

Chapter 203: Dragon's Heart

The air filled with a mixture of Arthuria's scream and the panicked roar of Zhurong as the pair tumbled through colossal foliage, scrambling for anything to hold onto to stop their fall. Arthuria crashed into a large branch, her back screaming out in agony as she bounced off of it. She immediately lunged for the trailing vines, gripping them tightly as she slid downwards before swiftly coming to a halt. She groaned before swearing loudly, only for her golden eyes to widen as Zhurong continued to tumble downwards into the darkness. "Zhurong!" she cried, the Dragon disappearing out of view.

She felt no pain other than her own injuries, a fast relief that her Dragon was still alive coming to her mind. She then looked around. "The Frontier, definitely," she muttered to herself, looking at the colossal trees all around her, each trunk at least fifty metres wide. She let out a sigh, reaching for her communicator. "Anyone nearby? What the hell happened?" she questioned. Silence followed. She groaned as she began to climb up the vine, eventually dragging herself up onto a large branch. "Anyone? Jayce? Astris? Jeanne?" Silence followed once more. "Well, shit."

She lay on the branch for a few moments, fumbling in her bottomless bag for a healing potion, which she drank immediately. When the bubbling pain subsided she sat up with a groan and fumbled for her necklace once again. "Zhurong, come to me," she commanded. A loud roar came from below, the trees shaking and countless flying creatures taking the air in all directions. "Stuck!" came a deep growl through the communicator. "Okay, I'll try and come to you," Arthuria stated, still not sure how she felt about the Dragon now talking.

She sat there for a moment, shaking her head. "Compared to Kaina... it's like they were children," she muttered, steadily getting to her feet and concentrating to lock her body to the branch. She walked around the branch, standing upside down on its bottom before looking up, to see down. She couldn't see her Dragon beyond the foliage beneath her, but at least this time she was prepared for the fall. She released her Focus and drew her sword, carving her way through the leaves.

Smoke immediately directed her to where Zhurong had landed, the Dragon spewing fire as he lay tangled in vines and colossal webs. Chittering filled the air, Arthuria's gaze glancing in all directions to the numerous gigantic spiders travelling across the trees towards the flailing Dragon. "You might have mentioned the problem," Arthuria stated with a hint of frustration. She had

wasted Caliburn against Kaina, so using her back-up blade she darted through the air towards her Dragon.

A spider lunged towards Zhurong, the creature far larger than Arthuria, but she dove past it like a lightning bolt, carving a golden line through the air that spiralled outwards to free the trapped Dragon and bisected the arachnid. Zhurong fell but twisted in the air, flapping hard to push himself upwards before he turned his red gaze towards the creatures that had arrived to feast on him. He took in a deep inhale and burned them all, the creatures shrieking and convulsing as the fluids inside them boiled before erupting out of their abdomens in gory carnage. Zhurong lunged for a particularly large one, grabbing the creature in his forward claws before crunching down on the barely-living monstrosity.

Zhurong devoured his feast as Arthuria slaughtered the survivors. "Care to help?" she yelled his way, the lazy Dragon ignoring her as he found a relatively safe perch to eat on. As he finished his meal, Arthuria prepared for his assistance, instead the Dragon curled up and let out a loud yawn before shutting his eyes. Arthuria scowled, darting through the air with her Focus and slicing upwards through the huge branch the Dragon was laying on. Her blade cut through it like butter and the Dragon swiftly woke back up as he began to fall. Fighting together, the beasts didn't last much longer.

The pair then found themselves resting on another large branch. "You owe me." "No. This is your fault," Zhurong returned. Arthuria scoffed and gestured around them. "You'd be spider food without me," she returned, cleaning her blade of blood and then putting it away. "And I wouldn't be here if not for you." "On the contrary, this is your home. You would be here, just smaller and not as well fed." Zhurong raised his devilish head and looked around, the Dragon doing what Arthuria could only perceive as a shrug before lowering his head once again. "I see."

"You see? Is that all you have to say after everything that just happened?" she questioned in disbelief. "I want sleep, be quiet for a moment," Zhurong grumbled. "Unbelievable. I preferred you when you didn't speak," she growled, looking up at the branches above them and then beginning to walk up the tree towards them. An eventual huff alerted her to the Dragon deciding to follow her, only rather than fly up with her he flew past her and found another branch to lay upon.

