

Chapter 204: Amongst Strange People and Stranger Lands

Fenn took a step back from the wall he had claimed. "You know," he said, somewhat aimlessly to the darkness behind him, "I don't think I could count all of these scratches. I think we've been here years. A decade at least." The wall was marked with countless tallies. "It's been a month," Falconer said plainly. "Twenty-eight marks. No more, no less," he said, sitting in a meditative position, cross-legged on the floor. Fenn admired his work. "Definitely at least three months..." he muttered to himself. Falconer let out a sigh, shaking his head before he opened his eyes and stood up. "A guard is here," he stated firmly. "How do you know?" Fenn questioned back.

Falconer pointed at the guard stood by the door to their cell. "Ah," Fenn exclaimed. "Are we being released, or are you here to bring us food?" Falconer questioned plainly, the suit of armour stood on the floor rather than floating in the air. Silently the gate was pulled open, a strange slurp-like sound coming from inside the armour. A slow and heavy hand was raised, gesturing towards the vague direction of the exit. Falconer and Fenn glanced towards each other. "Play it safe, we do not know what awaits us," Falconer advised, stepping forwards. "Yeah, like I was going to do anything else..."

They followed the stairs upwards, eventually stepping out into the familiar courtyard they had been allowed to exercise in. Large walls surrounded them in all directions, but the number of guards were minimal and they were all placed in unusual spots – as if more for show than actual practice. Fenn let out a large groan as he stopped in place and stretched, taking the moment to glance at the guard following them. The djinn floated, like all djinn typically did, but this one only barely got off the floor. In fact, it seemed to be struggling to get up the final steps out of the prison. He smirked, glancing at the fake weaponry aimed downwards at them – the cannons depowered from the state of their glyphs, the golems stood unmoving, and the djinn that were suspiciously stationary and in positions where they could lean or rest.

The Scourge's antimagic effect – although Falconer had argued consistently that antimagic was the wrong term – was having an impact on the djinn far more than Fenn or Falconer. It also spoke heavily that Falconer and Fenn had been the only prisoners in the prison, but from Tempest's vague and unspecific conversations about his people that seemed more due to the djinn's habit of exiling anything they disapproved of. Fenn started forwards, catching up to Falconer with a few sharp hops.

"I think this place is hindering them far more than they've let on, probably why we've seen only their clones in recent times. This antimagic field could be our way out of here," Fenn said quietly to Falconer, the pair walking across the courtyard to a portcullis that rattled as it lifted up to let them through. "Homunculi was the term Tempest used. And again, it's not antimagic. The..." "See, even you don't know. Antimagic is the best term we have," Fenn countered. "No, this is more. There isn't life. It's missing magic, it doesn't negate it. The components for magic are absent."

A slurp came from behind, the pair turning to look behind as the djinn pointed ahead to a pair of armoured humans wielding spears. They were both identical, their helmets designed to obscure everything other than their eyes and covered with a harlequin-esq face bearing an expression of anger. "This way," instructed one of the guards, the djinn remaining in place as Falconer and Fenn continued forwards. They stopped in front of the guards, each armoured man gigantic in size and towering over them. "You are expected within the council chambers. Do you comply?" questioned the same guard.

"We get a choice?" Fenn questioned. Both pairs of eyes bore down upon him, and no response came. "We comply," Falconer answered, shooting a warning glance to Fenn. The guards nodded, turning their backs to the pair and marching forwards in unity. "Couldn't we just run?" Fenn whispered to Falconer, the guards not bothering to see if they were following. "For what end? We're at least hundreds of metres in the sky, our hands are shackled, and I need to find Wren." "Okay then... guess we meet this council."

They were led through the flying palace through countless hallways, passing numerous djinn who all turned to observe them, as well their homunculus servants – the groups or pairs of identical people all staring with little emotion or empty eyes. Eventually the guards escorted them to the base of the largest tower in the floating city, the pair of them pushed onto a small circular platform in a large chamber. They looked up, a retractable hole lay in the ceiling above them. "Mind your words," Falconer warned to Fenn. "Jayce once had a meeting with a djinn council, maybe even this one, they were... fickle."

