

Chapter 205: Ancient Knowledge

"What's an Archmage?" Jayce questioned, sensing that the initial hostility the lich had posed had dispersed. She looked at him with a skeletal expression that he could only assume was bemusement. "Which century are we within?" she questioned back. "Uh, it's been a little over five-hundred years since the world exited the Dungeons, at least that was the case in the New World," he answered, leaning against the barren dining room table. "Most curious. This 'New World' - explain it to me."

"Uh, it's the lands beyond the Frontier. The far North of the world," he answered. "And these lands are living and luscious?" Rosalynn, the Archmage of Death, asked. He nodded. "That is most relieving to hear. You have my gratitude. You may stay for as long as you need, I shall endeavour to provide food and water and there are rooms you may use. Bathe and return to me. I have many questions, and I have no doubt the same is true for yourself," she stated, the skeletal butler descending the stairs into the room before gesturing for Jayce to follow. He nodded to her and followed after the butler, feeling her eyes on the back of his head.

"You were curiously quiet," Jayce questioned to Paimon as they walked through the castle, eventually arriving at a large ornate bedroom. It was filled mostly with dilapidated furniture, except for a surprisingly well-maintained wardrobe and a gleaming bathtub that the butler promptly began to fill, the water emerging from some unknown source. "It is rare for me to be unnerved, that Archmage is... ridiculously powerful. Perhaps the most powerful mortal, if that is even the correct term, that we have ever encountered." Jayce pulled open the wardrobe an unusual collection of fancy clothes inside. "Stronger than the Sovereign?" Jayce questioned. "Can you not feel it? The air is saturated with magic."

Jayce entered into Focus: this time there was no feedback – he could use it freely. "How is that possible? This region is devoid of it, how can there be so much?" "It is likely that she holds so much stored mana that it has diffused from her to create this cloud. Or perhaps she has found a vein, a Leyline as Falconer puts it, and has a direct connection to it – one that she has breathed life back into." "But we'd see more greenery, more life around us. Perhaps there's more to magic than even you understand."

Paimon scoffed as Jayce undressed and tested the water. It was warm, the perfect temperature, and he eased himself into it with a loud moan. "Oh that's so nice," he stated. "We are being observed." Jayce glanced backwards towards the butler

still in the room. It stood staring at him and then somewhat awkwardly turned its head away. "You may go," he stated, dismissing the skeleton. It left rather hurriedly that drew quick suspicion to his mind. "She must be able to see through her minions, right?"

"Unknown, she didn't seem to notice Little Witch, but that could simply be because Little Witch was not a threat." Jayce shrugged, shutting his eyes and laying back in the water. "What is an Archmage?" he questioned to Paimon. "I confess I do not know. It's not a title I'm familiar with, but then again – most of your titles and nomenclature is alien to me. I would assume it is a mage of great power and renown, likely one from before your 'apocalypse'," Paimon answered. "Yeah, I think so too. She's old, not just old, ancient even. From before the end of the world, at least."

"Yet I sense... youth. Stunted growth at least," Paimon added. Jayce pulled a bemused face. "She's not that short." His head tipped to the side, hitting the side of the bath. "Ow, what was that for?" he questioned, rubbing his head. "That is not what I meant. I mean emotionally. She allowed us here with hardly any questions, she dropped hostility over the presence of a mere animal, and she's clearly a prude."

"She's probably lonely, it's been at least five-hundred years for her since she last saw another... a living person. Besides, most mages we've met have some sort of emotional and social difficulty." Silence followed. "Hello? Still there?" Jayce questioned inside his head. "Tread carefully," warned Paimon. "It's not just mages that struggle. And your obsession with collecting allies may cause us trouble."

Jayce lay in the bath until it went cold and the surface had turned a rusty red colour. Eventually, with his stomach growling he emerged from the waters, drying himself with a short spell before approaching the wardrobe. He donned himself in a pair of smart trousers, accompanying it with a white frilly shirt before wearing a pair of leather slippers to complete the look. Everything was comfortable and fit, surprisingly. He took out his sleeping bag and set it down on the floor, before rummaging through his various items and checking them over. He filled up his waterskin and left it to filter before departing the room, back in the direction of the dining hall.

