

Chapter 212: Red-handed

The journey to Kraken's Grave had taken far longer than Wicke had liked. With the Mysts having previously been a region heavily under the influence of the Church, it had become the centrepiece for rebellion within the New World. The carnage brought about by the Republic's swift and thorough extermination of all loyal to the old ways had left numerous holes within the typical trade routes that had previously been open. Between military checkpoints, the threat of piracy and terrorism, as well as general refusal by sailors to simply take them, it had been a nightmare to make their way east. But eventually the familiar sight of what had once been the heart of the Mysts came into view.

"You look nervous," Damian said, a little too loudly for Wicke's liking, as he came and stood next to her near the bow of the passenger ship. "Hmph," she uttered. "Thanks," she added sarcastically. He shook his head and rolled his eyes. "No, I meant- ugh, never mind." He turned to walk away but she reached out behind her and caught the sleeve of his jacket. "This place... it's not got particularly nice memories for me. It's where we first learnt of the golems." Damian nodded, turning back and looking out towards the island. He placed an arm across her shoulders. "It'll be alright. In and out and then we'll never come back." She shrugged his arm off her shoulders, giving him a side-eye along with a faint smile. "Yeah. In and out. No problems," she stated, thinking back to Jayce saying exactly that last time.

They disembarked, stepping into the smog-filled city with a cautious and careful attitude. For once, Wicke didn't lead the way – leaving it instead to the far too excited Cinderlee. "Why are you all so glum?" she questioned, practically waltzing through the narrow, dark, damp and claustrophobic streets. "The air is poison," Enki stated, a thick scarf around his mouth and neck. Someone threw up in an alleyway nearby, Morgause immediately gesturing with her thumb in the vague direction of the noise. Wicke didn't dignify the question with a response, whilst Damian and Sabine both shrugged – equally curious about their new alien environment and cautious about what potentially awaited them.

"That is the smell of industrial progress. It's the smell of the future!" Cinderlee stated. "The future can wait a little longer if it stinks like this," Morgause stated, looking out towards the Navy and Guild ships in abundance in the harbour. "Just what are they manufacturing here that is so toxic?" she questioned. Wicke paused, glancing across the numerous posters plastered to the walls of the alley. They were mostly bounties: ex-Navy, Pirates, general scum – but there was also

advertisements for employment within the Guild or within the Republic. She took a step back – the entire wall seemed to be competing between the two, the advertisements either for the New World Republic or for the World Guild. “It’s the Republic,” she clarified, turning and continuing to follow after the group. “Their factories. Probably ammunition, weapons and armour. The Guild wanted Dungeon delvers, not anymore it seems. The posters are all old.”

“They may have closed the Dungeon,” Damian stated, folding his arms and thinking to himself. “A consequence of the others falling apart, no doubt,” Enki added. “In which case we’re going to need to break in. Should we wait for nightfall or is it worth attempting the front door?” questioned Morgause, looking to Wicke for an answer. “We’ll try the front door first. I have an idea, and there’s always a chance it’ll work.”

They continued to walk through the city, stopping off at various shops to procure all the supplies they needed for their next attempt before eventually making their way to the remnants of the Imperial base at the centre of the island. “Identification papers!” commanded a gold and green guard, holding his hand out to stop them on approach. “We’re from Caedom,” Wicke stated. “We were delvers there before the whole thing collapsed.” She handed over the identifications they had used then. “These are no good here. No outsiders. And we’re not hiring, so turn your arses around and jog on,” he growled, his hand on a pistol by his side. They could probably take him and any other guards on the other side, Wicke theorised – her eyes glancing to Morgause’s hand readying to strike. “Fine,” she stated. “Your loss. Let’s go.” She turned and began walking away, waiting until they were out of earshot and eyeline to speak to her group. “Nightfall. It’s not worth being identified, not yet.”