The platform beneath them began to glow and then vibrate as it began to lift, before it then sputtered and crashed back down, sending Falconer and Fenn tumbling to the floor. "What the hell?" Fenn questioned angrily as he got back to his feet and looked at the two homunculi. They stood emotionless, unsure of what to do with the technical failure. The hole opened in the ceiling and an

unceremonious ladder was lowered. Fenn and Falconer looked at each other before back at the guards, the pair of them showing off their tight manacles.

With their bindings removed the pair of them began to climb, emerging into the base of a colossal and dark room. "Hello?" Fenn called out, Falconer's gold and green eyes sending daggers towards him immediately. "What?" Fenn questioned back. There was a loud clang and a gavel slammed to the floor in front of them, a loud slurp-like sound following from above. "I don't know djinn, but I think that was a swear word," Fenn said with a smirk, a suit of armour crashing to the ground afterwards in a heap and causing him to yelp and dart backwards behind Falconer. Falconer looked at the coward behind him, letting out a sigh and shaking his head. "Of all the people to be lost with..."

A cream-coloured slime slid down a large pillar, plopping to the floor before darting inside the armour. The empty suit of platinum armour then rose up, a faint red glow coming from inside the helmet. The armour leant back in an inhuman manner, looking upwards before saying something in the wet, slurping language of the djinn. Four more crashes followed, as armour fell from the darkness above. The suits of armour then vaguely floated over to them before standing in front of them in a half-ring - one djinn hastily retrieving their gavel before holding it awkwardly in their golden gauntlets. "Bow," Falconer said quietly, giving a gentle bow that kept all of the djinn in his eyeline. Fenn scowled and bowed as low as he could.

The foremost djinn said something in his language before faltering as Falconer and Fenn both looked at him with stark confusion. The armour sank a little in what Fenn could only presume was a sigh. One of the djinn floated towards the hole in the floor, saying something downwards, a female homunculus then climbed up and joined the semi-circle. She was a redhead, short and presumably quite young, her face obscured by a golden harlequin mask, this one showing an expression of laughter that was more than unnerving, her orange eyes visible through the holes.

"The council questions your intrusion into their city?" asked the girl, looking plainly at Falconer. "It was not by choice, I assure you all," he returned, the girl silent and the council seemingly understanding him. "We crashed here after a spell went wrong. We had no intention on intruding here," he answered. "They find it hard to believe," stated the girl, as the five djinn slurped to each other. "Yet it's true," Fenn stated. "Where's the bird, we'll be on our way and out of your... slime?"

Falconer sighed as the djinn all raised up to their full heights. "The Roc?" questioned the girl. "Yes, my companion. Where is she?" Falconer asked, as politely as he could. "She has been kept safe and under observation. Her kind is rare and as a specimen there is much that could be learnt. Samples have been taken and the bird will be returned to you, provided you answer the council's questions." Falconer gestured with his wooden arm for them to go on. "Firstly, what is your malady?" translated the homunculus, pointing at Falconer's right arm.

Falconer thought for a moment, trying to think of how best to even describe his blessing. Fenn stared at him with equal curiosity. "It is a blessing, granted to me by the essence of this world. A product of the Leylines and the power they hold," Falconer answered. "So you must feel the taint on these lands? What knowledge do you hold of this region?" questioned the girl, the gold djinn with a purple glow floating forwards. "I... do. I don't know much, but the Leyline at the border of the Scourge is... damaged, wounded. These lands have been killed, it's why this part of the world is devoid of magic. Why it is hostile to you. That is all I know, I do intend to investigate further."

Fenn raised an eyebrow, but Falconer dismissed it with a faint gesture of his hand. "They... understand, and thank you for the information. It opens a new line of inquiry for their researchers to pursue at a later time, once the great task is finished." Falconer and Fenn immediately looked at each other and then at the council. "What great task?" they both questioned. The five djinn turned away and spoke to each other before turning back. "The council seek lost assets. It is the only reason for our presence within these tainted lands. That is all that shall be spoken to outsiders."

