

## Chapter 207: Maiden's Dawn

Jeanne sat in deep meditation within the dark and tiny hold of the Last Card. A single lantern jingled above her, painting her periodically shadowed face in an orange glow. Her eyes were closed, her rarely-removed armour in a neat pile next to her. She felt the rocking of the small vessel, listened to the waves hitting the hull and the creaking of the wood around her, but her mind lay elsewhere. Her thoughts wandered through her memories, through bloodstained battlefields, fallen foes and friends, guilt and glory. She ran her fingers across the flat-side of her sword, feeling the energy of her oath mingling with the imbued magic Tempest had given it. It spoke to her, but it did not sing like her old sword once had, back when they had first taken their steps together.

"Jeanne," cut Bjorn's voice, her yellow eyes opening before fading back to green. She glanced back and looked up at him as he stood at the top of the stairs to the hold. His face lay in the shadow of the evening, an orange beam shining across his brow. His eyes were muddled with concern, anger, curiosity and fear. The final traces of silver hair fell away into black, her outward appearance returning to normal. "We'll arrive at your home within the next few hours. Is it worth waiting until the morning?" he asked her, stepping down into the faint light. His expression was of sympathy and care. "I... I don't know," she answered in almost a whisper. "Tomorrow then. Get some sleep," he told her, turning and leaving her to her meditation.

She didn't sleep well, but then again – two out of three of them typically didn't sleep very well. Yuthura struggled with the discomfort of a hammock, as well as her own wandering thoughts - the elderly woman often waking early and going to sleep late. And between Yuthura's difficulties, Bjorn's snoring, and Jeanne's own solitary thoughts, sleep often struggled to be agreeable to Jeanne. She lay on her bedroll staring up at the ceiling, the waves particularly frustrating thanks to the full moon. But then she blinked, the sleepless night ending as Bjorn groaned and got to his feet.

The sun had barely risen, the air cold and frosty for the Gardens, with a thin veil of mist floating across the surrounding ocean. As always, they tucked into their supplies, eating a breakfast of simple fruits and grains. Cooked meals were usually saved for the evening, reserved as a special treat for the end of the day since none of them were particularly creative when it came to cooking, nor particularly talented at it. The veil eventually faded, revealing a large island on the horizon.

The island itself was curious to see: it was concave – dipping in the middle rather than rising – leading to a ring of land around the edge. A town ran halfway around the island, the rest dedicated to farmland and forests that were a deep brown and orange colour, the leaves falling for the autumn. For a location deemed almost legendary it looked feeble, weak and almost ordinary, yet as they sailed closer Jeanne couldn't help but look down at the wrecks decorating the ocean floor. The island had been demilitarised, its walls torn down, defensive cannons removed and central castle demolished. Jeanne didn't remember leaving it that way. It had never been that way.

Yuthura observed the ex-Paladin Elder as she stared in shock and slight horror at her old home. Jeanne had been anxious the entire journey - that had been immediately obvious to both Yuthura and Bjorn - but it was also more than that. The meditations, the recanting of her old oaths, the revisiting of her old battle-memories – Jeanne was journeying through her own history, and both Yuthura and Bjorn couldn't help but worry about what she was rediscovering. The Jeanne that she had become versus the Jeanne that she had once been were two very different individuals – Astris had seen to it.

They docked at one of the more discrete piers at the edge of the town, at Jeanne's request. Bjorn frowned as he looked down at Jeanne. She wore simple waterproof clothes, her armour left behind below deck. Her sword and banner were stowed in their item forms: a pair of silver and gold bangles on her wrists. "Anything we should be aware of or concerned about?" Bjorn asked her softly, picking up a few empty sacks and stuffing them inside his bottomless bag. "I don't know. We'll see," she answered, approaching the edge of the Last Card and dropping onto the pier. Yuthura and Bjorn glanced at each other before following after her.

They followed the natural ascension of the pier inwards towards the edge of the town of Maiden's Dawn. The buildings were formed of a rough grey rock, the roofs either red or blue slate and much of the town had been crafted to give a consistent view outwards. The houses sat above one another on the outside of the ring, with only larger, taller buildings, such as the town hall and a church, nesting on the inner part of ringed mound, but Bjorn kept noticing signs mentioning a castle, that was distinctly absent.