Rosalynn was waiting for him. She too had changed clothes into a long black dress that was loose over her skeletal body, a purple feather cloak that lay across her shoulders, and a three-pronged golden tiara which sat mounted to her

hooded skull. Her flaming orbs appeared to fixate on Jayce as he entered the room and she gestured for him to sit opposite her on the table. A roasted animal lay in front her with a small accompaniment of various vegetables. Jayce did not recognise the animal nor the vegetables, but he had to make the safe assumption it was all edible – at the very least his Focus would help neutralise any toxins. “Was the bath to your liking?” Rosalynn asked, leaning on her hands as he sat down. A small bowl of scraps lay on the floor for Little Witch, the cat curiously approaching the meal. “Yes, thank you,” he answered, eyeing the food but hesitating. “Please eat. Do not wait on my account, or you shall be of an equal state to I.”

Jayce tore into the meal with desperate ferocity before reaching for a chalice filled with the greatest wine he had ever tasted. She watched him, the expressionless skull observing with an unnerving determination. He slowed down, sitting up more properly and wiping his hands before picking up the carefully laid out cutlery. “This is... good,” he stated nervously. She nodded, her voice sitting uneasily inside his mind. “It took some time to locate the spell, I am glad to know my effort was worth it.”

“Are you... able to speak, or only through telepathy?” he asked. She tapped her skeletal neck. “With what organs?” she questioned, her voice somewhat melancholic. “Ah, sorry.” She shook her head and looked around the room. “It is of no harm. A consequence of my duty, nothing more, I assure you.” Jayce continued his lone feast, before picking off pieces for Sola and Luna to consume. “You travel with curious company: a rokken, a cat, a Demon and a pair of failed spellwords. For what purpose have you entered these lands?” she asked.

“By accident, I promise. My crewmates and I were ambushed by a Dragon, we tried to teleport away and the spell was disrupted, sending me here,” he answered honestly. There were several moments of silence. “You are fortunate to have survived. I am sorry,” she said, earnestly and sympathetically. Jayce shook his head. “My crew live, I have no reason to believe otherwise. They are out there, somewhere, searching for me.”

She remained silent in thought. “You must have a strong connection to be so certain. They must be something special.” Jayce nodded, setting his cutlery down. “They are. They really are. But what about you, are you alone out here?” “In a way. My servants remain eternal, but I would hardly refer to them as good conversationalists.” Jayce forced a small smile. “I was hoping you could clarify the past for me. If it has been more than five-hundred years since the world was

reseeded then I'm nearing at least a millennia in age. What happened to my fellows?"

"Your fellows? Other Archmages?" he questioned. She nodded. "I'm sorry you're the first I've encountered." She looked down and silence once again followed. "I see. Nevertheless, the world continues so I must presume their success. So, please tell about yourself, your world, the people, the state of this time period? Spare no detail," she requested, sitting back in her chair and observing him curiously.

Jayce lost track of time as she bombarded him with ever more questions. He answered them all as best as he could, talking about the Old and New World, the Sea Sovereign and the fall of the Empire, his crew and his rise to fame. He spoke of his battles and adventures, of his friends and allies and greatest foes. He spoke for so long that his eyes began to close on their own and he lost his chance to ask any questions of the ancient mage. "Rest," she instructed, several bottles of wine empty on the table. He had questions he wanted to ask but, after days of walking, the promise of a safe sleep was too much. "I am grateful for all you have told me, Jayce. I look forward to our further conversations. Good night." He could hardly argue, the skeletal butler all but escorting him back to his room. He crawled into his sleeping bag, Little Witch doing the same. His eyes falling shut on their own.

Jayce woke the following morning far more rested than he had been in a long time. He lay in his sleeping bag looking up at the dark ceiling, cracks of sunlight entering his room, wondering about his friends and the new acquaintance he had made. Eventually he sat up, looking to the closed door before opening it for the cat to escape and wander through. He then returned to the centre of the room and sat down, closing his eyes and descending into the underworld.