Falconer nodded, despite Fenn's clear look of curiosity. "Your items and companion shall be returned to you. You may then depart. Should you discover more information on this region the council will gladly trade for it, but otherwise your presence is not expected or appreciated," the homunculus said coldly. "Fine by us," Fenn chipped in, turning and starting to walk towards the ladder. Falconer looked across the five djinn. "Have you encountered any other... intruders?" he questioned hopefully. The girl shook her head. "Understood. Farewell."

Wren let out a deafening cry as she hopped over towards them, all but tackling Falconer when he came close enough. She then screeched at him as loudly as she could, Falconer's vision blurring from the noise as he placed his arms around her

neck and buried his head in her feathers. "I am glad you are well," he told her before pulling back. If anything, she looked even bigger than he remembered and her injuries had healed. A homunculus handed him his bow and quiver and he slung it across his back before placing Wren's saddle upon her. He then turned to Fenn as he climbed aboard. "Let's leave this place. We have much to discuss." Fenn nodded and climbed aboard, grateful to be free of his collar, but unable to transform much to his frustration. "Out of the Scourge, please," he requested. "Not yet," Falconer stated, the trio taking to the skies.

They descended through the clouds, the colossal red expanse of the Scourge beneath them. "What do you mean not yet?" Fenn questioned, the wind whipping around them. "The crew is scattered, likely all across the world if it was a disruption to the teleportation circle spell. As a reminder, they will have apparated through any number of ancient teleportation circles, rather than our original destination. Hence why we emerged out of that sky knight palace, albeit slightly off course. Did the Captain give you any instructions in case of this eventuality?" Falconer questioned. Fenn shook his head. "Well I was."

"We've lost a month, but it is a safe assumption that the others will be looking for us. So we should make haste in our task," Falconer stated, tucking into Wren as she began to dive. "Which is what?" Fenn questioned, the pair of them heading south, rather than north. Wren pulled up, gliding forwards at a fast speed. "We're going to see if we can destroy the Scourge. We're going to try and revive the world."

Much further south, Jayce looked up at the skies. He had no idea how long had passed, but it had been at least a few weeks and food was running out, least of all water. His bottomless bag was anything but – it had served him well to start with, but between Little Witch and the two mimics he carried, as well as himself, his resources were dwindling. She purred in his arms as he rode RK, the cat feeling lighter with each day and distinctly skinnier. Time was running out, for all of them.

A chitter drew his attention upwards, a vague brown blob ahead of them amongst the red sands stretching in all direction. Jayce set the cat down and stood up, instinctively entering into Focus before yelling out in agony as he tumbled from RK's back to the floor as his cells gasped for fuel. He groaned as he forced himself off the ground, before panting heavily as he got to his feet. It felt unbearable every time and had become such a crutch for him that he truly struggled to live without it.

He stepped forwards, pushing past RK before picking up speed as he tore into a full sprint, Sola turning into a spear as he charged towards the brown blob. The creature rose up and he faltered, coming to a skidding halt as it spread six large arms wide in a defensive stance before leading out a screech and charging towards him instead of fleeing. The monstrosity was huge and, where pride may have caused him previously to charge daringly towards it, Jayce did not hesitate in turning around and running back towards RK.

The beast looked like a giant fur-less mole, only with a single cyclops-like red eye and eight limbs in total. It was at least three-metres in size, prompting Jayce to immediately question as to where it found such a consistent food and water supply to maintain its size. It bounded towards him at a terrifying pace and Jayce turned to face it, only as he reached RK, throwing a spear that landed far shorter than he had hoped. "Fuck," Jayce muttered, as the monster swiped Sola aside, sending the mimic spinning through the air. Jayce transformed Luna into a similar spear, the otherwise magical weapon completely devoid of any of its usual potency.

But RK wasn't going to let a giant mole get it's Captain. The giant rokken barrelled into the creature, a huge boom sounding across the desert as the giant creatures tussled. Stone versus flesh was only going to end one way, and whilst RK had the creature pinned, Jayce pierced the back of the monster's head with a solid and sharp thrust. It thrashed for a few moments before falling still, bringing great relief to Jayce, and seemingly greater relief to the three carnivores travelling with him as Little Witch, Sola and Luna tore upon to the corpse.