The three of them walked the streets, numerous cautious eyes naturally falling onto Bjorn. The subtle and unsubtle discrimination towards therians hadn't been something he had missed. They passed numerous statues and monuments to the old Church, the relics of the past talking about notable people who had come to

see the place that Jeanne had been born. Jeanne would periodically stop and look up at a statue, mumble something under her breath and then move on.

For the most part Bjorn didn't recognise them, but he certainly recognised the names: Jean de Dunois, Charles Dauphin, Pierre Cauchon, Jean de Metz, Robert de Baudricourt, Jean Pasquerel, and Gilles de Rais. The seven Sentinels were all in the same state: someone had been maintaining them, keeping the bronze shiny and the placards clean. Jeanne seemed to appreciate it, but her expression remained practically identical the entire way as they walked from one end of the town's arc to the other.

Eventually they reached the end and she turned to face Bjorn and Yuthura, glancing briefly towards the old woman. "Do you need rest?" Jeanne asked with gentle concern. "What do I look like: some old woman who can't walk more than an hour?" Yuthura grumbled. Neither Bjorn nor Jeanne bit at her trap. "No," Yuthura clarified. "Okay," Jeanne said quietly, stepping past them and walking onwards.

She led them towards the old church, stopping briefly outside of it before looking at Bjorn. "Please... be careful," she asked him. He frowned as she stepped towards the doors and then went inside. He followed, the heavy metal doors creaking as he pushed them open. His chest immediately tightened, his jaw clenching. "I thought this was meant to have been... dealt with?" he questioned to Jeanne quietly as he joined her inside, several of the believers inside all looking at him with alarm. "It's not like there has been a chance to check," she returned, the pair of them looking up at countless imagery celebrating the beliefs of the church.

Bjorn growled as he looked towards a painting of the Pope, his urges tempting him to break every window and tear every painting glorifying the organisation and people that had caused him so much harm. But he resisted as Jeanne stepped forwards, the young woman looking towards a large stained glass display over the central altar. Someone had damaged it, a stone or something heavy having broken through the centre of the image of seven knights. An eighth knight was above them, the faint traces of a golden halo remaining around the faceless and headless individual, where the glass had been broken.

Yuthura tapped Bjorn's leg with her cane, the large polar bear looking down at her as she gestured to several empty displays. He nodded in acknowledgement, understanding immediately what she was pointing out. "Demon," hissed a voice from the pews, Bjorn and Yuthura immediately glancing towards an old woman

staring at them. "Come on," Yuthura said quietly to Bjorn. "Let's not stain your clothes," she said with reinforced and vocal threat. The stranger turned a ghostly shade of white.

Eventually Jeanne joined them, a distraught expression on her face as she approached. "Are you okay?" Bjorn questioned to her. She shook her head, before forcing a blank expression and taking a deep breath. "It's... not worth wasting my time on. I have a few more stops, if you don't mind?" she asked gently. Bjorn nodded and Jeanne continued forwards, heading further towards the centre of the island.

They eventually arrived at a huge statue, one that was almost twice Bjorn's height and made of a golden metal. It was of a woman dressed in a short dress, a large longsword in her arms, a halo over her head and her left hand outstretched with what looked to be beams of light extending from her fingers. It was plainly Jeanne, but the placard had been defaced and the stone pedestal had numerous words carved into the surface – none of which were pleasant. She sighed, looking down at the floor as Yuthura began to circle the statue, dragging her cane through the dirt.

"Seems... harsh," Bjorn commented, as he read the numerous words and phrases calling her a traitor. "No..." Jeanne said firmly. "I... deserve it. I let down my Sentinels, and my people. When I left here, I... I failed to do what I promised. And my friends, my followers, suffered for it. They have every right to blame me for the fall of the Church," Jeanne turned to look at Bjorn, "regardless of whether or not it was right or wrong. I'm surprised it's still intact, but I guess it's more of a warning to them than anything. A monument to my failure."

"Hmm," Yuthura uttered, finishing her scribbles on the floor. "A waste of good materials," she stated, placing her hand to the statue and her thumb to the philosopher's stone in the handle of her cane. There was a flash of red light, both Jeanne's and Bjorn's eyes going wide as the statue disintegrated and reformed into a series of metal bars and stone blocks. "What have you done?" Jeanne questioned, a spade cluttering to the ground behind them. The trio turned to find an older man in overalls, his knees covered in mud. He stared at them in shock and horror, his eyes fixated on Bjorn before they fell to Jeanne. He stood and stared before a shaking finger rose to point at her and he gasped. "You," he realised, immediately turning and beginning to scramble his way back towards the town.

