

Chapter 213: In Deepest Darkness

Ordo groaned as he rolled onto his back, his vision dark and blurry, and the ground cold and damp. His sides hurt, he could taste blood and his heart thundered inside his head. "Jayce?" he questioned, a pair of glowing red and pink eyes looking down at him as his vision slowly cleared. "Not quite," stated Mai Lu, a look of clear disappointment across her face. She extended a hand down to him and he took it, allowing her to pull him to his feet. "Where are we?" he questioned, the darkness still consuming his vision. He frowned; regardless of where they had landed it should still have been daytime.

"We're East. Old World," Mai Lu answered. Ordo looked around. They were out in the open at the top of a grassy mound, with a large jagged rock laying on its side nearby. Huge evergreen forests sat in almost every direction, with a huge mountain laying beyond the thickest of the visible forests. The skies were covered with a layer of thick, dark clouds, but there wasn't any rain and, most curiously, the clouds were not moving – as if they had been locked in place. "Yeah, that's my thinking too," he stated.

"How so?" Mai Lu questioned. He turned and looked at her, an instinctive flare of frustration crossing his face immediately as he sensed her questioning his intelligence. "It matches what we've heard of Strigon's domain. The darkness, the landscape and so forth," he answered. "Given it seems like it's just us two, I don't need you to question my intelligence," he growled. She looked around before shrugging. "I'm just checking your cognitive abilities, old man," she said with a probing grin. He flinched. "Old man? I'm about a third of your age, 'young lady'," he returned.

She grinned, placing her hands on her hips and looking ever-so-slightly down at him. "And don't you forget it. So follow my lead. I sense magic all around us so we should try and head towards the source – someone may be able to help us, or, at the very least, there should be a group we can enslave – I mean, coerce." Ordo shook his head. "That mountain. We should climb it, it'll give us the tactical view we need to plan our next move. We should also be laying low, not trying to dominate. This is Betrayer, Vampire Lord, Jure Strigon's domain, and from what I've heard he is not alone here. Now is not the time to be picking fights." "But it's a mountain, do we really have to?" whined Mai Lu.

"We need to find the others. I can sense Taranis somewhere far away from here, he will try to come and find us, but I'm guessing you got no response on our communicators?" Ordo stated. Mai Lu shook her head. "Then we have to assume

they're either dead or not here. In either case, we lay low and gather information. Understood?" Mai Lu didn't respond. "Am I understood, Mai Lu? Baal?" "Clear," came a growl from Mai Lu's neck. Ordo looked towards Mai Lu's face. She let out a sigh and nodded. "Fine, Old Dog, we'll do it your way." He nodded and turned towards the mountain, beginning their march. Mai Lu trundled along after him.

"Great plan!" Mai Lu yelled, the pair of them back-to-back as they stood surrounded by trees in darkness with numerous glowing red eyes locked onto them from all directions. Ordo stared at the vampire spawn circling them. The vaguely human-like monsters were all pale, skinny, deformed – as if they had been starved and left to fester. One lunged at him and he slammed it down into the mud with his spiky greatclub. It squirmed and he brought his boot up before crushing its skull. The creature broke apart into ash. "We'll come across far worse than Vampire Spawn, my dear. They look like they've been abandoned, they're starved." Mai Lu shrugged, biting her finger before pointing at a Spawn lunging towards her. A bullet of blood shot out from her hand and impaled the creature. It then staggered backwards before rupturing from the inside out.

The rest fell shortly after, with Mai Lu using the blood-splatters of the corpses as weapons of her own and Ordo crushing the rest with his huge and heavy club. "Easy enough," Ordo stated, leaning on his weapon and looking at her. Mai Lu rolled her eyes before beginning to walk forwards. He cleared his throat and she turned to face him with a flash of irritation. "What?" she questioned. He gestured to the blood on his greatclub. "Do you mind?"

Ordo rubbed his bruised nose as they began the steep ascent up the mountain. "Where is your Dragon now?" Mai Lu eventually questioned, moaning and complaining with every step and leap. "Still far away, somewhere in that direction," he gestured, pointing vaguely towards the other side of the mountain. "A real pity..." she said quietly. It took them far longer than Ordo would have expected to reach the summit, but the view was everything he could have asked for.

At the edge of the clouds, an orange glow broke through the faintest gap on the horizon. It felt warm, reassuring, kind to them both as it landed on their faces - but almost immediately the light was smothered. The pair of them stared down at a large city, the buildings medieval and bleak – illuminated almost entirely by fires in hearths and oil streetlamps. A fog seemed to float across the cobblestone streets, the roads almost entirely empty other than a hurrying, hooded figure or

two. Faint farms sat in the background but the fields of crops seemed desolate, abandoned and withered.