"A fortunate break," Paimon stated in Jayce's head. He nodded in agreement, letting the three have their fill before he began to carve up the flesh and siphon the blood as emergency fluids. The monstrosity didn't particularly smell very nice, but it served a purpose, and the bottomless bag would help keep the flesh clean-ish for him to cook later. He then took the bones, he was sure he'd find some use for them eventually. With a weary sigh he then continued forwards, resuming the long march.

He spent the night huddled around a fire made from anything he had left to burn, trimming the meat and hanging the strips over the fire to dehydrate them. But eventually he fell asleep, waking up as sunlight landed on his face. Cautiously he opened his waterskin, looking inside. A sigh of relief emerged from him as he found a modicum of water inside, the blood filtered by the sponge inside. The sponge however had turned an unhealthy shade of red, that immediately created

great concern inside of Jayce. He poured some water into his hand, offering it first to Little Witch who happily lapped it up, before then to Sola and Luna. With them sated only a tiny amount remained, that he did not hesitate to finish. "Perhaps it is wise to boil the blood and collect water that way instead," suggested Paimon. "I hate to agree, but I don't exactly have much left to burn, it'll be my clothes next."

RK let out a grumble and Jayce looked his way, the rokken looking ahead to a figure on the horizon. Jayce stood up, his eyes wide. It was a person, an actual person, from the general shape. He turned and picked out pieces of reusable fuel from the fire before mounting RK. "Let's go," he stated, trying his best not to become overwhelmed with emotion as they surged forwards. It was only as they came within a few hundred metres of the person that Jayce faltered. "Hang on," he stated, standing up as RK came to a halt.

His heart sank as he dismounted, stepping forwards cautiously with RK in tow. It was a figure, but the person had no skin, or muscle – it was a skeleton holding a rusty sword and shield. It took a step towards him. "What in the abyss?" he questioned, the creature approaching him and him it. "Be careful, there is magic weaved around that corpse," warned Paimon. Jayce couldn't believe it, it couldn't be possible for a walking corpse to be... alive in the Scourge. How could it possibly be functional in a land devoid of magic?

It broke into a run, charging at him. He transformed Sola into hammer, swinging as it came close and battering its right arm off its body along with the sword. Jayce then lifted the weapon to strike downwards on the skeleton, but without thought he pressed a burst of Focus into it. Jayce screamed as he collapsed, the skeleton dropping onto him and pressing its shield into his throat as it pressed down upon him with a surprising and terrifying force.

Jayce gasped for air as the creature choked him, but a heavy stone arm swept through the skeleton, turning it into dust and releasing him. Jayce sat up, clutching his throat. "That's... twice now. Thanks, big guy," Jayce told RK, standing up and leaning against the mini-mountain. RK grumbled something resembling reassurance before reaching for the discarded sword and shield. He then threw them into his open hole, consuming the metal in a desperate need for some form of food. RK then let out a warning grumble and Jayce turned. A haze lay in the distance, a haze that was only growing in size. "Oh, great," Jayce muttered, staring at the small army of skeletons approaching him.

"Fine then," Jayce stated, mounting RK and pointing forwards. "If that's where they're coming from then perhaps there's a mage of sorts somewhere in that direction. If they can use magic even here then they probably had a way to help us," he theorised, RK slowly taking a lumbering step forwards. "Right?" he questioned aloud. "Potentially," Paimon returned. Jayce scowled, 'potentially' was not the affirmative answer he wanted and needed. "Just tell me it is, lie if you have to," he half-begged, RK building up speed as he charged towards the army. "Sure," Paimon said unconvincingly.

They barrelled through the army of skeletons, the creatures unable to stop a moving mountain like RK. Desperately they leapt onto him, trying to climb and get at Jayce and Little Witch on top. Jayce swung at them with a maul, and if a skeleton came too close he would either shove them off or would drag them into the molten hole in RK's back. They wouldn't emerge from the literal lava vent. RK did not stop his charge, the weapons of the skeletons harmless against him, but eventually the horde began to part, letting them pass without attacking. "There," Paimon eventually said, Jayce looking away from the skeletons to a small mound on the horizon, a dark castle sat upon it. "Now that's what I'm talking about!" Jayce yelled.

