

Chapter 200: A Future Beyond Today

Damian looked down at his shaking hands, his entire body was trembling: a mixture of fatigue – both mental and physical – and also the memory of what he and his group had just encountered. The Dungeon had changed, that was for certain. They had conquered the Dungeon in the west, but this one had completely wiped them – the group hardly making it over halfway. Between new and more complex monstrosities, as well as an evolution to the Dungeon's environments, the entire journey had felt like an uphill struggle. Damian disliked it. Wicke hated it.

"More than a month... wasted!" she growled, storming down the Isle of Majesty and leaving the group behind. She didn't care that they weren't following her. It didn't matter. She wanted space. She wanted time. She needed to do better. It was the middle of the day, the summer skies already hot on her skin and the streets flooded with people – all milling around as they went about their ordinary lives.

They parted for Wicke, her expression more than intimidating enough to get her through even the thickest crowds. That was until she walked face-first into the chin of a slightly taller woman. "Ow," came an all-too-familiar voice, Wicke's eyes widening as she rubbed her forehead and looked up at Alara. "Alara?" Wicke questioned. "Oh great," she immediately followed up with. Alara frowned, glancing at Wicke before looking beyond her. "Hello, you two," she stated, smiling at Damian – the only member of the group who had followed after Wicke – before folding her arms and glaring at Wicke. "You look like you're up to trouble," she scolded.

Begrudgingly, Wicke followed Alara across the Capital to a small bar on the Isle of Duty. She had used every possible excuse, but neither Damian nor Alara were having any of it, and, before long, Wicke found herself sat in a booth with a strawberry ice-cream milkshake in front of her and Alara's inquisitive eyes staring her down. "I would prefer a beer," Damian stated quietly, looking at his almost matching drink. "Nonsense. And no, young man – not yet, not until you're an adult," Alara said, somewhat mockingly. Wicke rolled her eyes, sipping her straw. "So, what are you two doing in the Capital?" began Alara's first line of questioning.

"We just exited the Dungeon," Damian stated quietly, the pair of them looking down at their laps. "I take it didn't go well? What floor did you reach?" Alara pried. "Sixty-four," Wicke answered plainly, her hand reaching unconsciously to

her side – the memory painful. “And how many are there in total?” Alara questioned, leaning forwards and staring intently at Wicke. “I... uh,” Wicke stammered. “I heard about Caedom’s Dungeon – your handiwork?” Alara pressed. “Yeah, that was us,” Damian said more confidently, taking Alara’s attention back to himself. “One-hundred floors, but it’s changed recently so there could be more – I don’t know,” Wicke inserted, trying to take control of the conversation. “I was just going to say that,” Damian said quietly to her. “I can speak for myself,” she returned. “I’m leading this group after all.”

Alara smiled, shaking her head and leaning back into the booth seat. “Sounds to me like you had your behinds handed to you. I get it, it happens. It’s not nice, but it’s sometimes inevitable. Will you go back in?” she asked. Damian looked towards Wicke. She seemed uncertain, but then a familiar glint reemerged in her amber eyes. “It’s what Jayce would do.” Alara twitched, her face darkening before a soft smile reemerged. “Yeah, it is. He’s expecting you to finish these Dungeons sooner rather than later. So you best get to work. We’ve all got roles to play, this is yours,” she stated, standing up.

“And what’s yours?” Wicke questioned. Something splashed into her milkshake, a look of confusion crossing Wicke’s face before she looked inside at the coin that had landed in her drink. Wicke looked back towards Alara, Riley stood up from her seat at the bar, a few other Marines with her. “Leading us,” Riley stated with a grin, placing her hands on Alara’s shoulders as the Marines heading for the exit. Wicke grit her teeth: she could have sworn no one else had been in the bar – how could she have missed multiple Marines? “I’ve got my own fight. My own war to wage. Make it count you two – this may mean more than you know.” She departed with a small nod, their drinks and food paid for by Riley’s donation.

They left a little later, stepping out and pausing for a moment as they saw a large fleet of Navy ships sailing south. “So...” Damian said quietly, turning and looking towards Wicke. “A week today,” she stated confidently. “We enter, and do not leave until it is ours.” Damian grinned, rolling his neck from side to side before stretching. “What will the others say?” he asked, watching as Alara’s ship disappeared into the horizon. “Aye aye.”