With that decided, the group separated – heading out in various directions in search of food, a bathhouse, and other sources of relaxation whilst they waited for the night to come. Wicke sat in a busy restaurant, listening to her food grill next to her as she sorted through her latest grimoire. The abundance of new spells she had been given by the two Archmages from the Dungeons had been overwhelming. It had taken her weeks on weeks to simply process what she had been gifted, and she had no doubt that it would be years before she had finished compiling her favourites into a singular grimoire. In the meantime, she had unceremoniously glued the two books together – a temporary measure that would probably result in her being shunned by most magical societies. “Here you go, miss,” stated the chef in front of her, sliding a healthy portion of various grilled meats towards her. She nodded and dug in, using her spare hand to

withdraw her other tome before flicking through it until she found what she needed. "Gotcha."

"Come again?" Morgause questioned, as Wicke unveiled her great plan. "It's simple. We're going to walk right in. It's winter – a blizzard is likely, no?" Wicke questioned. The group looked around to the distinct lack of snow, or even distinct cold in the air – the heat from the factories had eliminated any. "So a sudden blizzard is going to shield us, that still doesn't answer how we are going to get through that wall," Sabine stated. Wicke reached for her bottomless bag, pulling out a pair of large scrolls. "I'm going need a volunteer."

Damian's teeth chattered as he stood on the nearest rooftop to the Guild wall. Wicke's spell had worked, he could barely see his hands – the snow and wind, heavy and fast. "This is so stupid," he muttered, taking the scroll in his hands and beginning to chant. He guided his hands forwards, the snow on the ground clumping together before freezing solid as he built himself a staircase to the top of the wall out of ice. Damian then began to climb, taking out the second scroll and beginning to chant – this spell far more complicated than the previous one. He reached behind him, pointing at the rooftop. He then stopped at the top of the wall, pointing to the base of the Dungeon. A pair of blue portals formed in both spots, his party rushing immediately through the copy of Caelie's portals.

"Hey!" came a voice from someone just beneath him. Damian kicked, hard, a scream following as the person on the other end fell off the wall. He then leapt forwards, trusting in his senses as he crashed through the wooden roof of a shack and then broke into a sprint towards the Dungeon. "Hey, someone fell off the wall!" came a voice behind him. "Sound the alarm!" Damian ignored it, weaving through the blinded patrols before sliding along the ground under a barrier. He could feel the others at the doors of the Dungeon, a faint crack open just for him. He dove through and they shut it closed behind him. "I am not doing that again!" he panted, the others beginning to walk forwards. Morgause offered a hand to him and he took it. "With luck we won't need to," she reassured. He scoffed. "Yeah, right. I have a bad feeling about this."

Damian couldn't help but feel he should have listened to his earlier feelings. Right from the first floor of the Dungeon things felt different. The layout seemed alien, alien to the design of the other two. It had warped, turning what initially had been simple encounters into ones where even the environment seemed out to get them. "Be careful," warned a returning party, heading in the opposite direction to where they were heading. "It's all changed again. Whatever

happened to the other two Dungeons, it's probably happening here as well – it could collapse any day now," they stated to Wicke and Damian. It wouldn't, but they didn't need to know that. "Have you got updated maps?" Damian questioned. "Were you not given any? Here. Good luck."

There were bodies further in. Damian did his best to ignore them, as did Wicke, but he could hear her muffled sobs during the nights. The increased difficulty was their fault, that was undeniable – the extra casualties were theirs, regardless of whether the explorers knew and accepted the risks. There was little he could say to comfort her, he knew that better than anyone, but they carried onwards – the days falling into weeks.

Damian clutched his stomach, dropping to his knees – his vision blurry, body heavy, and distinct agony coursing outwards from within. "Damian!" Wicke cried, the headless knight raising its halberd to behead him. "Come on," he growled, lunging forwards to roll between its large legs. He ignored the trail of blood he was leaving behind, throwing an armoured fist into the back of the monster's knee. It buckled and he dove onto it, knocking the heavy suit of armour to the floor as the others rushed to aid him. "Back!" Wicke yelled. Damian rolling away as she encased the creature in a large block of ice before Sabine smashed it apart into tiny fragments with her mace. Damian's vision darkened and he did not get back up.