"Jayce?" came a voice from behind him, as he found himself stood on the familiar dark sands of the Abyss. He turned, his eyes widening as the familiar form of Caelie floated in front of him. "No..." he muttered in horror, only for her to attempt to tackle him in a hug and phase straight through him. "I'm not dead!" she stated loudly as he turned on her, a sharp rush of relief passing through him. "Thank the Gods! Where are you?" he questioned.

"Uh, long story. We landed in the Sovereign's homeland, we're currently on our way north," she said firmly and comfortably, in a manner that she could only do in the underworld. "Hang on, I'm with Astris," she stated, vanishing. She returned several moments later. "She wants to know where you are?" Caelie asked on Astris' behalf. "I'm in the Scourge, at a Necromancer's castle," Jayce

answered. Caelie faltered before disappearing. "What?" she questioned when she returned. "That's from both of us," she added.

"Long story but I have Little Witch and RK with me. Is anyone else with you?" he questioned. She shook her head. "No, but a Republic invasion has supposedly begun, we're heading there to help. The others might be as well." Jayce frowned. "That sounds risky, it might be more sensible to meet up with the others first." Caelie disappeared and reappeared. "Astris says we've had no contact. And the Republic is our best connection. She apologises, but it is Alara's fleet that we're going to aid."

"What?" Jayce questioned. Caelie vanished, and didn't reappear. Jayce exited the underworld, only to scramble backwards as a tattooed skull stared into his face. "A Spirit Monk trance? You intrigue me more and more. Apologies for the intrusion, I was concerned you had passed away," Rosalynn stated. "There is some food on the table for you. Unfortunately I will be away from the castle for some time, but food will still be available in my absence. I would advise taking this opportunity to train, given your conflict with this... Sovereign. I will return, farewell." She turned and departed, the door closing behind her.

Jayce sat for a while on his own. Alara was part of an invasion, and the others were scattered. It was worrying but he knew there was little he could do. He sighed and stood up, departing in search of food. After obtaining a small meal of peculiar taste, he stepped out into the courtyard where a statuesque RK lay on the floor. "RK?" Jayce questioned, the rokken grumbling as his stone body grinded against itself as he rose up and turned to Jayce. "I'm okay, you?" Jayce questioned. A grumble came back. "We're staying here, at least for a while. This is the only place we can contact the crew, and it's suicide out there."

The rokken either took in the information or ignored him, Jayce wasn't sure of which. Shrugging Jayce turned his attention to the open space, he concentrated on his Focus and began practicing his techniques. But he faltered, Rosalynn could use magic even in an area as devoid as the Scourge. Could he use Focus? Could he learn to channel it, even on the faintest of magical energy? It was worth a try. It had to be.

Rosalynn didn't return to the castle for over a week, and when she did return she immediately entombed herself within the largest bedroom of the castle, warning Jayce not to disturb her. She didn't emerge from her room for almost another week afterwards, but periodically – as Jayce ventured to the edge of the mana zone – he spotted her watching him from a window, her expressionless skull

confusingly friendly. But eventually, his questions having long since festered in his mind, they got another chance for dinner together, albeit her watching him eat.

"I have seen you venturing to the edge of the castle, is there a purpose in your expedition?" she questioned, almost immediately as he sat down. "Ah, apologies, please eat," she swiftly followed with. He must have shown an expression of disappointment or annoyance as she sat up straight and immediately rescinded her question. "No, um, sorry, I was hoping to ask some questions myself," he eased cautiously. "Ah, of course. Well, please do ask away."

"No, you asked and I should answer. I've been experimenting with using Focus at the edge of the mana border. To see if I can utilise it even in the Scourge, without feedback. You can use magic even here, so perhaps I can use Focus," Jayce proposed. She folded her arms and nodded, looking down at her lap. "A curious hypothesis. This... Focus, do you mean martial arts?" she questioned. Jayce nodded. "Ah, given your periodic uses of magic I took you for an apprentice mage, rather than a warrior. I should have some ancient manuals around her somewhere that could be worth your time. But I do agree with your theory, it is not unfounded and would perhaps follow something akin to what I do myself," she stated.