"Why?" Jeanne immediately questioned, ignoring the man and looking back at Yuthura with anger. "Because I'm not going to indulge your self-pity, it's pathetic and unbecoming, and you are not going waste your already-fragile mental health on trying to appease these savage morons. You can blame yourself, that's your right, but they are not entitled to your misery out of feeling slighted for following the cruel and xenophobic dogma of the Church. It fell. Good riddance. Now, you had other stops – I sense time is running out if you wish to go unbothered by the locals," Yuthura lectured. Jeanne desperately tried to think up a retort, but nothing came. Instead she shook her head and marched forwards.

They travelled towards the fields, heading towards a small cluster of farmhouses, but Jeanne stopped in her tracks, shook her head and turned around. "It's gone," she mumbled, both Bjorn and Yuthura glancing towards each other before following after her as she took off in the direction of the church. As they walked, Bjorn couldn't help but notice the new and multiple sets of eyes watching them from afar. Word had clearly spread and he doubted that was a good thing.

Jeanne walked around the old church to its associated graveyard. She then began to walk through the rows, glancing at each headstone until she found a pair next to each other. She knelt in front of them, her hands clasped in prayer. "They're there!" called a voice not too far away, both Bjorn and Yuthura immediately turning to look before facing each other. Bjorn tilted his head towards Jeanne and Yuthura nodded, stepping towards her before pausing as she read the names of the graves: Isabelle and Jacques d'Arc. Yuthura sighed, looking back towards Bjorn as he paced anxiously, then shook her head.

The gate to the graveyard opened, a small group of men and women, young and old, entering the area. Bjorn stood firm as he looked down at the cluster. "You know why we are here," stated a middle-aged man, stepping forwards with a wooden club in his hand. He looked up at Bjorn, the giant therian towering over him. "I don't read minds. Use your words or there will be no conversation," he threatened. "We want to speak to Jeanne," cried a female voice from the group.

Jeanne stood up, turning and looking at the group before approaching without caution. "It is you," stated the foremost man in disbelief. "I-I don't believe it. Why? Why have you returned after all this time?" he questioned, the club falling limp by his side. "I'm sorry," Jeanne said quietly. He shook his head, the others all looking at each other. "I don't want or need your apologies, we want answers. It's been years, why did you abandon us? The Sentinels returned, but you never did. You never came home. Why now?" questioned the leader.

Jeanne shook her head and shrugged. "I didn't get a chance to, that's why I sent them here. I tried. I failed. I am sorry," she said quietly, her body shaking. The group looked at each other, all of them confused and uncertain how to respond as she stood in front of them. "You tricked us," stated one of the voices. Jeanne shook her head. "No. Gille de Rais did. He created me, made me your champion. I was never what you believed me to be. I never really wanted any of this." "Gille de Rais was a good man, you lie!"

"He most certainly was not," Bjorn scoffed, Yuthura immediately stepping forward and placing a hand on his folded arms as the locals glared at him. "Gille de Rais betrayed the Sentinels. He sacrificed them for his personal glory, he was a cultist pacted to an evil creature. I am sorry, but that is not debatable - it is fact. The others were more... heroic," Yuthura stated, telling the truth and then lying through her teeth. Jeanne looked at her, her eyes wide and uncertain.

There were murmurs amongst the group, a few individuals turning and walking away. "But why now? Why have you come back now?" questioned the leader. "Because this was the first chance I could," Jeanne answered. "Only now and not for long. We'll leave, you'll never see me again. I've said my goodbyes," she stated. The leader sighed, looking at the floor and shaking his head. "You're still the same child that once danced through the fields, I guess we adults were the fools with our heads full of dreams. You do not have to leave. Even this... man can stay. At the very least, you could help defend against that Dragon that's been spotted near here," he stated, turning and beginning to leave.

"Wait, a Dragon?" Bjorn questioned. The leader looked back and nodded. "It was huge, a giant red creature. It was seen on an island not far from here only a few days ago. They claim it had a rider, an armoured warrior." Bjorn, Yuthura and Jeanne all looked at each other. *Arthuria*, they all thought. "Are there supplies we can purchase?" Bjorn questioned with urgency. The leader staggered backwards. "Uh, yes, near the harbour," he said with a hint of panic in his voice. "Which island saw the Dragon?" Yuthura questioned with similar urgency. "Uh...."