He awoke with his head in someone's lap, long red hair dangling over him. Wicke's eyes were shut, fatigue plastered across her face and her breathing soft. "You alive?" Morgause questioned quietly, from the other side of the recovery alcove they were in. "Just about. What floor are we on?" he asked, hopeful that they had somehow carried onwards without him. "Seventy." He swore and let out a deep sigh. "We're not going to make it with just us." Morgause shook her head. "No." Her eyes glanced towards Enki, his back to the entire group and headtails tensed in an aggressive manner – a telltale sign that he was at a breaking point.

"What are our chances of getting back in if we get out?" Damian asked her. "Next to none. The blizzard worked because it was winter. It won't be by the time we get out. There's a chance we'll be identified as well. Enki is not discrete." "Not my fault," he protested, glancing back towards them with a sullen face. "Not saying it is. None of us are. Well, perhaps you Damian," Morgause returned. "Thanks..."

"What's her thoughts?" he asked quietly, looking up to Wicke. Morgause and Enki looked at each other, before back at Damian. "She wants to keep going." "Of course she does. We'll make our way back to the surface. We'll head north. It won't be what she wants but it will be our safest option. There should be a ship heading that way. Or something we can use to go that direction," he stated. The other two nodded in agreement.

Wicke was not happy with the decision made without her, but both Cinderlee and Sabine were immediately in agreement with Damian, Morgause and Enki. "We're outgunned. We're not ready for this. We need better equipment or we need new bodies. It's too much for the six of us," Damian rationalised. Wicke held her tongue, her face and immediate pacing laying out a silent essay of frustration. "You know I'm right."

"Two years..." Wicke said quietly, eventually standing still and looking directly at Damian. He nodded. "It will be more than that. Jayce isn't done with his fight, not by a long shot from the sounds of things," he returned. "We're not done either, and even if Jayce was ready for us, would you want to return to him like this? With a job half-done? I'm not ready to give up either but we're no good dead. We need a new approach – especially if these Dungeons are only going to get even harder."

And that settled it for them. With a foul temperament, Wicke led the charge back to the surface. Throwing away her cultivated resources - that she had set aside for the final thirty floors - she burned and froze their way back to the surface, completely ignoring the abundance of magic stones they previously would have desperately scavenged. Damian did his best to stay out of her way, her fire often lapped a little too close to his ankles and he was well aware that although she agreed with his viewpoint it didn't help to eliminate her frustration at the group's failure to keep up with her. She knew the others could and would leave if she was too harsh on them. Damian wouldn't, because at the end of the day, without his brother – and through him, her - he had nothing.

She placed a hand on his back as they made their way towards the final set of stairs leading out of the Dungeon. "Hold up. Something's wrong," she said softly, just for him to hear. He glanced back towards her and the others, the group weary, drained, and exhausted from the fury-march back to the surface. "We've passed no other groups," she stated. He looked at her with confusion before his eyes eventually widened. "Shit. You're right. They've locked down the Dungeon. They're going to be waiting to see who emerges on the other side."

"So how do we get out of here?" Sabine questioned, rising panic in her voice. "I have a spell, but I can't cast it until we're out of the Dungeon – I already tried and it failed. I need cover – a smokescreen," Wicke stated to the group. Sabine and Morgause looked towards Enki and Cinderlee. "I can create a cloud, but it will not erase our presence from those versed in Focus," Cinderlee stated. Enki withdrew his paintbrush. "I can handle that," he added. Damian looked to Wicke. She gave him a soft but nervous smile. "Defend us," she told him. "As if I wouldn't."

They made their way up the final stairs, stopping in front of the metal doors with Morgause and Damian at the front. "There's a chance there's no one waiting for us, right?" Sabine questioned in a near whimper, standing just behind Morgause. "Doubtful, but hiding our identities still isn't a bad thing," Morgause answered, looking to Cinderlee as she shook two glass vials in her hands. "Fair point..." Sabine muttered, looking to Wicke and Enki both getting into their own positions. "Now," Cinderlee commanded.

