

## **Chapter 206: Inheritance**

It was a considerable journey to the Old World. A journey that had been absolutely wonderful for Ohno, and a complete nightmare for Marisha and Morgana. They had first made their way to the Mysts, utilising a small dose of nepotistic connections to commandeer fuel and the Guild's communication systems, along with the added mass of Ohno and the ferocity of Soteria where conversation failed to acquire what was necessary. With a message sent, a transceiver stolen, and enough fuel to more than make the journey, the quartet then headed to the Frontier. But rather than through, they went over.

Marisha had swiftly settled into her role as pilot of the Gambit, with Morgana and Soteria often flying alongside to ensure the flimsy flyer's protection. It gave Ohno a chance to just sit and watch the world around them. And whilst Morgana and Marisha fretted about Dragons and other predatory beasts attempting to snatch the flying vessel out of the skies, he instead enjoyed the greenery beneath his feet: the colossal trees almost within an arms reach as Marisha weaved the Gambit between balls of webbing, plumes of flame and globules of flesh-melting acid. He couldn't help but grin as his stomach churned, the adrenaline coursing through his body.

But eventually the greenery fell away, replaced by an endless expanse of ocean beneath them. "Ohno, take over," Marisha commanded, the large panda groaning as he stood up and sauntered over towards the cockpit. He took the controls and she stepped away, wiping tears and sweat from her face as she let out a sigh of relief. "We made it," he said simply to her, as she leant against the wall of the main hold. Marisha nodded, taking a moment to process their surprising survival. "And now comes the actual hard part," she stated, more to herself than to Ohno, as she sat down and took out her new transceiver. "What are we doing?"

She shook her head. "I told you yesterday, remember?" she questioned, locking away her frustration towards his simplistic mind. "Uhm... no," he answered, lowering their altitude, locking the controls before entering the rear hold and sliding open the side door. Soteria and Morgana flew promptly inside, taking a rest from their combat duties. "Morgana, Soteria, thanks. We wouldn't have made it through that without you," Marisha said immediately, her eye locked on her transceiver as she listened to it through a headset and tapped away and flicked several switches. "No problem, most fun I've had in a while," Morgana stated sarcastically. Soteria let out a huff and immediately curled up on the floor,

exhausted from the encounter. "Could you remind Ohno of the plan, please?" Marisha requested as Ohno returned to his seat in the cockpit. "The plan, or...?"

Marisha looked up at Morgana with a weary expression. "Ah," Morgana uttered quietly, stepping closer to the cockpit and looking up towards Ohno. "We're going to use the Guild to look for the others. So we need to ingratiate ourselves. We need to get access to everything they have." He simply shrugged before looking back at them. "So what gifts do we have for them? I don't really carry chocolates, I normally just eat them," he questioned. Morgana chuckled and shook her head. "We may need something a bit more significant than chocolates," stated Marisha.

It was truly breathtaking to see the Guild Citadel once again, and even more unnerving to see it docked in what the Serpent had called the true Guild Bastion. The ginormous flying battleship had docked at an island, one the size of a djinn palace, that in turn was bound to three other floating islands - all held together by colossal chains. It was alien, magical, ancient - and spoke strongly of the Guild's power and influence that such a location was far from common knowledge. It had been a few weeks of flying to locate the Guild Headquarters, and even longer to procure what they needed in preparation for their arrival, but Marisha guided the Gambit into a colossal hangar located on the eastern island.

They landed amongst a hundred other flyers and larger flying ships, following the guidance of the brightly-coloured workers, and their heavily-armed guards to an empty berth. As Marisha depowered the Gambit, she turned to Ohno, Soteria and Morgana. "I don't know how long we are going to be here for, but I don't think it's worth leaving anything behind. If there is anything you are worried about losing, take it with you. And if this goes wrong, get out - whatever way you can," she said firmly and seriously. Ohno and Morgana nodded as Soteria let out a yawn and stretched. "We're right behind you," Morgana stated.

They stepped out of the Gambit, the wind howling around them amongst the deafening roars of the numerous flyers coming in and out of the colossal hangar. Immediately a young ginger woman began an approach towards them, her sides flanked by two gold and green armoured guards. "First time?" she called over to Marisha who nodded back. "I thought-so, I don't recognise the colours of your flyer, nor it's name. Hangarmaster Heeley, and you are?" questioned the Hangarmaster, herself dressed in a more officer-like golden uniform, her guards looking curiously from member to member before both tensing as they spotted

Soteria. The young woman also flinched on seeing the reptile, but she immediately held up a hand – indicating to her guards to wait for her orders.