She eventually caught up to him, standing in front of him and folding her arms. He peeked a crimson eye open, staring at her before shutting it. He let out a slow

huff. "What do you wish us to do now?" he questioned. Arthuria shook her head and sat down. "Truthfully, I don't know. We're in the Frontier, but that runs across the entire equator. We could be anywhere and, given this place's infamy, I'm guessing its no easy task to get across it – regardless of which side we want to go. Right?"

"Why would I be aware of such things? I never tried to leave this place until you ambushed me from above," Zhurong grumbled. Arthuria shrugged looking away. "Sorry about that. Captain's orders," she said quietly. Zhurong rolled over, exposing his back and stretching. "The food has made it worth it, besides it was the Ancient's will," he stated lazily. Arthuria raised an eyebrow, shuffling closer to the Dragon and laying against him – he was incredibly warm as always, only just bearably so, and it immediately made her want to take a nap against him. "The Ancient's what?"

"The Ancient. One of the greatest of my kin. One of the eldest, the strongest." "Like Kaina?" Arthuria questioned. There was a deep and long pause from the Dragon, his mind clearly thinking over the events of the previous battle. "Perhaps. Her glorious and colossal body would indicate so, but... she felt young. I can only imagine what battles she has survived and what feasts she has gorged upon."

"Could you grow that large? Could you transform like she does?" Arthuria questioned. "Enough talk. I hold not the knowledge of those... paper things your kind uses, nor does this topic interest me. Ask the Ancient, not I," he growled, turning and pushing her away. "Then I guess that's where we will head. To where we first met. These answers could be of use, to not just us, but the others too. Also, they may have landed there," Arthuria suggested. Zhurong growled. "I tire of you Oathsworn, we will depart once I've rested, and only then." "Very well."

Whilst the Dragon snoozed, Arthuria turned her attention to their surroundings. This was most certainly the Frontier, and deep within it. She glanced up: they were near the tops of the trees, going above would help to give some clues about their position. She faltered, fumbling for her bottomless bag before pulling out her survival kit – something Falconer had made for all of them some time ago. She found the compass within and turned until she identified north. "New World that way then - okay, that's something." She put it away and thought to herself. The others were probably fine, but if they had been scattered in all directions then the logical place to reconnect would be the Republic Capital, or Last Drop, or the

Dragon village... "Damn, this isn't going to be easy..." she muttered, leaning back and shutting her eyes.

"Oathsworn, waken," came Zhurong's deep voice, as quietly as he could. Arthuria's eyes flickered open; she hadn't meant to fall asleep but exhaustion had overwhelmed her. "What is it?" she questioned, keeping her voice similarly quiet and drawing her sword. "The night is far more dangerous than the day, beasts are on the hunt, we should be too," he advised. She sighed, standing up and stowing her sword. "Then we should find a better place to sleep. I've figured out which way north is, so we should fly and see how far away the edge of the Frontier is."

"I would think otherwise, the largest predators avoid the trees and fly above them. We would be an easy meal," he warned, standing up and stretching in a manner similar to a cat. Arthuria shook her head. "We need to see, and at the very least we could see the stars to estimate our rough position and where your nest is," Arthuria suggested. The Dragon tilted his head in confusion, his crimson eyes staring at her like she was mad. "I know where my nest is."

"You do?" she questioned in confusion. "How far are we from it? Where is it?" "Considerably far." He raised a claw towards the east. "That way. I can feel the call of the Ancient ones." Arthuria deflated, of course the Dragon had the answer all along. Why wouldn't he have? "Great, then that's our heading. We'll travel that way and kill everything that gets in our way. How does that sound?" she offered. Zhurong nodded. "More feasts, more hunts, perfect." Arthuria stepped up onto his back. "Ugh," he complained. "I change my mind," he grumbled. "Shush. Let's go."

It took the pair of them several weeks of travelling, at the very least – Arthuria long lost track of time, with most days consisting of battles against giant insects, arachnids, birds, and even the rogue Dragon. They fed on their prey, despite Arthuria's initial refusal, but eventually her food rations ran out and she was forced to devour anything and everything they could get their claws and hands on, whether that had wings, legs, hair or an exoskeleton. By Arthuria's fifth spider she no longer felt she had any moral grounds to refuse any more of the grotesque meals that Zhurong hunted for her. And despite all the horror it brought her, she actually began to enjoy Zhurong's well-cooked meats.