Damian pushed the incredibly heavy door open just a little bit, enough for Cinderlee to throw the vials out. "Someone is coming out!" yelled a voice from the other side just before the two vials shattered, releasing a pair of thick and explosive clouds of grey smoke. "Come out with your hands up or we will open fire!" came a command. Damian ignored it, reaching out with Focus and immediately getting a response back from dozen guards stood waiting. Wicke began to chant as Enki painted in the air, a metal barricade materialising and crashing to the floor between them and the Guild guards. "Mage! Open fire!" came a command from the lead guard.

Sabine, Enki and Cinderlee dove forwards, ducking behind the metal barricade whilst Wicke continued to chant. Damian and Morgause stood in front of her as bullets began to fly towards them. He used his metal gauntlets, channeling his Focus to block the impacts, whilst Morgause angled her huge sword like a shield. The seconds slowly ticked away, a giant purple ring spreading out around them. "Teleportation Circle!" Wicke cried, a bolt of purple lightning crashing down on them all.

A moment later they were stood on solid ground, looking into their apartment within the Republic Capital. "That felt too close!" Sabine immediately cried, holding her head in her hands and rocking on the floor. "We were fine," Morgause stated coolly, crouching next to Sabine and placing a gauntlet on her shoulder. "But it does raise a few worrying points to discuss. Most notably that

they knew we were still inside, and that our faces were seen by other explorers. They may have our identities."

"Then we're going to have to be extra careful on our next attempt," Wicke returned. "Which is going to be where exactly?" Enki questioned. The group looked towards Wicke. "I... don't know – yet. Give me some time to think it over. There's a lot to think over..." she said somewhat dejectedly. The various eyes flickered over towards Damian. He nodded back and stepped towards the windows. "I'm thinking- wait, what's that?" he uttered, faltering before walking towards their room's balcony.

The others followed him as he unlocked the door and stepped outside. Smoke filled the air, fires burned on the waters – the ruins of numerous ships drifting across the surface of the ocean. "A battle?" Sabine asked nervously, looking towards Morgause. She shook her head, waving her hand across the wreckage to the Navy fleet beginning to set sail south. "A war."

Seize the Seas Tales: Burden of Loss

"Commodore, if it was any other person, I would be recommending weeks, if not months, of rehabilitation. You've suffered a great wound, least of all the scarring to your face and neck. People do not just shrug off losing a limb, or a friend," stated Lieutenant Laine. "You've lost your right arm, in more ways than one." "Do you think I don't know that, Doc?" Alara returned, massaging the still fresh scar tissue over her stump as Lieutenant Laine looked over her. "I'm just suggesting that it may not yet be time to be... leading, fighting – you should be resting."

Alara shook her head and reached for the metal prosthesis that had been hastily prepared for her. "Allow me," Laine attempted, moving closer to help with the straps but Alara pulled back. "I can do it myself," she said, a bit too aggressively for her own liking. An awkward silence passed before Alara turned her right side towards the Lieutenant. "Sorry..." she said quietly. Laine nodded, helping to equip the prosthesis. "It's okay. You've been through a lot."

"We've been through a lot, all of us. But duty does not wait for us to be alright. Commodore Kai is counting on us, on me, to bring her help," Alara stated, getting to her feet and moving her metal arm around. Alara caught Laine's side-eye glancing around the adjusted Captain's quarters of the Blood Moon – the ship Alara had taken as her own. Their fleet, for the most part, had been destroyed – the 'reinforcements' they were bringing were minimal. "We're better than

nothing,” Alara asserted, stepping towards the door. “And sharing bedrooms is far from my biggest problem.”

She sighed as she stepped out into the open air. Her body felt in pain, a constant and numb aching sensation across her skin: mainly in her neck and lower jaw, but also across her absent right arm. She also felt heavy, an invisible pressure pushing down upon her shoulders, despite having gone through arguably the most radical weight-loss of her life. But she could see that the weariness was not exclusive to her, so she forced a smile, stood up straight and stepped forwards towards the Helm. “It will be sometime before we arrive at our destination, Commodore,” warned Lieutenant Suni, as she turned away from the ship’s wheel to look at Alara. “I know... but hopefully it’ll be in time to matter.” *It better be*, she thought.