

Chapter 211: Blood and Bonds

Thalia rolled her shoulders as she strode into the arena once again. It had been months since her arrival and in that time she had beaten her way up the ranks through broken bones, broken teeth, bloody knuckles and with an indomitable spirit. She grinned as she raised her fist high, the crowd chanting, but not for her. They didn't cry and scream for her, they screamed for her opponent. "Athena! Athena! Athena!" cried the audience.

She stood waiting for Thalia, her chest puffed out, her clothing simple and functional, wrappings across her hands and her black hair cut short and held back out of her face by a simple band. Athena cracked her knuckles and rolled her head, her entire body stretching in a rhythmic pattern as she warmed up every sinew of muscle and every joint with barely a movement. It still unnerved Thalia just how much control Athena had over her body. Every joint could be dislocated and reattached. To a degree, Athena even had control over her organs, able to purge poisons at will and accelerate and slow her heart at a command. It was inhuman, and as Thalia stood before her she couldn't help but question if she was facing the greatest monster she ever encountered, bar the Sovereign, and Oni.

"So here we are," Athena said, matching Thalia's menacing grin and beginning to circle her. "So we are, my friend," Thalia returned, the words genuine and meaningful. Athena had been far more than that to her, but there was also a mutual understanding to hold each other at arms' length. Athena's grey eyes shone, the dirty black smear of makeup down her eyes intimidating and fitting of her appearance. "What will you do if you win?" Athena asked genuinely, ignoring the crowd and the announcer – their noise practically silent in her ears.

Thalia glanced towards the noise, before looking back towards Athena as she felt a subtle probe of Focus drawing her attention back. "They're not going anywhere," Athena stated, continuing to circle Thalia who in turn began to mirror her prow. "If I win? Don't you mean when?" Thalia returned, the noise overwhelming but not worth her attention. "When is brave. Foolish too. You see, babe, I like you here. Perhaps I'm not ready to see you leave me – especially if Oni challenges you to a death match."

"Sorry, that's not in your control anymore. I was always going to leave. If my crew are dead then it's up to me to avenge them. You could come with me?" Thalia offered. Athena shook her head, glancing up to the arena box. "I have a duty - I wish I could. Truly. It would be fun," Athena answered. Thalia nodded

and clenched her fists, taking a defensive stance. But rather than mirror her, Athena relaxed, putting her hands behind her and almost leaning into herself.

"Now, once upon a time, when I was little, myself and the other little assassin cubs liked to play a game with each other. We called it 'To Ten'. It's simple, a bit of a show of control and endurance, but also a measure of metal. Back then we would take turns hitting each other. Your aim was to avoid your opponent and score hits, with each hit you would strike harder. You would raise the power 'to ten', with the tenth hit being lethal. Most of the time people would bow out at six or seven. Personally I would wait until nine if I hadn't won by that point. But I remember watching one bout between Oni and another assassin. They went to sixteen apiece. So, Thalia, what number can you last to?" Athena questioned.

She shimmered and Thalia staggered backwards clutching her stomach. "One," came a whisper in her ear, the pain agonising from the deliberate and precise strike to her liver. Thalia swung wildly, Athena stubbornly standing still as Thalia missed her. The friendly grey eyes that had been such a strong and consistent source of affection were cold steel, Athena's face a blank slate of grim intensity.

Thalia's vision blurred and she growled and shook off the pain, raising her fists defensively. Athena charged her, her hands down by her side, fingers flexed. She leapt, vaulting into a twist before pushing off the air to dive her heel down towards Thalia's collarbone. Thalia blocked with both forearms, catching the blow that felt like an anchor had been dropped on her. Her knees buckled and Athena struck with her other leg, catching Thalia's temple and sending her tumbling across the floor. "Two and three," Athena stated, walking over towards Thalia's dazed body on the floor.

"What happened to a scale?" Thalia groaned, blood dripping down her chin as she forced her head upwards to look at Athena. "Did you not feel the difference?" Athena questioned. Thalia hated that she had. It was agonising, all three blows, especially as they had all been targeted towards physical weak points. Athena was toying with her. Thalia hated being toyed with. "Come on, get up. I took far worse than that as a child. I didn't wrestle in storms against therians, I wasn't the princess grandchild to a Pirate Lord. I was an assassin designed to be sacrificed and thrown away at a command. Fight me Thalia, or you will die. If not to me than alone in a back-alley somewhere with hardly a name worth saying."