The end of the Dungeon matched that of the one in Caedom: after beating the ninetieth floor with little resources left to use, they found the following floors empty apart from old defensive outposts. They then came across more fields of dead crops before finally the city where the ancient people had stayed. Once

again, a lone white tower sat in the middle of the city - but this time Wicke knew what she was going to ask.

"Do not touch anything!" Wicke warned to her party as they entered the Dungeon's control room. Sabine immediately and slowly lowered down the large, glowing gemstone she had picked up. Wicke ignored her, her own attention fixated on the large frozen chamber in front of her. Mist billowed from the icy surface, yet the woman inside was easy to see. She was a short woman, with long brown hair and darker skin. Her eyes were open and unseeing, her irises a bright, almost-unnatural, cyan colour. Her robes matched her eyes, and - like the Archmage Wicke had met before - this one floated over a black, shadowy orb: a Demon bound to the machine and the conduit for the Dungeon.

Wicke edged closer to the stasis tube, giving a brief glance backwards before adjusting the levers to deactivate the device. Her world faded away, and she once again found herself inside a blank environment - only this time, the Archmage sat on a chair sipping a cup of tea. "Hello," she said cordially, looking at Wicke with both suspicion and intrigue. "Take a seat, intruder from the future, killer of my friend - or saviour of the past, and protégé of us all," she said, her voice icy and smooth. She gestured in front of her and ice rose up from the floor to take the form of a chair. Wicke strode forwards, her heart racing and excitement consuming her as she sat down. "So," carried on the Archmage of ice, "which are you?"

"My name is Wicke, oh great Archmage," she began, attempting flattery only to falter as a cold stare pierced her. "Uh, I met Porthos. In the Dungeon to the West, in Caedom," Wicke reattempted. "He gave me his grimoire and then the Dungeon collapsed." The Archmage stared at Wicke, squinting before sighing and nodding. "I've never heard of Caedom, nor do I know of any other Dungeons apart from those south of this location. But it seems plausible and I have no reason to doubt a creature such as you. Who is your master?" she questioned.

Wicke frowned. "Uh, I have no master. No one other than my sisters and my own skills." The Archmage smirked, nodding approvingly before sipping her tea. It then vanished into thin air. "Then there is much to discuss, little one. My name is Alizia, Cyromancer of the First Orb. If all has gone well, I take it you have never heard of me?" Alizia asked. Wicke nodded. "How much time has passed?" "Five hundred years, give or take."

"Ah... bollocks. Then the rate of deterioration will be accelerating with every moment. That gives us little time. This grimoire is for you, it represents not only

my life's work, but that of my predecessor's, and those before them. Collect the rest, mention our names and they should understand what has occurred. I sensed the destruction of another Dungeon – your doing?" Wicke nodded. "Then the threat has passed and the world is healing?" Wicke nodded again, but a momentary falter drew a look of suspicion out of Alizia.

"What is the state of the global authority? Are Mages in command still?" Wicke shook her head. "No. We're... working through some things at the moment. For a while magic was persecuted and that has only just stopped." Alizia's face twisted into a look of disgust. "Disappointing, but I suppose to be expected since the Anvil of Agron is still functional. Which faction is in command of the Great Forge?"

"Uh..." Another look of confusion and curiosity crossed Alizia's face. "What's the Anvil of Agron?" Wicke asked. The Archmage shook her head, her visage beginning to crack. "The Dungeons are fed enchanted items by the Anvil of Agron, it is a forge – located near the pole. You must have wondered why there were items to aid you throughout your exploration?" Wicke sat in silence. Alizia shook her head. "This world is doomed."

A hand yanked Wicke backwards, her hands clutching a cold, cyan grimoire. "Hey," Damian said with urgency, the entire Dungeon around them shaking and large cracks spreading throughout the floor and ceiling. "We need to go!" he stated. Wicke blinked a few times, returning to herself before she glanced towards the stasis chamber. The glass had cracked, the light from within was gone, and blood steadily dripped down its surface. "Shit!" Wicke stated, she'd taken too long – wasted too much time answering questions when she should have been asking them.