“My name is not a requirement,” Marisha returned firmly. “I am an expected guest, and expect to be treated as such – Hangarmaster. I have already transmitted my clearance, we will pay the fee and be on our way.” A small smile spread across Heeley’s young face before she shrugged. “Information is power. My apologies, your business is your own – Marisha of the Rising Aces. Your mother will be expecting you, I have no doubt.”

Marisha’s expression hardened: it was not meant to be common knowledge of her relationship with the Serpent. In fact, she doubted there were even many members of the Guild alive to remember her as a child, yet a mere hangarmaster knew. As if noticing the change in her expression, Heeley’s smile spread even more as she knew for a fact she had hooked Marisha firmly. “You stand out,” she warned, “and where your crew goes there are often big changes. I make it my business to know everything and everyone that goes through this hangar. That includes who uses which and what codes. Remember that. Hundred pearl and I’ll factor it in for any future visits,” Heeley stated.

Ohno glanced between Marisha and the Hangarmaster before folding his arms and stroking the fur on his chin. Something was up between the two, but he had no idea what, so instead he turned around and began to walk towards the edge of the hangar. The wind dragged him forwards, threatening to pull him out of the large cavern-like area, but he ground his feet and edged cautiously forwards before peering over the side of the metal floor. The fall was astronomical, the clouds parting to show ocean far below.

“Ohno!” called Marisha, as Heeley and her guards departed. He turned and hurried back, frowning as he noticed Morgana staring curiously at Marisha. “See anything interesting?” Marisha asked, drawing his complete attention back to her. “Uh, that is not the way out of here,” he warned. “A very long fall,” he added. She smiled, nodding approvingly. “I would most certainly agree. Now remember, I need that intimidating figure by my side. Let’s see that action face.” He pressed his face into an awkward grimace and let out a soft growl. “Good enough,” Morgana inserted, placing a hand on Ohno’s forearm and drawing Marisha’s gaze. “We’ve got business to do, and perhaps not an indefinite amount of time. Let’s go.”

They departed the hangar, following numerous large glowing arrows on the walls until encountering a set of large elevators, the cables visible and the doors consisting merely of metal gates with latches. Marisha pressed the button with

the highest number and the elevator began to rise, eventually breaking through multiple layers of darkness to reemerge in bright sunlight. They stepped out into the middle of street, either sides strewn with shops displaying all manner of magical items, technology, jewellery and clothes – so many clothes.

People stopped and stared, all of them dressed in luxury or clearly-identifiable Guild uniforms, but as quickly as they looked at the unusual quartet they turned their gaze away, carrying onwards with their lives with little care. But one individual remained and stared: a tall man, with a well-groomed beard and shiny golden armour. He approached, towering over the group – other than Ohno – and staring directly at Marisha. “Lady Marisha, please follow me. The Serpent is waiting for you.”

The large man led them wordlessly through the city, straight towards the nearest of the four visible palaces scattered across the four islands. Guards didn’t stop him, they didn’t question him, they dared not even look at him, only throwing more questions into Marisha’s mind as they were led onwards by their clearly high-ranking escort. They passed through countless ornate hallways, past endless statues, paintings and busts before finally entering another elevator, this one far more luxurious with mirrors in almost all directions.

With a ding they emerged into a platinum hallway lined with guards, a pair of huge maroon doors on the far end. Their escort continued forwards, Marisha continuing to stare at the back of his head with distinct curiosity. She definitely didn’t recognise him, yet there was something about him that was familiar, but she couldn’t grasp what exactly that was. “The Serpent is inside,” he stated, knocking on the door. “Mind your manners, even if she is your mother. I will not tolerate disrespect.”

In an instant Marisha recognised him, the same coldness came through him just without a serpentine veil that the therian had previously had. “It’s you,” Marisha growled, thinking back to when her mother had abducted her and the Stacked Hand, forcing Jayce to come and rescue her. He was the cobra therian who had been her mother’s enforcer. He nodded, a faint smile that radiated only cold warning crossing his face. “Go on in,” he told her, opening the door.