Eventually however, the trees began to take on familiar sounds – the sounds of Dragons – and, early one afternoon, they flew out into a large open expanse. "We did it!" Arthuria exclaimed, her nose dead to her own stench and hair braided to

ignore the knots and the fact it had not been washed properly for so long. She looked around, scanning the Dragon swarm for anything or anyone familiar, but nothing stood out. "I sense a presence," Zhurong stated. Arthuria leant forwards to be in his vision. "What kind?" she questioned, fumbling for her communicator. "A fellow Oathsworn, another Dragonlord. Somewhere above us. It's not one I recognise."

"Anyone, can anyone hear me?" Arthuria questioned into her communicator as they flew upwards towards the Dragon Monk village. No response came, but as they neared the gaps in the foliage something lunged at them from above. Zhurong grunted as he was tackled, a white, colossal, serpent-like Dragon slamming into him. "Go!" yelled Zhurong, as the two Dragons fell away, Arthuria surging upwards to break through the foliage and land on the familiar wooden walkways of the Dragon Monk village.

She immediately drew Caliburn, pointing the blade towards the woman stood leaning casually in front of her. "Call it off!" she ordered, a scoff coming from the woman. "And why," Dragonlord Thákane questioned, "should I do that?" She was shorter than Arthuria by about half a foot. A cream hood covered her braided brown hair, the sleeveless clothing made of animal hide with numerous bright colours and feathers decorating the outside. She had light-brown skin, her similarly coloured eyes narrow and staring both curiously and threateningly at Arthuria. A fresh scar lay across her left cheek. The Pirate Lord stood unafraid. "This place dislikes violence," Arthuria said quickly. "You may be able to handle me, but do you want all of them as your enemy?"

"I am simply dealing with an intruder. A Rising Ace that has caused so many problems already for the greater world, and is undoubtably going to do the same here," she stated. Zhurong was silent, but Arthuria felt no pain from him. The other Dragon had been far larger. "Please," Arthuria asked nicely, putting her sword away and holding up her hands. Thákane nodded, putting her hand up to her mouth and whistling loudly.

A moment later a hooded woman flew up through the gap, floating down to land next to Thákane. She had ghostly white skin, a white hooded leather jacket across her top. She wore a cyan skirt, and her feet were bare. Her eyes glowed from the darkness of her hood, both matching her cyan skirt and distinctly reptilian. "Another one that can transform?" Arthuria muttered aloud to herself. Thákane folded her arms, looking back to her companion before back at Arthuria. "Another one?" she questioned.

Arthuria held her tongue, uncertain of what she should share with the possible enemy. Thákane let out a sigh, looking away. "Look, truthfully I only have a problem with your Captain. And from the looks of things you haven't been with him for some time. Unless that stench and look is trending amongst your crew. You don't need to be afraid of me, or this one. I swear on our bond and the rivers of my homeland that we will not harm you unless you bring it upon yourself. Okay?"

Arthuria hesitated before letting out a sigh and nodding. "Kaina, the Betrayer, is a Dragon - just like your companion," Arthuria stated. Thákane immediately glanced towards her companion, a look of confusion on her face. "Nanabolele?" The Dragon shrugged, almost too casually. "I had no idea," she said, surprisingly softly. Thákane glanced back towards Arthuria. "Then it seems you're lucky to be alive," she said gently, with a small smile.

"Lucky is not how I would phrase it but... hard to disagree. Well, since no one else is here, I will be on my way," Arthuria said cautiously, stepping forwards. With a sigh, Thákane held up a hand. "Wait, I feel bad. You came here with a purpose, I'm guessing to follow your Dragon's call?" Thákane questioned. Arthuria nodded. "You'll need to climb the tree. There's an alcove high above. You'll get whatever questions you need answering there, or you'll perish. I can't speak for the rest of your crew, or your... Captain, but at the least it'll give you a better chance of survival." She stepped past Arthuria, her Dragon - Nanabolele - following closely behind before they dropped through the hole in the floor and fell out of sight. Arthuria shook her head, uncertain what to think of the strange Dragonlord, but she turned her gaze upwards. There was visible path leading up to the foliage, one that she could follow.