But then a portal appeared behind her, the surface speckled with shards of ice and the opaque blue surface swirling in front of her. "Go!" Wicke stated, a voice in her mind saying the same thing. The group didn't need to be told twice. One by one, they darted through the portal, emerging back out into daylight just as the Dungeon crumbled to dust. "What did you learn?" Cinderlee questioned, immediately ignoring the destruction and looking towards the new grimoire in Wicke's arms.

"Arrest them!" yelled a voice, and before Wicke could even react she found her face pressed to the floor and a pair of antimagic cuffs around her wrists. The others put up more of a fight, but, one-by-one, they all found themselves pressed to the floor before being dragged away by armed guards. Before Wicke could

even properly complain, she found herself gagged and separated from the rest. The dirt soon turned to rock and then to carpet, her kicking legs finding no grip to stop her rough manhandling as she was dragged through the Republic Command Centre before placed kneeling inside a large and well-furnished office.

A cold, yet furious presence pressed down upon her from every direction, a red-faced, clean-shaven, giant of a man staring down at her. Fleet Admiral Truth was beyond livid. He sat behind his desk staring down at her, his breathing heavy, and teeth audibly grinding together. But Wicke ignored him, as much as she could, looking around for anyone who wasn't wanting or able to snap her in two. A heavy thump drew her attention to Damian as he was thrown down next to her. "Of course," Truth said with a growl. "And here I was hoping that an Exarga wouldn't be with you." His brown eyes glared firmly at her.

Using her tongue she pushed out her gag. "This is rude," she said snarkily. "Rude? Rude!" roared Fleet Admiral Truth, transforming into his giant elk form and dragging his giant desk aside before levying an accusatory finger at Wicke's face. "You have single-handedly destroyed any chance this Republic has at gaining independence from the Guild! Your sabotage of our Dungeon has doomed us!"

"Hang on, that's not true," Wicke returned, flinching with every bit of spit that landed on her face. "We were given permission to destroy the Dungeon." Truth let out a long growl. "By whom?" he questioned, looking to Damian as he nodded profusely. "His father. Admiral Exarga." Truth's eye twitched and he stood up straight, adjusting his uniform before approaching his desk and picking up a communicator. "I want both Exarga's to my office, now," he commanded, with cold fury.

"We made a deal, we traded how to make magic stones for the permission," Wicke argued. "This was months ago," she reinforced. Truth shook his head and leant against his desk before folding his arms. "I will throw you in the ocean bound in chains myself if you're lying," he threatened, looking up from her as the doors to his office opened and rescue arrived. "Please tell me you did not give her permission to destroy our Dungeon?" Fleet Admiral Truth questioned.

Wicke's cuffs snapped open and Fleet Admiral Exarga strode past her, standing next to Truth and looking down at Wicke with bemusement before a cold glare flicked over to her son. Admiral Philip Exarga remained by the accused as they slowly stood up. "I did. It was of no use to us and a consistent money hole. Wicke provided a more consistent and permanent source of magic stones – which

requires nothing more than simple training. I figured it best to ensure that systems were established before I presented this to you, my apologies but I know you have no time to be wasted on fantasies without results,” Admiral Exarga explained, holding out his palm and created a small magic stone himself.

Fleet Admiral Truth growled and looked back towards Wicke. “The Dungeon provided far more than just a source of magic stones – it was heritage, a training ground, a use for our overpopulated prisons, and a consistent, exploitable source of enchanted weaponry. Philip, even for you, there is little way to spin that loss in a positive light,” the Fleet Admiral stated, glancing from Wicke to him and then levying the blame towards Fleet Admiral Exarga. “I don’t disagree,” Cassandra stated, nodding in agreement – her blue eyes remaining on Wicke.

Wicke sighed. “We learnt where the magic weapons are coming from,” she stated quietly. “We did?” Damian questioned, looking at her with confusion. She glared at him before looking back at the eyes bearing down upon her. “Go on,” growled Truth. “It’s near the pole. Something called the Anvil of Agron – a Great Forge of the past,” Wicke explained. “The Archmage inside the Dungeon told me herself,” she added. “That adds nothing,” Truth stated blankly.

“Which pole?” Cassandra questioned, her husband cracking a smile as he thought the same thing. “I don’t know,” Wicke answered. The three Admirals looked towards Damian and he simply shrugged. “I know about as much as you do, but we’ll give over any further information we find out,” he promised. “I’m sorry you guys didn’t communicate effectively, but we’re heading to our next Dungeon and not stopping until they’re all dismantled. At the moment, the Guild knows nothing – so, this is an opportunity. Only we, and you, know how to make magic stones. The value is going to change heavily, and if you keep that method quiet...”