A roar then drew his attention upwards, a colossal shadow covering him. "That's absolutely not!" he yelled, as the bones of a gigantic Dragon flew down towards him. It dove towards him and he combined Sola and Luna together into a heavy mace. He braced, gritting his teeth and preparing to swing, but at the last moment the fleshless creature pulled up, soaring over him and out of his reach before flying back up towards the skies. His heart hammered in his chest, and he slowly knelt back down upon RK, his eyes watching the skies above, but a greater feeling of doom passing over him. "It chose not to attack," Paimon warned. Jayce shook his head. "It was commanded not to," he corrected.

They neared the base of the mound that actually turned out to be a far larger mountain than initially presumed, the flat lands around quickly identifying it actually as an island within a waterless sea. Jayce dismounted RK, the pair of them quickly beginning to clamber forwards up the slope. The castle was massive, made entirely of a black stone with large pointy towers and large surrounding walls. A colossal silver gate marked the main entrance, but it opened as they approached, only further adding to Jayce's feeling of unnerve. Skeletons of animals observed him from petrified trees, skulls watched him from the battlements.

"This mage is incredibly powerful, I can feel their magic all around us," warned Paimon as they entered a large courtyard with a pond in the middle. "Water," Jayce gasped, abandoning all resolve and throwing his head into the stagnant pool. It tasted vile, but it didn't matter to him. Little Witch did the same, the cat recoiling and batting its own tongue in distress before darting back to the safety of RK.

A pair of stone stairs curved upwards to a set of huge rosewood doors that opened as Jayce glanced towards them. The doorway was too small for RK to fit, and inside there was no telling of what would be awaiting them. Jayce shut his eyes, pulling away from the pool and taking a step forwards. He had no choice, it was this or the Dragon or the death-filled expanse beyond. "Little Witch," he commanded, the cat jumping down and darting towards him. She followed him as he stepped forwards entering into the castle.

Torches ignited as he crossed the threshold, blue flames illuminating the long corridor and turning the long red rug and golden tapestries into colours of flickering purple and green. Jayce strode forwards, Little Witch following closely behind. Ancient paintings lined the corridor, the paint cracked and peeling, the images twisted into fallen visages of people and scenery. Jayce tried the nearest door connecting to the corridor but it didn't budge. He carried forwards until the path split, it went onwards but also to the right. A skeleton stood waiting for him in an ancient butler's attire as he looked to the side passage. "Hello?" Jayce asked, receiving no response. It bowed to him and turned, starting to walk forwards up a set of black and red stairs. Jayce gulped and followed.

The creature led him silently, ignoring him before eventually stopping in front of a set of red doors. It gestured for him to go forwards, opening the door for him. Jayce nodded and stepped through, emerging into a large dining hall where a fire burned gently in a fireplace and a long table lay strewn with food and drink. Jayce's mouth fell open, and without hesitation he ran forwards, racing down the stairs and lunging for a hunk of meat before freezing in place as he felt a pair of eyes upon him. "A fool..." came a cold voice that crept into the back of his mind.

"Spooky," Paimon said unhelpfully, in addition to the other voice. "So that's what that feels like."

"Hello?" Jayce questioned, pulling his hand back and quickly questioning what he was seeing in front of him. It couldn't be real. It couldn't possibly be real he rationalised, the banquet vanishing in an instant. Jayce pulled back and turned, looking across the table at the numerous empty seats. He then turned, looking

back at the fireplace he had raced past. A hooded figure leant against the fireplace, a pair of glowing blue eyes staring at him from within the darkness. Jayce froze, uncertain of what to do and sensing that a single wrong move would spell the start of a new future as a skeleton.

He felt movement at his legs and looked down, the hooded figure looking down as well before tilting their head in curiosity. "A cat?" she questioned, crouching down and extending a skeletal hand from beneath her black sleeve. "Pssp pssp pssp," she said softly, much to Jayce's bemusement as Little Witch stared at the lich blankly. A rattling sigh emerged as the lich looked upwards, a skull marked with black runes on the forehead beneath the hood. Her eyes were small balls of blue flame and they seemed to darken slightly, as if she was squinting, as she looked up at Jayce with caution and suspicion. He picked Little Witch up and held her closely. "Her name is Little Witch," he said simply.