She trusted Zhurong to stay out of trouble and, after negotiating with the locals, began to climb. The twisting wooden staircase didn't last long and she found herself using Focus to leap and run upwards. The journey felt forever, mainly due to not knowing what exactly she was seeking, but also due to the abundance in combative creatures she encountered, whether Dragon or otherwise, all hoping to have her as an easy meal. They fell without issue and eventually she passed through a thick barrier of foliage, coming to a stop in a huge grassy cavern.

Arthuria frowned as she climbed up and onto the solid ground floor. It made no sense, there should have been no reason for the floor to be covered in grass, but then her eyes glanced around the colossal birdcage-like structure she was in. The

entire place had been artificially made: someone or something had constructed it, and clearly a long time ago. "Hello?" Arthuria called out, stepping forwards in the colossal grove. Her eyes scanned the floor, looking for anything that stood out. For Zhurong to have previously described an 'Ancient One' with such reverence, she could only imagine the creature to be ferocious, and quite likely preposterously big. She couldn't help but think back to the colossal reptilian eye she had seen when she had first bound herself to her Dragon. It had been golden, with lightning-like patterns throughout its iris.

"Hello?" she repeated, her hands over her hilts and no apparent creature in sight. Arthuria reached the centre of the grove: the grass was flattened outwards, as if something colossal had been laying upon it. She faltered, reaching down and taking off her gauntlet before touching the ground: it was warm, unusually so. Her eyes widened and she looked upwards. It was hard to see: the creature was camouflaged to a near-invisible degree, the only identifier of the gigantic Dragon's presence was its vague outline and golden eyes. Arthuria couldn't believe she hadn't noticed it, she had looked right through it, both with Focus and without. It hung from the ceiling, its wings wrapped around its body like a bat.

Its head was large, with an ox-like pair of wide horns. Its snout came forwards getting narrower towards its large maw, with countless large spiky scales pushing backwards and outwards to form something akin to a mane. The creature huffed, blowing a casual threat of air that smothered Arthuria immediately in a foul-smelling cloud. It then unfolded its wings, spreading the four of them wide, before releasing the grip it had in its hind legs, dropping hard and fast towards her. Its body shimmered, the camouflaged scales transforming into a pearlescent pattern reminiscent of a far larger Soteria.

Arthuria remained where she was - she didn't have the speed to avoid the creature falling towards her. She was going to be crushed and there was nothing she could do about it. The creature spread its wings casually, gliding just enough to land in front of her with a crash that knocked Arthuria to the floor, the entire cage shaking from the impact. Arthuria immediately regained her composure, looking forwards as her heart hammered inside her chest. The Ancient Dragon stared directly at her, its snout only a metre or two in front of her. "Well?" she questioned, getting to her feet. "Eat me or speak, I know you can do either, Ancient One."

"So you do," boomed the Dragon's voice, directly into her mind. It was distinctly feminine amongst the firm growl. "Yet you seek me, not the other way around."

So ask your questions, mortal. Why have you sought me out?" questioned the Dragon. "I was looking for my companions, I was hoping they are here, but clearly they are not. Were they here, have I missed them?" Arthuria questioned. The Dragon tilted her head, curiously like a confused cat. "I do not know. Matters like that are beneath me."

"Then what of my Dragon, Zhurong? He can speak now, like you do but with his voice. Are... will he develop further, change forms like that one bound to Thákane? Or Kaina?" Arthuria questioned next. The Dragon pulled her head back, sitting up tall and proud. "Your Dragon?" she questioned, a glare to her eyes. "I meant no disrespect. My pacted companion, my Oathsworn bond. The Dragon I travel with," Arthuria corrected.

"Tell me then, do you wish it so? Do you seek him to shed his body to take a more... human form?" the Dragon questioned. Arthuria looked away, the Dragon moving slightly to ensure she was still in her eyeline. "I asked, you answer," the Dragon commanded. Arthuria didn't know. She didn't know anything about the Dragons, nothing more than a basal layer of their history – and even that came through the lens of a Demon, their once allies.