Cassandra turned to Truth. “She’s not wrong. This is a powerful weapon we can utilise, and, if Wicke says she’s going to destroy the other Dungeons, I’m inclined to believe her – two have already fallen by her hands. This Anvil of Agron could be a major asset if we can find it – I believe it’s worth letting them see what information they can find out,” she argued. Wicke tried to not to look smug: she could hug Jayce and Damian’s mother, but Truth was still glaring at her. “Very well,” he said reluctantly. “If there is a final conclusion we can all agree on – I wish to never see your face again, Wicke.”

It felt like they were being deliberately sabotaged as Wicke and Damian waited for their friends to be released. They had been promptly booted out of Admiral

Truth's office – and neither of them had wanted to wait for the Exargas to emerge from their presumed telling off. Eventually Sabine shakily emerged from her captivity – her face covered in tears. "Oh thank the Gods!" she sobbed, dropping to her knees and hugging Wicke's waist. "How long was I in there for?" she asked. Wicke glanced towards Damian. "Uh, thirty minutes," Wicke answered. Sabine shuddered.

Enki and Morgause strolled out with little care moments later, but Cinderlee faltered at the doorway, turning and looking back the way she had come. "Until next time, darlings!" she said, blowing a kiss. She strolled up to the group. "Some of the nicest cells I've ever had the pleasure of being in. Five stars. Anyway, what did we miss?" she questioned. It took some time to explain all of which had been discussed, both with the Archmage Alizia and the Admirals, and by that point they had made their way through the city back to their accommodation.

"A forge? Something of that scale must be... absurd. How could it be functioning after so long?" Morgause questioned, looking to Cinderlee for answers. Cinderlee just shrugged. "The Gods work in strange ways, the Heavens even more so," she said cryptically. "So, that's two Dungeons down. Where to next?" Enki questioned. The group looked towards Wicke. "I was thinking we head East, to the Mysts."

"Word will spread quickly that two Dungeons have collapsed, we should probably get moving sooner rather than later – every moment will only make it harder for us to get in," Damian stated. The others all looked at him. "What?" Wicke shook her head and placed a hand on his shoulder. "That sounded somewhat sensible. Let's get going. Let's find a ship."

Seize the Seas Tales: Brutal/Beauty

Thalia decided against leaving the medical ward. It was late, and her body groaned at her when she took the first step. It screamed at her as she climbed back into her bed. So she lay there for a while, looking up at the ceiling. She knew where she was: the Guild Arena in the Old World - but was anyone else nearby? She didn't know. It didn't matter. This was an opportunity. A chance to improve. It was something Jayce had told her she should look for.

"What?" Thalia questioned, looking at Jayce as he stood on the bow sprit, riding the waves. He turned and looked at her, his orange eyes glowing. "We do not stand a chance against the Sea Sovereign. None of us. Not me. Not you," he said firmly. "We cannot beat a Betrayer together at the moment, and all of the

Betrayers would struggle to defeat her. Therefore, something needs to change. We need to grow, to evolve, and to find a way to stand toe-to-toe with the Betrayers. I need you to evolve."

She grit her teeth, looking away as a spray of water crossed her face. "I... I can't. I need to avenge my grandfather. I need to... be realistic about what I can do," she said quietly, the words hurting her throat, but an unfortunate truth that had long tormented her. "Who says that? Because that's not your words – it's not you. You survived being cut in two. You do not back down from a fight you cannot win. And that's why you are such a great asset to this crew. You charge first, always."

She looked up at him and he stepped down to meet her, looking up at her and placing a hand on her head. "You're our beast. But I need a predator who can hunt and kill, not just maim. A chance will come, one where you can test yourself, push yourself, but you need to find out your way of fighting. Your real way of fighting, something that isn't just throwing yourself at your enemies without tactics or strategy. You can do it - break the mould, become my first Champion."

Thalia woke up without pain, and she wasted no time in ignoring the healers in the ward, grabbing her stuff and immediately setting off for the upper levels of the Guild Arena. Her Captain's words rumbled in her mind as she stormed through armed guards, recounting the route she had walked a few months before. Eventually she came to a stop, a field of eyes looking upon her from all the edges of the large viewing box she had entered.