Beyond the farms, the ground had cracked and broken. Huge masses of earth had listed, breaking out of the ground and tilting upwards as if pushed from below by something. Forests, fields, a mountain, even a lake floated a few dozen metres above the ground – encapsulated within an unnatural power from a past long gone. But one of the loose pieces of earth had been captured, moved or dragged to sit above the city – held to the ground by colossal chains. A black castle stood watch over the dominion beneath it, its spires tall and pointed, gates and walls high and ominous. Its windows glowed a blood red colour, and both Ordo and Mai Lu felt as if the castle itself was watching them. “Well...” Mai Lu stated, losing grasp of the words she had wanted to say. Ordo nodded in agreement. The land itself felt in despair. “This is certainly Strigon’s domain.”

Slowly, and carefully, they descended the mountain towards the city and its floating castle. A caravan was coming in from the west, following a trail through the surrounding forests. Ordo and Mai Lu quietly slipped in amongst the other walkers, the guards unobservant and focused more on guarding the wagons carrying food than the passengers either in the carriages or walking behind. “Easy enough,” Mai Lu whispered, pulling her hood up over her pinkish hair. “Too easy,” Ordo returned, stepping forwards to get a glance inside the nearest carriage. He couldn’t see much, but the glowing red eyes and pointed ears of the passengers within told him all he needed to know. He dropped back to her side, looking towards the other hooded walkers – each of them bore grim and doomed expressions, some wearing shackles or otherwise marked with brands. “Slaves, and food for the populus – vamps and otherwise,” he ascertained.

Mai Lu nudged him, gesturing ahead to the gates to the city. A rotting corpse of a woman hung over the entranceway, the entire road leading up to it marked with sharpened logs each bearing an impaled corpse of their own. They were mostly men, all a variety of ages, with the youngest being a late teenager. Ordo lowered his head, clenching his fists in a deep rage as he walked through the clear warning that had been presented to all newcomers.

Mai Lu kept her head up, her curiosity scanning the Null Legionnaires on the walls for any traces of vampirism. The sight didn’t bother her – the dead were dead, the method of their execution was irrelevant – but she couldn’t help but let her thoughts wander. The city was large, well-defended and being supplied with external resources given that the fields looked dead. But it wasn’t anything

special, a mere monument that any self-respecting tyrant would scoff at. The castle stood out, a distinct stench of magic floating upwards from within towards the skies – the source of the daytime cloud-cover, Baal informed her – but it was just a castle, not a palace.

“This isn’t Strigon’s city, only one of his Generals,” Mai Lu informed Ordo, snapping him out of his silent fury before subtly nudging him away from the other broken walkers, the pair of them watching from an alleyway as the caravan continued forwards further into the city. “Are you sure?” Ordo questioned, taking a deep breath before slowly exhaling. “Certain,” she returned. “This isn’t grand enough for a Vampire Lord. It’s the domain of one of his Generals.” “Should be easier for us to move around then. They won’t know who we are, not to the extend he does. Let’s find somewhere to sleep, and then we’ll buy some clothes to better blend in in the morning.” She nodded in agreement, glancing back towards the city gates as they slammed closed.

It never felt like morning actually came – the only sign of the day was the clock on the wall of their room and the bustle of people hurrying about the streets outside of their inn. They quietly left their inn, heading through the streets to the nearest clothes shop. Ordo immediately searched for anything plain, ordinary, and functional, but Mai Lu decided against that idea. “You’re not Zeta,” Ordo grumbled, as she emerged in a gold and black embroidered tailcoat. “When surrounded by Vampires, dress like them – no?” Mai Lu returned, testing the movement of the black leather shoes and patting her fluffed black trousers. “Return it and grab something more sensible,” he ordered. She rolled her eyes, moving her hair to ensure it covered her ears. Her red and pink eyes flashed at Ordo. “Vampire enough?” she asked. He sighed, shaking his head. It wasn’t worth the argument. “Fine, just... don’t do anything stupid.”

“Where to?” Mai Lu questioned, looking up at the Vampire castle above them. “Let’s head closer to the marketplace. We’ll buy some supplies and then head further west.” Mai Lu nodded, stepping closer to him before biting her finger. She hooked her arm around his, a steady stream of blood rolling up her finger before binding to his clothes – the black-red crystals shining in the low light and glamourifying his clothing. “I need my servant to look the part,” she said with a smile, leaning into him and beginning to walk. “Why couldn’t I have been paired with anyone else?” he muttered. She glared at him out of the corner of her eye, a genuine question of whether or not to kill him crossing her mind – on Baal’s suggestion. “Just, uh, joking,” he quickly added, sensing bloodlust.

