

Chapter 199: Beast, Man... and God

Gaea stared in horror as Wam died in front of her. It had been so quick, and, although unlikely that he could have won against the War Hound, she had been counting on him buying enough time for her to slip away and command the golems to attack. "That was... disappointing, but inevitable," Bahl goaded, wiping his blade and turning back towards her and Red. "Kill them," he commanded, his pack of hyenas surging towards Tempest and the helm.

She screamed, the entire ship rattling and twisting before the surface cracked apart and detonated outwards in a sea of large spikes. Red launched himself upwards, dodging out of the way of the wave of thorns and carrying himself aggressively towards the also leaping War Hound. They clashed in the air, before slamming back towards the deck as the thorns disappeared. Red glanced behind him, Gaea was gone. A fist then cracked against his eye.

Gaea caught her breath as she emerged below deck amongst the guarding golems. "Defend the ship!" she cried. The stone statues ground to attention and then marched towards the stairs to the main deck. She then paused, leaning against the wall with her hands over her face – orange tears dripping down her chin. She could hear fighting above: crashes of blades against stone, cracks of lightning, and the rushing of two apex predators throwing everything they could at each other.

She gasped, doubling over and clutching her side. When she pulled her hand back she saw sticky, green blood. Someone was attacking her tree. Gaea let out a pained sob, leaning back into the wall and transversing through it before lunging out of her wounded tree with a screech. She lunged at the large hyena – his body almost double the size of hers. Wam lay at his feet, tucked into the tree - by her design - to protect his corpse from her fury. The hyena stumbled backwards as she wrapped herself around his body, the light impact causing him to trip over Wam and crash to the floor.

She mounted him, her hands wrapped tightly around his throat as she pushed him down. He reached for her face, raking a claw down her cheek but she didn't let go – the wood of the deck parting beneath his head as she physically willed the ship to split. She screamed as his head fell back into the gap before she slammed the ship together – killing him instantly and painting herself red. His corpse spasmed beneath her before falling still, and only as the final movement stilled did she release her hands from his neck, slowly reaching up to wipe the blood off her face.

Tempest disintegrated the pair of harassing hyenas, running so much lightning through them that the deck ignited beneath their feet, before they turned to ash. More just kept coming, reinforcements beyond the hyenas that had presumably been called to aid the War Hound. It was a losing battle and with every fallen golem they came closer to their demise and joining Wam in the afterlife. He floated backwards towards the protection of his golems, analysing the deck before freezing as he spotted Gaea sat stunned in horror over a corpse of her own making. Tempest didn't blink – he didn't need to – but Bahl appeared in an instant in front of her.

Bahl lunged for her, she was the ship and with her death would come the end of the fight – he knew it, it had to be done. He swung with his swords, his eyes not on her but on Tempest as he chanted and then Red as he darted to use the opening to kill him. Bahl feinted his strikes, the frozen dryad already defeated, swinging instead into the opening ocean crawler. Red blocked the first strike with his forearm, the curved blade embedding itself deep into his armoured arm before the following strike came harder and more precisely downward through his joint – severing his left arm at the elbow.

Red screamed, the War Hound dropping his embedded blade to grab his throat and then throw him directly into the direction of Tempest's incoming spell. Tempest faltered, a moment's thought questioning whether it was worth sacrificing Red to ensure victory. That moment was enough for the War Hound's second blade to embed itself directly through his neck, Red's body crashing into him a moment later and sending them both crashing to the ground with a fizz and then a pop.

Gaea's eyes widened as she looked up at the War Hound. He towered over her, his eyes furious and frustrated. "You cost me a lot of valuable soldiers. For what end? A meaningless fight to defend a broken crew?" he growled, placing his foot on Red's severed arm and then wrenching the blade free from the exoskeleton. Gaea turned and looked to her remaining crewmates. Red lay on the ground in a pile, his arm gushing blood and body smoking. Tempest has a blade embedded in his neck – something of little consequence to the being made of energy – but his armour looked dull and lacked light. The interruption of his spell had been catastrophic, the damage unknown. A hand grabbed Gaea's throat, lifting her up from the floor and removing all contact to the ship – unknowingly cutting off her connection.

"You'll join them soon enough, but first I have questions I should get answers for," Bahl growled, his rage fading and a begrudging duty reemerging. Gaea spat blood at his face but he didn't even flinch, he simply hacked at her tree with his blade – the pain agonizing. "Stop! Stop! Please stop!" she begged, struggling against his grip as he hacked at different spots purely to hurt her. Her body screamed as she did, wounds opening up across her skin. "What do you want to know? Ask, please," she cried. He didn't say anything, hacking once more. "That's the thing... I don't want to know anything. It's too much effort."