"I seek only a resolution to our bond. A day may come where we have to part, I want him to be free, and not as stupid as he was and currently is," she said honestly. The Dragon's face twisted into what she could only describe as a smile. "A fair comment. My descendants are far from what my ancestors once were." "Your descendants? All of them are your children?" Arthuria questioned. The Dragon shimmered, the scales transforming in colour to form a tapestry across her colossal body. It showed countless Dragons falling from the skies, images of giant machines launching huge spears towards them. It showed a small Dragon hidden away in a cave, and a young child stumbling across it.

It then showed the pearlescent Dragon in a larger form, and the young child now a grown woman, the pair of them flying high above countless islands, both on the seas and in the skies. It then showed the pair of them encountering other Dragons and other mortals riding on top of them. Finally it showed a dark shadow on the horizon, and a wall of trees emerging from the ocean. "I was not alone, but perhaps I may be now. Those you see around us are my descendants, but my direct line was cannibalised long ago by a wave of weakness and stupidity. The inferior remain, but your kind have helped to rediscover some of their strengths, so that someday we may return to our thrones. Your name, child?"

“Arthuria Pendragon, Ancient One. May I know yours?” she asked back, both in awe of the genuine piece of history before her, alongside an equal acknowledgment that her life lay literally in the Dragon’s maw. The Dragon looked at her with bemusement. “Valnea is the name I was once given. Take it with you, Pendragon, and let your descendants hold it close.” Arthuria nodded. “I will. I must ask, how can my bond with Zhurong grow further? I am afraid we only cause each other harm in battle. How can I help him grow stronger? How can he help me become stronger?” Arthuria questioned.

“Through conquest. Through feast. Like any creature, strength comes from the strength of our prey. Seek and devour the greatest of foes and you shall find your answer. But be warned, growth before its time comes through the cost of pain. That child is in your care, it requires a cold heart to force an evolution. Not impossible, not unnecessary, but it is your burden - should that be the path you wish to tread. It is risky for the weak to devour the strong.”

Arthuria frowned. “This place was attacked before, wasn’t it?” she asked. “Aye,” returned Valnea, her golden eyes sparking as she tried to read Arthuria. “Did someone force a Dragon to devour other Dragons?” she questioned. “My kin devour the weak... it is our way.” Arthuria shook her head, looking firmly at the Dragon. “Did Kaina kill the other Ancient Ones?” Arthuria questioned. Valnea hesitated. “I do not know of this Kaina.”

“That does not answer my question, great Dragon,” Arthuria pressed. “Was the might of the greatest of your kind challenged by a child?” Arthuria questioned. The Dragon shimmered and vanished, a human-like form fleeing in the corner of Arthuria’s eye. “Questions like those need no answer. Nor should they be spoken,” came a whisper into Arthuria’s mind. “Leave this place Pendragon. And speak not of the Apex.”

“How can I break my bond if it needs to be done?” Arthuria called out. Silence followed and she felt she was alone. Arthuria shook her head, a shudder passing through her. The Sovereign and Kaina had slaughtered the Ancient Dragons, and Kaina had feasted upon them. It explained why an older Dragon like Nanabolele hadn’t recognised that Kaina was a Dragon. Arthuria sighed. “Zhurong, rest up,” she stated into her communicator. “We’re leaving first thing tomorrow. There’s something I need to find out. We’re heading for the Capital, so eat your fill – it’s a long journey.”

Seize the Seas Tales: Dire Times

Astris yelled as she dived forwards and rolled, straight into the doors of a wardrobe. She groaned as she lay there on the floor, her legs over her head, before yelping as the thing toppled over onto her. It was a moment later that it was lifted off her and the familiar face of Caelie looked down at her with concern. "I'm okay," Astris said with a groan, taking the younger girl's hand and letting herself be pulled to her feet. "What happened? Where?" Caelie questioned quietly, immediately walking to the window of the room they were in. "I don't know," Astris answered. "But I'm guessing – from the wardrobe – that we're not where we're meant to be."

It was late afternoon from the orange glow outside - they had travelled east, by a considerable distance at least. Caelie stuck her head out of the window and made a gesture with her hand, a swirling blue portal appearing behind them. Without hesitation Astris followed Caelie through the portal, just as she heard the stomping of feet as someone rushed towards the room they were in. They landed on a nearby rooftop, a city stretching before them. It was beautiful, full of white buildings with red roofs, but offset by a large district full of factories that spat out smoke into the sky. "Ah," Astris uttered. "We're in Diasta, the homeland of the Sovereign."