Arthuria knelt in the ashes of her old home. There were no actual ashes, only mud, but it felt somewhat appropriate. She had burnt the house long ago. She hadn't needed it after all. Her bastard father had abandoned her mother. Elaine had left before then, out of frustration towards the fake love between their parents. So when Arthuria's mother had died from sickness there truly was nothing she wanted more than to erase the past in the most violent way possible.

She could still feel the heat of the flames on her skin, hear the crackle of the fire - a rare positive memory of her past.

But once the emotion faded she stood up and began digging, striking the ground hard with a shovel she had borrowed from an ancient and confused neighbour. The locals of her home island had been shocked to discover her identity, and even more shocked to realise that the red Dragon was not there to eat them. Eventually she felt and heard a thud, her shovel hitting something solid. "Zhurong," she commanded, pointing at the ground. The Dragon ignored her, rolling onto his back and scratching himself on the floor. She scowled and continued digging, eventually dragging a chest out of the ground.

She smashed the lock and opened the lid, pulling out stacks of documents, photographs, toys, and other items she had presumed she would have needed later on in life. She shoved the junk into her bottomless bag, it was something to sort later... at some point. Instead she flicked through the documents detailing ships going in and out of the island's harbour. A few destinations had been circled, locations her mother had guessed Arthuria's father had fled to. Arthuria put them in her memory and then put the papers away along with everything else. "Come on Zhurong, we're off to our next stop."

"Have you seen this man?" Arthuria questioned, holding up one of the few photos of her father: an image of a tall man with grey messy hair, stubble and golden eyes.

"No."

"No."

"No."

She let out a sigh as she tucked into a ball on Zhurong's huge back, the night sky twinkling above her and the cold wind whipping past her as they flew through the darkness. It had been hopeless and a waste of several good weeks of her life. None of the locations had been a match. Not even her father's original homeland. She'd found no trace, nothing, which wasn't too surprising given it had been almost fifteen years since she had last seen him. "It's stupid," she muttered to herself. "Why would I even want to see him? What would I say? What would be worth saying?" She shut her eyes, her silent tears getting dragged away by the wind.

The glow of the sunrise prompted a groan out of her. The sound of someone calling her name snapped her eyes open. "Arthuria? Zhurong? Can you hear us? This is Bjorn. Are you nearby?" Arthuria bolted upright, almost falling off Zhurong's back as she scrambled for her necklace. "Bjorn? Bjorn is that you? This is Arthuria. Where are you?" she questioned, her heart racing and a deep relief flooding through her.

Arthuria grinned as she spotted the Last Card sailing beneath her. It had taken several hours of searching to find them and finally the promise of company had come to fruition. Zhurong tucked into a dive, landing on the edge of the vessel and immediately forcing its bow underwater as Arthuria leapt off and rushed into the arms of Jeanne. "Off now!" Bjorn yelled, shooing Zhurong away from the Last Card. The Dragon took flight and the ship rose above the water once more. "That is going to be a problem," he stated, pointing at the Dragon as he huffed and began to circle. "I don't care, I'm just glad to see you all," Arthuria stated, tears streaming down her face as she held Jeanne. "Anything to report?" Bjorn asked. Arthuria shook her head. "Nothing urgent, you?" she questioned back. "Nothing worthwhile. Let's find a dock, we need to talk about how we're getting to the Capital." She nodded, shutting her eyes and resting her head onto Jeanne's. "We're safe," Jeanne said quietly. A smile spread across Arthuria's face. "Yeah, we are."

### Seize the Seas Tales: Blood and Brutality

There was a crack as Thalia threw her fist harder and faster, again and again into Elenor, the armoured warrior on the floor beneath her as the crowd cheered Thalia's name. A groan came from beneath Elenor's helmet, a hand slowly reaching out towards the sword laying in the sand next to them. "Not... over," bubbled the bloody voice from beneath the helm. Thalia threw another heavy punch, the helmet denting inwards and the body beneath her going limp. The crowd roared, Thalia stepping backwards and raising a fist to the sky.

But she staggered, looking down at the wound in her side, her blood seeping from a hole in her waist. She grit her teeth, ignoring the pain and looking up to the observation box. She had won the fight, but not cleanly, and a victim like Elenor was hardly a champion like Athena, and hardly a monster like Oni. Thalia swore, dropping to her knees as her vision went blurry before going dark. She had a long way still left to climb. Her face slammed into the sand.