitched cackle – the other two hyenas laughing along with him, before several more voices joined in from behind, alerting Wam immediately to the others scattered amongst the deck. "And most notably, no Jayce Exarga."

The War Hound glared at Wam, his eyes analysing him in an intimidating and almost lecherous manner. Wam clenched his fist, the silver ring on his middle finger forming into a large warhammer. "You two okay?" Wam questioned, calling up to Red and Gaea. "Yeah, fine," Red growled back, Gaea hiding behind him. "So, I take it you're in charge of this ghost ship? We haven't been introduced, but I suppose you already know of me – don't you, little badger?" Bayle the Joker stated, putting his weapons away.

"The clown, Bayle – I know of you," Wam returned, holding his weapon tightly and glancing nervously towards the other hyenas as they spread around and began to surround him. "Clown..." Bayle growled, letting out a sigh and rolling his eyes. "I will kill Persi for that nickname – I much preferred the Cackler. Still, it is good you know of me. I take it you also know that it is wise to surrender. This ship is mine, and your lives with it – whether you admit it or not."

"Never," Wam growled. Bayle nodded, looking towards one of his hyenas who charged silently forwards. A large thorny spike launched upwards out of the deck, impaling the hyena with a yelp before quickly retracting. "Another move dryad and your tree burns, with you along with it!" Bayle growled, turning to look at her. Wam surged forwards, lifting his warhammer high and bringing it sharply down across Bayle's jaw.

The weapon met bone and flesh, carrying forwards and through with a spray of broken bone and blood. Bayle staggered backwards, slowly reaching up to touch his ruined face as Wam swung again. This time the hyena caught the strike, almost lazily, with his free hand before he looked down at the blood covering his other palm. His green eyes glanced up, anger burning within them. He gargled something, before his head glowed green and transformed back into human form.

He had strong facial features, his cheeks and nose prominent – his skin pale, and gaunt, with numerous weary wrinkles. He laughed before he transformed back – his jaw reformed. "Strike first, strike hard – a wise idea, but one that needed to be lethal." Bayle shoved Wam back with a single, human hand – that quickly

transformed between therian and human form. His eyes remained green – human. “Try again,” Bayle goaded. “Interfere and you shall meet the same fate as that other failure!” he warned to his pack.

Wam roared and surged forwards. He leapt and slammed the weapon down hard, the hammer brushing the fur on Bayle’s face. He brought the hammer back up, trying to catch him with the hook on the back of the hammer’s head, but again it seemed to only just miss. Wam threw a heavy fist, dropping his therian form around his hand and concentrating his Focus into the strike. Again it missed, and his eyes widened as he realised what Bayle was doing. “Faster than most,” Bayle said softly, his pack cackling around them. “But too slow.”

Wam sputtered blood, his eyes looking down at confusion at the blade that had appeared from nowhere and impaled his chest. Desperately he pushed away, transforming fully out of therian form and trying to run away, only for Bayle to grab his shoulder and lean into him. “Weak.” He thrust the sword through Wam’s back, the blade emerging from his chest. The blade retracted nearly as quickly and Wam dropped to the floor, his vision darkening before his breath left his body.

Seize the Seas Tales: Know Thy Enemy

Alara flicked as quickly as she could through the tower of documents amongst her table. They were file names, all detailing Marines and Navy that she could choose from. Captains, Commanders, all at her disposal for their next attempt at the Old World. She needed the best of the best, it was the only way they stood a chance at taking down the Sentries and then freeing her parents. She had failed already, she wouldn’t again.

A knock drew her attention to her door. She had had numerous visitors across the last few weeks, but most knew now to leave her alone. She was busy, anxious, stressed, and it was not pretty. She growled slightly, forcing herself to her feet and wiping her eyes before stumbling to the door and dragging it open. “Yes?” she questioned. “Delivery,” stated the Navy Lieutenant, dressed in all black. She frowned and took it from him, shutting the door as he quickly walked away.

It was a large envelope, big enough for a sizeable folder – and that was exactly what it contained. “Huh?” she questioned, looking down at the damaged paper. The words on its surface were scrawled, twisting in her vision as her necklace automatically began to translate the words in a foreign language. She held it

tightly, staring closely at it as the writing finally stilled. Her eyes widened.
“Personnel file: Barca Khalid,” it read.