Caelie looked towards her, patting her clothes in clear panic. "What?" Astris questioned. "Things," Caelie returned, a short expletive escaping her lips before she crouched down and put her hands over her face. Astris frowned, looking down and reaching for her bottomless bag – in the place she always kept it. It too wasn't there, and with its absence was also her blood supply. "Oh no," she muttered, the soft sting of the sun on her face now a far greater problem than it had been in a long time. "You too?" Caelie questioned. Astris nodded, taking a similar stance to her and burying her hands in her face. "Big problem," Caelie muttered. "Really big problem," Astris confirmed.

She reached for her communicator, breathing a sigh of relief as she found it. "Still have this at least. Attention all Rising Aces, this is Astris and Caelie, can anyone hear me?" she questioned into it. Silence. "Anyone, can anyone hear me?" Astris questioned once again. "Jayce? Bjorn? Marisha? Ordo?" Astris questioned. More silence. "Oh no," Astris realised. Caelie's expression changed, half her face melting into the familiar demonic mask of Belial. "I cannot sense anyone else," he confirmed. "Then we have to follow our back-up plans," Astris stated, immediately snapping into gear and beginning to figure out a plan. "We need

accommodation first. There were some abandoned buildings near the factories last time we were here. It puts us a little close to the Mechanist, but it will help us to lay low. Caelie, can you get us there? Preferably out of the sunlight." Caelie nodded, opening a portal.

It didn't take them long to find what they were looking for, but by that point darkness had fallen. They sat huddled in an abandoned workshop. Most of the windows were broken and the building had long been stripped of anything valuable. Caelie sat in a trance as Astris kept watch. "Anything?" Astris asked as she emerged from it. Caelie looked pale, and a thin layer of sweat covered her forehead. She shook her head, her eyes towards the floor and an expression of hopelessness on her face. "He'll respond, we just need to keep trying," Astris reassured, getting to her feet and stretching.

Caelie reached up and grabbed Astris' hand. "No," Astris said firmly. "Rest. I'll be back. It'll just be a quick robbery and then we'll have enough money to fund travel north, okay?" Astris stated. Caelie looked up at her, worry in her eyes as she shook her head. "It'll be fine," Astris repeated, stepping forwards. "Nighttime is my playground. I'll be back, try to get some sleep," she commanded. "Astris," Caelie said quietly. She turned and looked at Caelie. "Don't leave me."

Astris grit her teeth as she hugged her side, desperately trying to stop the bleeding. She should have listened to Caelie. They should have done it together. She shook her head, leaning back and placing her head against the wall of the alleyway she was slumped in. "She's safe. And we've got the money. You made the right call," she assured herself, the wound closing, but a hollow hunger replacing it. Astris leant to the side, looking down at the puddle of water that had mixed with her blood. Her reflection stared up at her, her face pale and gaunt – her eyes a glowing crimson. "Fuck!" she growled. She needed blood. She needed to feed. Astris rested her head in her hands. "I don't want to do it," she muttered, an anxious guilt forming as she prepared herself for what she knew she had to do.

Lieutenant Graft paused as he and his fellow Null Legionnaires came to the site they had been ordered to. A groan came from his right before a crash followed as one of the new recruits toppled to the floor. "Check on him," ordered Graft, lifting his foot up and watching the blood drip from the sole of his boot before stepping forwards amongst the small group of eviscerated corpses. A terrified man sat huddled at the side of the road, rocking back and forth as he held his

hands over his ears. “Fangs, teeth, fangs, claws,” he muttered amongst a stream of traumatised panic. Graft scowled, shaking his head and ignoring the civilian. This sight was nothing compared to the war that most of the world seemed to have already forgotten.

“Corporal, assessment?” Graft questioned, crouching down next to the most intact Null Legion corpse. “Some sort of beast from the description,” came Corporal Monroe’s response. “A bear maybe?” came the foolish follow-up. Graft scowled, reaching for the collar of the corpse and peeling back the layers of clothing. A precise pair of puncture wounds shone in the moonlight. “No bear. Contact command, send a message to Strigon and the Sovereign. A Vampire is loose in the city and I want to know why it’s hunting our men. And then I want permission to put it down.”