Thalia growled with fury, a faint grin crossing Athena's jaw before being forced away. "Come on berserker, use that rage." Thalia struck, not at Athena but at the

Arena beneath her. The entire surface rippled like water before sand was thrown up in a giant cloud. "Blinding me does nothing!" Athena warned, her eyes locked on Thalia even through the sand. But Thalia hadn't done it for her. Thalia slid her bracer upwards, the heavy weight transforming into her anchor.

"Stupid and pointless, that won't hit me!" Athena goaded as Thalia grabbed the chain and swung the colossal weapon, the cloud of sand getting dragged into her personal hurricane. Athena then faltered as a tooth cut her cheek, drawing blood. Her eyes widened as she spotted countless fragments throughout the storm. She surged forwards only for a huge chunk of stone to fly her way as Thalia picked up a piece of the fractured arena floor and threw it at her. Athena smashed it with her fist, her body bracing as Thalia's huge anchor followed the rock, smashing into her.

An entire spectrum of Focus radiated from Athena's body in an instant as she desperately defended herself from the full impact strike, a strike that Thalia had used before to shatter ships. Athena tumbled backwards, bouncing into the storm before slamming into the arena wall. She slid to the floor in a heap, coughing blood as she quickly got to her feet and leapt back into the storm. But as she fought her way through the rocks, teeth, and broken weapons towards the centre of the tempest, she quickly picked up on Thalia's voice – a loud chanting coming from the eye of the storm.

"Oh great!" Athena complained, as a bolt of lightning crashed down from the skies and hit Thalia. Sparks and bolts of lightning flew off Thalia's anchor into the storm, the building static erupting into a ring of golden energy that completely surrounding Athena. She screamed as she was electrocuted by the storm she was enveloped within. But still she carried forwards, protecting her face as best as she could as her very muscles fought against her control.

She emerged into the eye of the storm, darting forwards towards Thalia and sliding under her wild lightning-charged swing. She struck hard, throwing a flat fist into Thalia's knee. "Four!" Athena cried, Thalia's leg twisting and buckling. "Ten!" Thalia stated, turning her leg and dropping her knee as she threw a thunderous fist straight downwards onto Athena. Athena splattered into the ground, bouncing off the stone – her eyes wide, glazed over and unseeing as she landed and lay still.

The storm dispersed, leaving behind a panting Thalia and a groaning Athena. "Stay down!" Thalia stated, clutching her dislocated knee and quickly fixing it with a yelp. Athena continued to lay at her feet before a gentle chuckle emerged.

"Ow!" she complained. "You cheated. You start with one, not seven, eight and then ten." Thalia wasn't sure how to feel about how quickly Athena was recovering from a wound that most certainly should have been fatal, even with the healing pillars engaged in the arena.

Thalia reached down and rolled Athena over, the pair looking at each other with soft smiles and genuine respect. "I was never going to win your way," Thalia stated honestly. "Yeah, you don't say," Athena returned, taking the hand that was offered to her and getting to her feet to the cheers of the crowd. They slowly limped their way to the exit, but by the time they had entered the familiar and cold underbelly of the arena their wounds had healed.

They made their way up to the fighters' box, but where Thalia was expecting to find Ming waiting for them she instead found a familiar, eye-patched face. "So this is where you've been hiding?" Marisha questioned, her arms folded and an unhappy glare on her face. "Uh," Thalia uttered, flummoxed by the sudden appearance of her crewmate. The emotions immediately disappeared as she stepped forwards and hugging Thalia tightly. "I'm glad you're okay," Marisha said quietly.

Thalia nodded, looking from Marisha to Athena. "So, I take it this is your crewmate?" Athena questioned. Thalia and Marisha both nodded before Marisha paused and looked Athena up and down. "Athena, wasn't it?" she questioned. Athena raised a singed eyebrow, looking towards Thalia. "I listen to my crewmates' stories. An Emperor's Fist with a large tattoo of a waterfall, a dragon and a snow leopard is pretty distinctive," Marisha commented. Athena chuckled. "I suppose it is. So have you come to collect this one then?"

Marisha nodded. "What of your fight?" Athena asked. "Oni will have seen that, he'll be waiting." Thalia shook her head and Athena flinched. "What?" she questioned in disbelief. "My crew need me. The holiday is over. He'll have to wait," stated Thalia. Athena sighed and shook her head before stepping back with her hands raised. "Whatever, you do you," she stated, turning and beginning to walk away.