Byleth cowered in Jayce's quarters, the fighting outside finally coming to a close – only instead to be replaced by the agonizing pleading of Gaea as she screamed and sobbed in pain along with a wild, animalistic cackling. The Demon had never known fear like it, nothing nearly as close to his own primordial fear of death. It was strange, alien, haunting and deeply concerning. Byleth feared for the lives of the mortals on this ship. "Asmodeus," said the small cat, "we need to do something." He turned and looked towards the other Demon, only for his eyes to widen as he found himself alone. "Asmodeus? Asmodeus?"

Wam gasped as he bolted upright. The floor was hot, scaldingly-so. "Ow-ow-ow-ow!" he yelped, leaping to his feet before bouncing on his tip-toes. The floor burned, but there was nowhere to escape to – everything around him was a flat expanse of molten magma. He looked down, a bloody hole sat in the centre of his chest, his body cold – despite the heat. He gasped briefly, another gasp following, followed by another, and another, before he let out a horrified and desperate scream.

"Enough!" came a deep growl, the horizon of the flat volcanic expanse beginning to undulate before a colossal mountain erupted out of the ground. Its surface exploded, sending out rivers of lava and plumes of smoke. "Asmodeus?" Wam questioned, a colossal creature dragging itself out of the volcano before sitting at its peak. The giant Demon stared down at him: his form completely different from the large bat Wam was used to, and also very different from what he remembered of Jayce's initial descriptions. "Wh-where am I? What happened? I'm... I'm dead?" Wam questioned.

"There is little time. You are dead, and the others will be soon," Asmodeus declared. "What?" Wam questioned, the Demon's glowing red eyes bearing down upon him. "Listen," he commanded. "Should I have willed it, I would have abandoned you the second you perished, but I do not wish for this crew to fall. Not whilst we both have so much yet to discover. I am offering you a chance to

fight again, to survive this grievous wound and take back the ship that is yours.” “A deal with a Demon? What’s the cost?” Wam questioned, already accepting there was no choice. “That you do not disappoint me, Captain.”

A hand grabbed Bahl’s ankle, his head angling quickly down as his leg began to burn in fast pain. He screamed, releasing Gaea and swinging his blade downwards before leaping away as the grip was released. Bahl landed on his feet, his left leg giving out as the exposed bone snapped on the impact. He crunched into the stairs of the aft-deck, staring in horror as the Demon rose from the dead.

“Wam?” Gaea questioned from the floor. He turned and looked down at her, the hole in his chest had been filled in with glowing orange magma. “Thanks for protecting me,” he said softly, with a genuine smile. Wam then turned, the smile gone, and his glowing red eyes full of hate as he stared at the War Hound. “You greedy bastard!” Bahl cackled, transforming his leg from the knee down into his human form. Wam transformed, his black and white badger form emerging, only now with a pair of bat-like wings and large streaks of glowing orange magma throughout his fur. His eyes remained a glowing crimson with a brown core. “I don’t normally get to kill people twice. Be honoured.”

Wam lunged for him, flapping his wings to launch himself forwards. Bahl swung his blade into Wam’s shoulder cutting the arm clean off, but Wam ignored the pain, pressing his larger body into the hyena before placing his remaining palm onto his chest. His hand melted into magma, the hyena screaming in pain before Wam pulled his head back and then slammed it into the War Hound’s face. The impact hurt, but, between the pain of the heat and the sharp change in battle, Bahl had no defence.

He tried to fight against Wam but Wam continued to press down onto him, his entire body a glowing weapon. “Burn you bastard!” Wam roared, the fur of hyena catching alight as he pressed further and harder into the War Hound’s chest. Bahl screamed before something gave way and Wam’s hand dropped inside the hyena’s chest. The green eyes stared directly at Wam with horror and surprise before they clouded over and Bahl went limp.

Wam pulled his hand free, reaching down for his severed arm before pressing it back to his shoulder – it reattached almost instantly and felt good as new. He turned to the few remaining therians. “Run,” he commanded coldly, the soldiers scrambling for the edge of the ship before leaping overboard down onto the pier, or even the water in desperation. *Good*, came Asmodeus’ voice in Wam’s head –

the sensation unsettling but also somewhat reassuring. *This body feels... strange, like there's something else in here.*

"Can we talk about this later?" Wam questioned aloud, stepping towards Gaea and looking over her wounds. "I'm fine," she cried, clearly not fine. "Them," she added, pointing at Red and Tempest. She faded away, disappearing back inside her tree as he headed over to the pair. "Red? Tempest?" he questioned, reaching into his bottomless bag and pouring a healing potion over Red's stump. The bleeding stopped and the wound sealed into a gnarly scar. Wam poured another into the ocean crawler's mouth, and he soon began to stir. He then turned his attention to the djinn.