The lich cocked her head once more, rising to her full height – about a head beneath Jayce – and looking up at him. "Little... Witch?" she questioned, her voice soft, feminine, and piercing into his mind. "On what cause did this dear creature earn such a title?" she asked in a somewhat eloquent and surprising manner. "It's a long story," Jayce stated. The lich shook her head and pulled down her hood. "Time is of little concern to one such as I."

"Then how about we start with names instead. I am Jayce Exarga, this is Little Witch and outside is RK-227," he stated cautiously. "We're a bit lost." She placed her hands on her hips. "Many lifetimes have started and ended since a name has been questioned of me. In fact... no, I remember still. Once I was called Rosalynn, but she has long since been dead. Now you may refer to me as the Archmage of Death."

Seize the Seas Tales: Homeward Bound

Jeanne let out a sigh as she leant over the edge of the Last Card, her fingers dragging in the cold ocean waters. It had been a few weeks of travel since they had stopped off at Yuthura's old home, and the experience had been eye-opening for them all: a cruel reflection into Yuthura's past, and a nosy opening that Jeanne and Bjorn had peered through to learn about their companion's greatest secret. Yet, despite the initial melancholy that the old woman had experienced, the experience felt like it had had more of an impact on both Bjorn and Jeanne.

Bjorn had dove into a heavy focus on their current task, spending almost all of his time practicing combat against Jeanne, often creating a frozen platform for

them to duel upon – he lost all bouts of course - or engaging in careful planning over their day-to-day sailing and longer voyage. Every stop they made had a purpose, and seemed to fill the ship with more junk, whether equipment, books, or long-term supplies for something that he refused to enlighten Jeanne on. It was annoyingly pleasant to witness, and a side she had never truly noticed due to his large presence often being hidden beneath the colossal shadow of Captain Jayce Exarga. He was as much of a leader as he was, and it was easily observable as to how much of a benefit the Right Hand of Exarga was to the crew.

She, on the other hand, had fallen into uselessness. On the larger ship her tasks were mainly supplementary, she often had little to do because ultimately – beyond her defensive and offensive skills, and supposed leadership qualities – she was, at her core, a poor sailor. It had always been a means to an end, and from the very start of her legend she had been so reliant on others to do the basal tasks that allowed her Paladin Order to function. She stared at her broken reflection, the sad girl looking back at her. She had needed her Sentinels: Rais, Baudricourt, Dunois, Pasquerel, Metz, Dauphin and Cauchon. They had been with her at the start, and, in a lot of ways, at her end as well. She had failed them. They had all died for her, whether the old her she had been or the new one she had become.

Her green eyes stared back at her, and in a blink they turned yellow, her black hair turning silver. The surface was disturbed and she returned to her actual form, not the blood-soaked tyrant. “Astris was right...” Jeanne muttered. “It never will go away.” She sighed. The non-humans she had slaughtered had just been the final corpses on a mountain she had built, all started because of a false crusade in a naïve attempt for freedom.

She raised her head, an island with a large fortress passing them by. They were in the Keeps, still a considerable distance from the Capital. Her face then twisted as a thought crossed her mind. “Um,” she said somewhat quietly, pulling back from the water and looking towards her Captain. Bjorn glanced towards her. “Could we change course?” she questioned. He tilted his head and pulled an expression of confusion. “I know we’re in a hurry, but... could we go home?” “Home? Your home? Why?” Bjorn questioned back.

Jeanne nodded, glancing from Bjorn to Yuthura, who was sat nearby. “I... need to put something behind me. My guilt,” she said softly. Bjorn shook his head but Yuthura looked at him and nodded. They stared at each other, exchanging silent words before both looking back at Jeanne. “This better be worth it, Jeanne.”

"I can't promise that, I'm sorry," she said honestly. Bjorn sighed and span the ship's wheel to the left. "Just great..."