Thalia lunged forwards and grabbed her arm. "Come with us. Your mission is over, it doesn't need you. We could use you. Arthuria could use you," Thalia pleaded. Athena shook her head. "The mission is never over. Goodbye, Thalia. Good luck with your own mission. Perhaps we'll see each other again someday." Athena pulled her arm away and continued to stride away, her eyes to the floor and shoulders low.

Thalia collected her things, her money, and then met up with Marisha at a dock not too far away from the arena. "Ready?" Marisha questioned. Thalia nodded, giving one last longing look at the place she had made her home. She turned and boarded the Gambit, sitting unusually quietly in the back of the hold. She didn't say anything for over an hour but eventually Thalia stood up of her own accord and approached the cockpit. "What have I missed?"

It took a considerable length of time to fill in Thalia on everything that happened to Wam and his group, Marisha's own encounters, as well as the newly formed Syndicate that was the reason why she had found Thalia in the first place. "The Captain?" Thalia questioned. Marisha shook her head, drawing out a long sigh as Thalia leant back. "I guess I'm the Captain then?" she stated. Marisha scoffed, drawing a soft smile that a year ago would have been replaced with bloody fury.

"So what now? Where are we headed if you're still working for your mother?" Thalia questioned. "We're going East to meet back up with the Stacked Hand and the others. Rumours have been circulating: something about a blue-haired Bard causing trouble for the local vampires and cannibals," Marisha stated, Thalia's mind immediately thinking of the only person that description could fit. "Of course she has."

"We need to hurry," Astris stated, her face pale as paced back and forth in front of Caelie. Caelie looked up at her, shaking her head – her face clammy and body cold. "No good exhausted. No good to anyone," she stated. Astris stopped in her tracks and looked down at Caelie. They had been travelling together for some time, slowly making their way from port to port on their journey north. Between hiding in cargo holds, stealing small boats, and crouching in shadows – the fact they had made it this far without major problems had been remarkable.

But Astris still hated it. She hated being forced to either ambush innocent people to drain their blood, or only being able to travel at nighttime. It made her feel disgusting, an animal, a monster. Least of all the fact that, now that they were isolated, she was the leading problem as to why they couldn't be there to aid Alara or Cyrenna or Beowulf. "Nightfall won't last much longer. We're not far from the eastern campaign, we can make it." But Caelie wasn't listening to her, her eyes were shut, her head on her chin. "Caelie..." Astris said softly, sitting down next to her and leaning into her for warmth.

"Incoming!" cried Commander Dorma. Beowulf tucked down into his trench, the skies glowing cyan as the Sentry unleashed another barrage on their position. The ground shook before falling still. "Commodore, enemy reinforcements are

arriving, and Commodore Vanathur's forces are reporting the presence of the Fortress Ship. We should abandon our position and regroup. The target is the Fortress Ship, if Vanathur can--"

The skies glowed cyan as the Sentry unleashed another barrage, but this time the blasts were not coming their way – the blasts were sailing through the skies to the west. "Fuck!" Beowulf yelled. "Send an immediate warning to Vanathur – tell her to get her forces out of there!" His Marines ran off the relay the message, his eyes turning back to the fortress that had been a consistent thorn in his side. "We push forwards! We have to take that Sentry!" Beowulf yelled.

"Sir, look! West, the enemy ships – they're turning." Beowulf turned, it made no sense – at their current position the enemy had a perfect angle to deliver a deadly bombardment towards them. Why had they abandoned their angle, why were they turning away. One of the four Null Legion ships exploded in a colossal fireball, the burning wreck sinking into the ocean before falling out of the sky through a large swirling portal directly onto another ship. Beowulf's eyes widened. "Reinforcements!" he cried. "Reinforcements are here!"

A red haze descended on the other two ships before one after another they both erupted into flames. A moment later a swirling blue portal appeared in front of the Fortress, a lone woman stepping out. She held a pair of pistols, her hair half black, half silver – albeit now sticky with blood. She turned away from the fortress, a storm of bullets peppering the ground around her. Some hit her, but she ignored them, so gorged on blood that the wounds regenerated instantaneously.

The sky then glowed cyan, the fortress detonating as a barrage descended upon it. Beowulf stood stunned, in complete disbelief that the Sentry he had been sent to conquer had been obliterated before him. The Vampire Lord then vanished in a cloud of red mist, a red haze descending on the equally stunned enemy forces between Beowulf and the broken fortress. Screams filled the air as she danced her way towards him, tearing apart everything in her path before she apparated directly in front of his trench. "What are you doing in a hole, brother? Father would be most disappointed," Astris said with a bloody smile.