The blade in his neck was sparking and, without thought, Wam reached for it and pulled it free. It was only as he held the weapon in his hands that he realised what he had done. "Curious..." he admitted, tossing the weapon aside and looking at the sparking armour. He didn't know what he could do to help, or even if there was anything he could do. Wam's eyes flowed across the damage, the holes in the armour. He looked around, his eyes landing on a broken golem. "Better than nothing," he muttered, grabbing a chunk of stone and concentrating upon it. The stone melted and he placed it onto the gaps in the armour.

With a loud zap, he was sent sprawling backwards, the shock agonising but brief. "Ow..." Wam groaned, getting to his feet as the armour began to glow once again. The two began to move, Tempest and Red regaining some semblance of consciousness. "Get up!" Wam commanded, the pair looking to him and then the devastation around them. "The War Hound is dead? How?" Red questioned, looking briefly at his stump before shrugging it off. "You bound yourself to Asmodeus?" Tempest questioned in turn, the pair self-accepting the silent answer. "Gaea?" Tempest questioned.

"Alive," Wam answered. "We need to leave this place, reinforcements will be coming. Can you teleport us?" Wam questioned. The djinn looked down, shaking his head. "I... do not think that is wise. It could end up worse than before," he answered quietly. "I didn't ask if you thought it was wise. Can you do it?" Wam asserted, the djinn's visor glowing brightly as he looked down at him. "Yes... Captain."

"Then let's go. It doesn't matter where. We'll make our way from wherever to the New World. We'll meet the others there, I'm certain of it," Wam declared. They all turned as they heard shouting in the distance. "Get us going, Tempest!" The djinn nodded, floating upwards and beginning to chant. "Are you certain

about this?" Red questioned. "Last time it didn't work. The djinn could doom us." Wam smiled, looking to the ocean crawler. He shook his head and followed the swirls of lightning around the ship. "We'll be fine. I trust him. Besides, I've already died once."

Thalia hit the ground hard, her knee dropping straight into the sand beneath her feet. Her heart pounded inside her chest, her body pumped full of adrenaline, and her soul felt fear, yet excitement. The Dragon, Kaina, had been something else. A beast, a monstrosity, and, as much as it had pained her that they had fled, she couldn't help but grin at the thought of facing down not only her, but all the Betrayers in the future.

Her eyes stared down at the sand, her left hand gripped her anchor tightly, but her right hand brushed the coarse floor. Beneath the surface sat a far harder rock floor: concrete, not a natural rock from the density as she pressed it with her finger. She frowned, her brown eyes flicking towards a splotch of congealed red sand, a white tooth sat in the mixture. *This isn't the ship*, she thought, as it finally dawned on her.

The roar in her heart died out, replaced instead by a far louder and deafening roar all around her. She looked up, her eyes widening as she got to her feet and took in the packed stands surrounding her in all directions as she stood in the centre of a colossal arena – an arena she recognised. An arena she had fought in only a few months prior. "What? Where's the ship?" she questioned aloud to herself, only instead to fixate her attention on the end of a battle occurring in front of her.

There was a cheer as a large man crumpled to the floor, his hand on his chest – over his heart – and the armour across his body cracked and dented. "Ladies, gentlemen, monsters and mortals, we at the World Guild must apologise for the unexpected intrusion! The on-site guards are on their way to remove the intruder. Once more, we deeply apologise for interruption," called out the announcer, his voice gentle and soft.

Thalia hefted her weapon, her heartrate accelerating as she stared beyond the crumpled body ahead of her. A lone figure stood beyond, his arms folded and a curious expression on his face. Thalia had never seen him before, but something stood out to her – an alien familiarity. He tapped his long, thin, stained fingers, the entire hand and forearms beyond stained a deep orange-red colour. He was short, most definitely close to a foot shorter than her, and quite small in build.

He had muscle, but not an overwhelming amount – a clear leanness over a bulky body, but every minute movement sent a ripple of taut muscle across his arms. Other than his stained arms, his skin was fair and covered in periodic patches of freckles – a strong stretch across his pointed nose. A large red tattoo of a scorpion lay on the left side of his neck. Curiously, he wore a simple black vest, but the lower half of his body appeared to be covered in smart attire, including dress shoes. A golden tie was wrapped around his right hand and a grey jacket sat discarded in the sands near him.