"Which is?" he questioned, opening a bottle of wine before curiously cutting open a thickly skinned wheel of cheese. "My... sister once referred to it as 'going infinite'. A childish term that fit her style of magic. Ultimately it requires one to engage as conduit for magic, rather than a store. An expert mage can cast continuously this way and at speeds that seem impossible to a lesser spellcaster. Think of it as rather than breathing, you allow your cells to absorb the oxygen needed for respiration. It seems impossible, and I confess it is preposterously dangerous as well."

"How so?" Jayce questioned, trying to visualise what the Archmage of Death was describing. She thought for a moment. "Picture a lightning storm and standing in its centre, allowing each and every bolt to hit and pass through you as you redirect it onwards towards your foes. Think of the heat and the energy passing through you. You have to expunge it all, for - if even one percent remains - that is then added to by another bolt, then another and another, until..." She placed both hands either side of her head before miming an explosion. "Many geniuses fell to this method, both in practice and victim. I see little reason for you not to be able to do the same with your... Focus."

"Couldn't I suffer the same...?" Jayce mimicked the detonation. She shook her head. "No, it's not exactly equivocal. Your martial arts rely on a heavy method of absorption, it's how the mana is utilised within your body. It's dispersed throughout you, rather than stored within Spirit Fonts – are you familiar with this term?" Jayce nodded, thinking back to Wicke's lectures. "Good, well – I would imagine something more along the lines of disintegration or instantaneous cell death, but it's unlikely. Due to such a heavy void of mana this would be the ideal conditions to practice a method. If mastered here, then outside there is little reason for you not to have fully mastered Focus for all it's worth. You would have done what many take decades to achieve in a matter of months, if not weeks. Perhaps it would put you on par with this... Sovereign, as you called her."

"Can you help me with this?" Jayce requested. She shook her head, looking around before leaning over the side of her chair. There was a hiss and Little Witch darted out from under the table to Jayce's side. "It's hardly my area of expertise. I can however provide with an expansive array of targets to practice against. There are some legendary warriors within my collection that would be more than a challenge for you."

"On that, I have to ask – why? Why do you have a horde of skeletons, even a Dragon's corpse, under your control? For what purpose, I mean – there's nothing here," Jayce questioned. She sat in silence for a few moments before standing up and approaching the fireplace. She knelt in front of it, staring into the flames. "Long before you were born, this world was full of power. Islands flew in the air, cities lay above and below the waters, magic was everywhere and everything. We rivalled even the Demons."

"Ridiculous."

"But it drew the attention of creatures beyond this world. Something far worse than any Dragon, Giant, or Demon. Something primordial and twisted. We called them the Entrasites. Creatures of shadow from a world not our own. They fed on magic, eradicating it, and were our perfect predators. They consumed us wholly, taking our own might and making it theirs. Acting as mimics, not unlike your blades. With every loss they grew in size and strength, taking our dead as their own. Ultimately there was little to be done, little to stop them, so my companions led the charge for humanity, creating bastions and sealing the doors behind them – erecting the Frontier, as you called it. But I stayed and fought. In a lot of ways I was the perfect foe for them. The Entrasites did not take the corpses, they copied

them, so - even when our greatest soldiers fell – I was there to keep them in the fight. I held the line. I still hold the line, awaiting the command to stop fighting.”

“These... Entrasites, are they still around?” Jayce questioned. She shrugged. “Potentially. When the world hid, they departed, deprived of their food. I slaughtered those that remained. Maybe one or two lay somewhere, slumbering as they await their queen to command them to arise once more.” Jayce paused. “Then, if you haven’t seen them, could you not leave this place? Leave the Scourge. I need to go north, you could come with-”

“No!” she stated firmly. “No,” she said more softly. “I-I cannot. I cannot risk all that I’ve done, all that we did. I must remain here, until the other Archmages give me permission.” Jayce sat in silence, thinking over what he had just been told. It was like nothing he had ever heard before, nothing anyone had heard before. She stood up and started to climb the stairs out of the room. “I’m sorry. I... need rest. Goodnight.”