"It's Astris Kai!" came a voice from along the trench. "Commander Kai is here!" cheers rang out and Astris crouched down, offering a hand to her brother to pull him out of the trench. "The battle isn't over," Beowulf stated. Astris tilted her head, a swirling portal appearing next to her and a young skinny, masked

women emerging out of it. "Are you sure?" Astris questioned, a white flag flying from the top of the enemy fortress.

It took a considerable amount of time for Beowulf's forces to finish cleaning up the invasion. By all accounts it had been nothing but a failure. He had failed to seize the island without Astris and Caelie and he had failed to capture to the Sentry. His forces were decimated, only a few of his ships remained, and none of them were truly seaworthy. "You did your best," Astris stated, as she sat in his command tent. "That sounds less and less like a compliment each time I hear it," Beowulf complained, taking a seat and looking towards his remaining Captains and Commanders, and Caelie as she span in a chair she had stolen from the fortress.

"So what is the situation?" Astris questioned, the other Navy and Marines looking her with a mixture of awe and unease. "Commander," Beowulf warned. Caelie's expression changed, the demonic white mask covering her face, the eyes black and dripping gold. "For the sake of ease, treat us as you would Jayce Exarga. Commodore," Belial growled, with a thinly-veiled demand for respect. Beowulf raised a hand as hands went for weapons. "No, fair. Commander Kai, you have special dispensation from Admiral Exarga – I should respect that. Belial, you need not stay, this is a Republic matter."

Caelie returned, continuing to spin in her chair. "The situation is that we were requested to conquer three weapon emplacements. We have failed two of them. Both Commodore Vanathur and myself have failed to seize control. This leaves one final Sentry remaining. It appears Barca Khallid is throwing as much resources as he can to ensure that it remains in his control," Beowulf explained. "Then we need to head there to reinforce Cyrenna," Astris stated adamantly. Beowulf nodded. "I agree wholeheartedly, however we have a lot of wounded and not many ships. Vanathur is in a similar situation, but..."

"What?" Astris questioned. Beowulf faltered, internally debating how much information to reveal to her. He needed Astris, he needed her here, not dashing across the oceans to aid Alara. "Vanathur was wounded. She is fine, but her advance is delayed. They will arrive before we do. Reinforcements are also on their way from the Capital, but they too will have to get past Final Bastion's enhanced blockade."

"Then Caelie and I will leave immediately," Astris stated, standing up. Beowulf shook his head. "Astris!" he said firmly, she turned and looked at him. "I need you here. Your... powers. You can heal our injured, save them from perishing

due to a lack of resources. And Caelie can help us to scavenge what we need to prepare our second advance. Commodore Vanathur can handle herself, but we will be of no use to Commodore Kai in this state. Please," he asked earnestly. Astris looked around the room, numerous desperate eyes falling to her. "Fine," she stated begrudgingly. "We set off as soon as possible."

Seize the Seas Tales: Stubbornly Forwards

"Falconer," Fenn said softly, helping him steadily to his feet. "Any more and this will kill you," he stated. Falconer looked at him: half of his face had turned to wood, his right eye completely consumed and replaced with a glowing green bulb. Falconer wheezed as he stood leaning against Fenn. "It's not enough. The Scourge needs more to be cleansed," Falconer said quietly, the pair of them staggering through the snow towards Wren.

They had travelled to the Scourge before making a journey west, to the land of the therians. Falconer had practically bathed in the damaged Leyline, the consequences clear and agonising. "I will not be an accessory to your suicide. I can't do that. I won't!" Fenn stated firmly, helping the man onto Wren. He immediately slumped into her feathers, exhaustion taking over him. Wren cooed to Fenn and he shook his head. "I... I don't know," he answered, tucking closer to support Falconer as Wren took up into the skies. "Take us south."

It was several hours before Falconer awoke, his body in agony. He immediately turned, looking back towards Fenn. "You will die if this continues," Fenn said quietly, looking out into the night sky. "Maybe. But I will have saved the world from a slow and inevitable death. Is that not worth the cost?" Falconer questioned, as much to himself as to Fenn. "No. Your life is for living, not for sacrificing. It's never worth it. Nothing is worth sacrificing yourself for."

Falconer shook his head. "You'll find something someday. Something that means more to you than your own life. But... you're right. I cannot do this alone. We'll make one last stop, a final preparation, then we will track down the others. I'm sure they are waiting for us."