Thalia stepped forwards. “Dearest patrons, I have just been informed that our guest is no other than Thalia of the Rising Aces! As such, we are delighted to inform you of the special match that is just about to begin!” clamoured the announcer. Thalia grinned, permission had been granted and she was itching for another fight. The strange man smirked at her, his blood-red, narrow, crimson eyes flashing at her across the thirty-metre gap between them. His messy black hair flicked around in the gentle wind, the sands of the arena picking up as they both slowly approached each other. “Place your bets now! Thalia of the Rising Aces versus the Assassin, Oni!”

Oni darted forwards across the sands, the small ex-Emperor’s Fist clearing the gap towards her in a far faster time than Thalia could. He was dwarfed by her, but he moved in a blur, sliding through her legs as she swung her anchor down in a devastating strike that shook the entire arena and send a tsunami of sand in all directions. He then pushed against his momentum, leaping up towards her exposed back.

Thalia sat upright, her body cold and her surroundings dark. It had been a dream, it must have all been a dream, she rationalised – a firm and sticky sweat across her body as she sat in a hospital gown. She couldn’t remember anything other than the small man avoiding her blow. Slowly it dawned on her, ice spreading throughout her as she began to pant heavily. She covered her face, her hands blocking out the sight of her humiliation, but in the darkness she saw only red. The red eyes of the warrior that beat her before she could realise she had lost.

And then, as the tears began to stream from her eyes, the rush of shame and embarrassment was replaced. A grin spread across her face, a sadistic expression twisting her mouth as her heart raced. She’d lost. She’d lost in an unbelievably devastating way. And that meant she had so many good fights ahead of her.

Seize the Seas Tales: Crash, Bang, Sputter

Marisha spat out a clump of dirt, pulling her face back from the grass she had landed upon. Her body ached, and she had a sneaking suspicion she had fractured a rib, but none of that was her biggest priority. "Where in the abyss am I?" she questioned aloud, standing up with a groan and looking around at the dark grassy island she was on. It was hilly and plain, with nothing other than grass and ocean in view – nothing other than a flyer laying on its side. She gasped as she recognised the colours: the flyer was the Gambit.

After chugging a healing potion, she raced over to the vehicle. Much to her relief, it was for the most part intact: it had taken some knocks, but nothing particularly stood out as damaged, other than that its left wing needed its fabric retying. She folded her arms, turning and taking in her surroundings. She was definitely more north than they had been, but how far north was the question. A groan drew her attention back to the Gambit.

Someone was underneath the damaged wing. She peered around the fabric, a large form laying on the floor. "Bjorn?" she questioned hopefully, only for the mass of white fur to turn and look at her – a giant panda staring groggily at her as he rubbed his head. "No..." Ohno said softly, groaning as he stood up – only to immediately sit back down as he bumped his head, both hands grasping the top of his head. Marisha tried her very hardest not to voice her disappointment: Ohno was a wonderful, kind and gentle young man, but he was – for lack of better words – a bit thick-headed.

With bleary eyes he looked up at her, her face clearly giving away her disappointment. "Sorry," he said mournfully. She shook it off and stepped under the wing to be by his side, checking him over for injuries. "You don't have anything to apologise, Ohno. I'm glad you're with me," she reassured, placing a hand on his cheek and smiling at him before stepping back and helping him up. "Where are we?" he questioned, stepping more carefully out from under the wing. Marisha shook her head. "I don't know, I think we've crossed the Frontier, but I'm not certain."

"The Gardens?" Ohno questioned, standing over her and looking around at the horizon. Marisha looked up at him before nodding. "Could be, since we're in summer and it's so mild. We'll have to see what we can find once we get into the skies. Check the fuel, I'll see what I can do about this wing," Marisha commanded. "Okay," he said simply, stumbling towards the flyer before clambering inside. Marisha turned to the wing. "Hmm," she vocalised aloud,

before letting out a sigh and turning to the ocean. She reached up to her communicator. "Rising Aces, it's Marisha – can anyone hear me?" she called out.

Morgana turned to Soteria as they flew through the air, Morgana on her broomstick, the Dragon flying through her own means. "Did you hear that?" Morgana questioned. "I did," Soteria responded, her voice raspy and emotionless, but the faint change in expression on her face indicating, at the very least, intrigue. "Marisha?" Morgana responded. "Where are you?" she questioned. "Where are you? Where are we?" came back the response.

Morgana looked down at her broomstick, her knuckles white as she flew absent-mindedly. She then looked past the wood, her eyes focusing on the various islands she was flying over. "Home. We're near my old home."