They stepped inside into the Serpent’s personal office. It was almost exactly as they all had imagined: a lair that was fitting for a Dragon. Trophies, treasures, gifts, artifacts and art were displayed in all directions. The room was twisted so that the doors connected to the corner of the cube-like room, allowing the far two walls to be entirely made of glass, showing an expansive and glorious view of the Guild Bastion and the world beyond. In front of the glass was a colossal

wooden desk made of a black, shiny wood. A pair of large L-shaped sofas sat in front of the desk, forcing the occupants to sit facing the desk and look upwards at the mistress of the room.

The Serpent sat waiting for them behind her desk, but she promptly stood up and walked around it, opting instead to lean against the front of the desk as she gestured for the group to sit. It was the first time that Morgana and Ohno had seen her, and, if picked out of a crowd, they would most certainly have been able to identify her as Marisha's mother. The resemblance was uncanny, she was a definitively older and unscarred version of Marisha.

Morgana glanced between the two, the photos of Marisha from the crew's earlier days showed her with shorter hair, and she had grown it out – now almost matching her mother's stomach-length light-brown hair. They shared identical orange eyes, and Marisha appeared to be slightly taller and was certainly more muscular. But as Morgana glanced from the distinctive serpent-theme jewellery across the Serpent's hands, ears and neck, her eyes landed on Marisha's right middle finger, where an ouroboros ring lay, one identical to the Serpent's. A cold and wary feeling passed through Morgana's mind: who was using who? Was it Marisha? Or was it her mother?

"Mother," Marisha greeted softly, standing in front of Ohno, Morgana and Soteria. The Serpent cocked her head, looking curiously at the Dragon at the back of the group. She let out a soft hiss, opening her mouth barely. Soteria perked up with confusion, starting forwards before leaping onto the sofa and then the Serpent's desk, she then lay down curling around the Serpent's waist to put her large head in her hands. The Serpent gently scratched Soteria's head, a faint smile spreading as she then looked challengingly towards Morgana. "How?" Morgana questioned in confusion.

"Quite simple. All animals have signs of identifying their mothers, a sound, a tone, a feeling or a scent. Mimic it and they all obey. Even people," she said coldly. "Soteria, come back," Morgana commanded, the Dragon immediately slinking away from the Serpent to return back to Morgana's side. The Serpent shrugged, her point had been made. "It is good to see you Marisha, I worried that you had been annihilated by the Sovereign along with the rest of your crew." Ohno's face fell. "What?" he questioned.

Marisha held up a hand to draw his attention. "It's an exaggeration. We're just... scattered, for the moment," Marisha corrected, nodding to the others and taking a seat on the nearest sofa. They followed her lead, sitting as well. "I thought so,

yet the Betrayer Kaina seems quite proud of the fact that your Captain is suspiciously missing. So I presume that is why you are here? You want my resources to locate your peers?" the Serpent questioned.

"Yes," Marisha answered plainly, leaning forwards and looking firmly at her mother. "Why should I? What purpose does that provide? It doesn't help me." "Because it means that I am here, by your side, until I find them all. I am selling myself to you, mother. That's my offer," Marisha stated. There was a brief expression of shock that crossed her mother's face, but hardly an amount that compared to Morgana and Ohno's. "What?" they both questioned. Marisha didn't look at them. "I need something more to tide over the other Guild Masters. You are a weakness to me, my daughter. I want you to be a strength, not something that others will use to try to exploit me."

"Hang on a moment, Marisha, this was not-" Morgana attempted.

"Ohno, the gifts, please," Marisha commanded. The panda therian faltered before reaching for his bottomless bag. He took out a trio of sealed scrolls, at least one of which had splatters of blood across its surface. He stood up and nervously presented it to Marisha's mother. She took them and read them over. "This will do nicely. I accept your terms daughter, you have access to my resources. Make use of them as you will but do not think that you will have time to use them. I have more pressing things for you and I to attend to," stated the Serpent. Marisha nodded. "I expected nothing less, that's why I have these two with me," Marisha stated, turning and smiling at Morgana. "This wasn't the plan," Morgana whispered. "It always was, just not the plan I shared. I will help where I can, find our crew Morgana. I know you can."

### **Seize the Seas Tales: A Fox's View**

The fire crackled between Fenn and Falconer, a heavy periodic huff pushing the smoke in Fenn's direction as Wren slept with her huge beak in Falconer's lap. It had been weeks of travel for them, with an immediate journey north to retrieve supplies before a fast return to the Scourge. From there the pair of them had begun their investigation into the Leylines - or more accurately - Falconer had begun *his* investigation into the Leylines, whilst Fenn sat and watched.