Most of the fighters eyeing her up were women – a menagerie of body types wielding a range of weapons from swords to spears to shields to fists. They all looked her with curiosity, suspicion, and hunger, and all braced as they prepared to engage her in violence. But she ignored their stares, her eyes locked on a man that she had seen speak to Jayce before. "Ming!" she bellowed, startling the peacock-like man before approaching him. He yelped as she strode across the room, her feet stomping loudly on the wooden floor.

Thalia then stopped in her tracks, another fighter stepping between her and her target. Thalia stared straight ahead, looking at the chest of the woman who had intervened. She frowned: Thalia was by no means small, but this goliath must have been seven feet tall. And she wasn't lacking muscles either. "The Rising Ace who had her neck snapped, for a toad leaving her pond you're awfully bold," stated the goliath, her green eyes boring into Thalia's brown. Thalia didn't think, she just swung her fist – straight into the larger woman's jaw.

She toppled over and crashed through a table, clearing the way for Thalia. Ming stared up at her, his mouth hanging open before he firmly closed it. "I'm not here to talk, I want to fight. I want a rematch against that... assassin," she stated firmly. A yell and the clatter of bits of wood alerted Thalia to the goliath regaining consciousness but, as she charged forwards, Ming held out a hand. She skidded to a halt. "But-" she attempted.

"In a tournament between women fighters, a headliner like this one will only increase the revenue for you all," Ming stated efficiently. "Think between now and the future, and choose which you think is worth it, Brigitte. Is it worth a fight now that could prevent this entire event from reaching its full potential? If you think so then hit back. It won't be me who stops you," he warned, the numerous eyes around the room all falling on Brigitte. She stepped back, wiping her mouth before shaking her head. "We'll settle this, I swear," she threatened, pointing at Thalia before storming off – her short auburn hair bouncing with each step.

"So where is your Captain?" Ming questioned. "No one visited you in the infirmary, are you truly alone?" Thalia glanced around before standing at her full height. "I'm on holiday," she lied. "And as I said, I want a rematch." Ming shook his head before stroking the long strands of hair falling from his chin. "Oni is beyond you. And his fights are... special. If he takes interest then it will be arranged, but he's not a man that you can force to do anything, so I advise – to the best of my ability – that you look elsewhere."

Thalia folded her arms. "My patience isn't something to be squandered, peacock, speak fast," she stated. His mouth opened slightly and he fidgeted as he ruffled his fanciful clothes and became a little flustered. "Peacock?" he questioned, before shutting down his thoughts and pushing aside the nickname. "Well, uh, as it so happens – Oni is probably going to be interested in facing the champion of our new event. With all that has been going on – and a few complaints from the audience of our ratio of fighters – we at the Watergate Guild Arena are proud to announce an all-women tournament," he stated.

"Put me in it," Thalia stated firmly and immediately. Ming took a cautious step back and nodded profusely. "But of course, a Rising Ace would be always welcome in such an event. Um, well, the rules are simple: it is a round-robin style tournament. Most victories wins. You may challenge each other fighter multiple times, but if you lose to any of them more than three times in a row then that is marked as a permanent loss on your record and you cannot face that fighter again. This works both ways, win three times in a row and it is marked as a

permanent victory – alternatively, any fighter may concede against an opponent outside of a fight which works the same way. There is no benefit to two fighters constantly switching between loss and victory – it does not add to your points. Additionally, some fighters are marked as... special – these provide additional points but can only face each other, so as to not trivialise the tournament.”

“What makes them special?” Thalia questioned. Ming glanced beyond her. “They are... in any other sense, unbeatable – except by each other.” Thalia grinned – between fighting waves of fodder or actual champions, she knew immediately which she would prefer. “So, like me,” she suggested. Ming eyed her with a glint of greed in his eyes. “Perhaps, but that is to be seen. One of them will test you, and we will go from there. Athena, could you please?”

Thalia turned, her eyes locking onto the approaching woman. She was tall, slightly shorter than Thalia by only by a few inches. Her eyes were a stark grey, and her silky black hair was braided to look like a mohawk. Like Oni, like Vexx, her hands and muscular forearms were stained orange. “Follow me,” she said plainly, turning and beginning the walk away. A large tattoo covered her mostly exposed back.