Seize the Seas Tales: Old Ties

Arthuria did her best to avoid being spotted as she and Zhurong made their journey north from the Frontier to the Capital. It wasn’t always successful: sometimes a ship would spot them and they would hear the alarm bells begin to ring as the panicked crew saw a Dragon for the first time, but for the majority of the way they seemed to go undetected. However, that went straight out of the window as they approached the Republic Capital.

There was a crackle of red lightning, something sailing through the air towards them before a boom of thunder resulted in the swift appearance of a redhaired woman dressed in a red and white uniform. Arthuria yelped as an axe was swung at her and Zhurong, stopping about an inch or two away from her neck. “Explain now, and explain fast,” warned Fleet Admiral Exarga, a fury on her face that sent shivers through Arthuria’s body.

They landed on the Isle of Duty after flying over a sizeable armada placed in preparation, presumably for Arthuria’s arrival. “We have not encountered any of your crewmates, but your presence is a relief,” Cassandra Exarga stated, standing down her forces before looking Zhurong over. “Are there any others available in his model?” she swiftly asked, nodding in approval of the red Dragon. Arthuria didn’t quite know how to respond. “Uhm, I’m not sure. This one is mine, sorry.”

"Pity. Unfortunately I genuinely do not have any helpful information for you. Wicke departed not long ago with her own group, but otherwise I've heard nothing." "Wicke was here?" Arthuria questioned. "Where is she headed now?" "Indeed. She and Damian caused a real stir when they collapsed the Dungeon. I believe they were heading east, but that's not for certain. Anyway, I have duties to tend to and a report to make on... this," she stated, gesturing to Zhurong. "Keep the Dragon in check, and preferably away from ordinary folk. There's enough worries as it is." Arthuria nodded and Cassandra vanished in a flash of red lightning.

With a sigh, Arthuria turned to Zhurong. "You can stay here for a bit if you want, but only here. Otherwise go for a flight and find some food. Wild food - don't be lazy," she instructed. The Dragon let out a huff and took to the skies, leaving her alone with a small crowd of onlookers who immediately rushed to question her. Eventually she escaped the curious Marines and Navy, making her way on the advice of a local to the nearby Convent.

"Arthuria?" questioned Meredea, hurrying to the doorstep after being summoned by another Sister. She embraced Arthuria tightly before pulling back with her hands on Arthuria's cheeks. "I was worried that you'd fallen, rumours speak that your crew was destroyed. Are you okay?" she asked gently, taking Arthuria's hands. Arthuria nodded, her body tense. "I... yeah, fine. It's messy, we were separated, but I have faith in the others. I just need to find them," she answered. Meredea nodded. "I understand. Well, your sister was here not too long ago. She spoke to Gujin," Meredea stated with a reassuring smile. "My sister? Morgana was here?" Arthuria questioned. Meredea frowned and shook her head. "No, uh, Morgause was her name."

Arthuria unsteadily sat down on a stool that was rushed to her side, Gujin and Meredea easing her down to sit on it. "You're telling me..." she said shakily, "that my youngest sibling was in the Order, as a Squire? And I wasn't informed?" Arthuria questioned, her disbelief transforming into anger. "It was only towards the end that I learnt of your connection," Guhin stated. "And afterwards she was in hiding. I'm sorry, Arthuria - I would have told you sooner."

Arthuria sighed and placed her head in her hands. "Where is she now?" "She is travelling with a group, they are investigating the Dungeons." Arthuria scoffed. "So she's with Wicke. Of course, how could she not be... Well, that's the best place for her right now. Association with me will only put her at risk, I guess it's a future problem," Arthuria stated, forcing herself to her feet and shaking her

head. "No one's past evades them forever," Gujin warned. "We all have to face it eventually. Have you thought about returning home? Now would be the time."

Arthuria looked at Gujin. It was something she really didn't want to do. She had burned her past quite literally. It was not something she wanted to dig up. But it might have been something that Morgana would have done. "I guess I have to. I guess now is the time to track down my father."