With the magic void of the Scourge, they had been forced to manually track for traces: something Fenn had no clue how to do, and Falconer had no idea how to teach him to do. Fenn let out a huff nearly as heavy as the roc's snores. Falconer glanced up from the fire, the golden crosses on his green eyes boring into Fenn's

face. Something that normally could have been disguised with his fox appearance lay completely bare for an inquisitive eye. "What's bothering you?" Falconer questioned, his voice low and steady and bristling with genuine concern. "I-it's nothing... don't worry," Fenn returned, looking briefly up from the fire before back into its golden core.

"Typically, from my experience, every person I have encountered who has said that has been lying. I will not press you, but it appears we will be travelling closely together for the foreseeable future. Just something to ponder on," Falconer stated gently, adjusting his position and prompting a slumbering whine from the giant bird as she was disturbed. Fenn opened his mouth, but he stopped himself and shook his head. This was not Bjorn, nor Marisha, and it certainly wasn't his brothers. It was not Falconer's problem – it was not his business.

"I just want to know if the others are okay..." he eventually mumbled, deciding at the least that the guy in front of him may have some words of comfort. "I do not know," Falconer said unhelpfully. Fenn scoffed and shook his head. "But I like to believe that they are," Falconer continued. "I have faith that they live and that we will see each other again." Fenn shook his head, looking up from the fire. "Faith means nothing, just lies and deceits made to yourself."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. It is always hard to tell, but would it not be fair to say that our experiences so far have been blessed with luck and fortune?" Falconer questioned. Fenn gestured around at the dead lands surrounding them. "You call this luck, fortune? What sort of crazed existence have you been living? My life has been nothing but bad luck and misfortune and this is just the latest shit that I've been dropped in."

"We are still alive. We have a purpose and an objective, a fire, food and bedding - that is not nothing. And we have also survived against countless misfortunes so far. We could be in a far worse situation..." Falconer suggested. Fenn shook his head, looking up at the stars far above. "Do you not have faith in your brothers?" Falconer questioned, the words cutting through Fenn like an axe. "I do... I... I do..."

"Then why not believe in them? And if not them, then at least, yourself?" "Because we are so out of our league, Falconer. Ever since we joined we have been. We're nothing but... but... boys along for the ride in an adult world – always have been. We get told what to do and we do it. We fight enemies we don't make for reasons we don't understand. Even now, why in the abyss am I here - in hell? Literal hell that makes it hard for me to even exist in the only way

I know. Because you told me, because you sound like you know what's going on."

Falconer chuckled and Fenn grit his teeth in anger, sitting up and glaring at him. "I have never pretended to know what is going on. Ever since I was young I have failed to be in the know, I just go where the world takes me in the best way I can." "Yeah, lucky for you..." Falconer tilted his head, his gaze curious and pressing in a manner that made Fenn question what exactly he was seeing. "I could drop you off somewhere, you could leave this life behind – start anew," Falconer offered. "Not without Ohno and Wam."

"You're very close to your siblings," Falconer observed. Fenn shrugged and pulled a face. "Yeah, duh, who wouldn't be?" he returned somewhat absent-mindedly. Falconer raised his hand. "I am not particularly close to mine," he said softly. "Why not?" Fenn questioned, genuinely confused by the comment. "We had differing ideologies, and it turned us against one another. It's not something that can be fixed."

"I'm sorry..." Fenn said quietly, looking back at the fire. Falconer shook his head, his hand grasping the ruby necklace around his neck. "It's alright. I gained something more: this crew, this family... How did you meet your brothers?" "Meet them? I... don't know, I don't really remember – we were so young. We just... came together. We were all abandoned and placed in an orphanage. And I guess we just stuck together. Sometimes one of us would be adopted, and we'd be given back not long after, or we'd run away and find each other. There was one time where all three of were adopted - this real rich guy and his really, really hot wife – but, he just wanted us for photos, to use us for pity and for votes in his bid to be mayor. We were given away as soon as he lost. We thought... well, it doesn't matter now... it was a long time ago."

Falconer shook his head. "Not that long. I am truly sorry." Fenn nodded and let out a sigh. "Whatever. Let's just... let's just find this Leyline thing. Goodnight," he stated, laying back onto his side and shutting his eyes, a wave of buried memories flooding back through the darkness.