They walked around the marketplace, the majority of the shoppers avoiding them like they had the plague, and all of the sellers offering them only the best of deals. A scream struck the air, Ordo immediately turning to look as Mai Lu desperately tried to keep him locked within her grip. "Don't!" she warned, firmly and coldly. A Vampire had snatched a young boy from his mother, the boy squirming in the pale and blonde woman's grip. She stared at the mother, her fangs bared over the boy's neck – the child no older than seven or eight. "Please! I beg of you, let him go!" she wailed on her hands and knees, pleading before the Vampire.

Ordo took a step forwards but Mai Lu darted forwards and stood in front of him with her arms spread. "Think, Ordo, think!" she said in a firm hush. He glared at her. "We can't do nothing!" he returned, keeping his voice low and in a deep growl. "You can't stop it, it's too late – you'll just create a hostage," she warned. "Everything we do here may have unforeseen consequences and there is a very real chance that the Vampires may punish the population for anything we do." "So we should do nothing?"

"That's not what I'm saying. This isn't going to affect any real Vampire. This is just the territory of one of Strigon's Generals. We hold off until we reach his city, we cause real pain there," she suggested. He looked past her. The mother lay on the floor in a ball, sobbing – the child and Vampire were nowhere to be seen. "We're here for the moment, we might as well leave an impact here. We can put the fear back into these fiends – make them learn to hesitate before they take any actions."

"And just how do you suggest that?" she questioned, folding her arms and glancing around. "We show them that there is always a bigger monster," he stated, looking intently at her. "We can't do anything for these people, I agree with you – we need the others. But we will come back, and every one of those monsters we kill now is one less for us later. Let's show them what they have to look forward to. Even if it's not permanent we can give these people a breather, it's only fair."

Night fell once more, the foggy streets darkening beyond the shadows of the daytime into the eclipse of the night. The moon shone through the gaps in the freed clouds, painting the streets like searchlights as the Vampires prowled. A scream filled the air: a drunken man caught out on his way home. Another pierced the silence: a young woman carrying food to her parents, an old man trying to force a door shut, a priest muttering a prayer in a dying church... a child

in their bed, screaming at the forced-open windows, a crouched red-eyed ghoul staring at them with a wicked grin and salivating tongue. All food for the night.

A hand grabbed the creature from behind, the flapping curtains falling still and the window slamming shut. The prayers continued unhindered. The door closed and locked, bringing a sigh of relief. A daughter made it home. A father was embraced by his wife and children. Blood splattered the streets, teeth and skulls were shattered, monsters were slain by the bigger predators on the prowl - all the way until the sunrise that lay invisible behind a wall of shadow.

The pink and red-eyed Demon fed on the massacre and the Old Dog guarded the people as he always had. Slowly the fear of the Vampires stilled, replaced by the fear of whatever lay in the night – waiting for the creatures to lay a finger on the people they had once called their prey. Rumours swirled whilst Ordo and Mai Lu hid in pubs and alleyways – both in plain sight and without – rumours of the predator that hunts Vampires.

“They say it’s someone called Astris Kai,” murmured an ancient man to Ordo, the pair of them enjoying a pint of very dark ale. “Who?” Ordo questioned, his eye glancing towards his watch as he waited for Mai Lu to return from her hunt. “Some Vampire woman that turned against them – they speak of her in terror, in the same sort of way they speak about their Lord, Jure Strigon,” stated Almec, one of the eldest within the city. “I see,” Ordo returned casually, the door to the pub slamming open.

“Everyone out!” growled a harsh voice. “Everyone is to report to the market square, now!” Ordo turned to look, a trio of Vampires had entered the dark and warmly-lit pub. The lead Vampire wore a smart suit of black and red, his hair slicked back and eyes a fearsome vampiric red. Flanking him were two Null Legion – their eyes glowing beneath their gasmask helmets, they held thin rapiers already stained with blood. Ordo moved to stand up, his right arm hanging down as he pressed on his left knee – readying himself to strike if necessary.

But Almec reached for his sleeve, taking it subtly and with a strong grip built from a lifetime of labour. “There is a door out of the back, my friend. It connects to the cellar, which has a hatch behind the bar,” Almec said softly, getting to his feet with a groan and stepping in front of Ordo. The pair looked at each other. Ordo was not young, but Almec was at least a few decades older than him. “Don’t talk, my friend. Go.”

Ordo didn't hesitate, as the rest of the busy pub staggered and shuffled towards the Vampires by the doorway, he stuck low – downing the remains of his pint and moving quickly to the bar before slipping behind it. He pulled open the hatch, dropping down into the cellar before moving through the numerous barrels to another small hatch. He entered into Focus, scanning his exit before stepping outside.

Mai Lu was waiting for him from a vantage point near the main market square. The majority of the rooftops were laden with Null Legion, all with their rifles aimed towards the growing crowd hurried and shoved into the square. "I don't like this..." Ordo murmured, leaning against wall of the church's bell tower – looking down from the belfry windows. "No, but this was expected," Baal stated through Mai Lu, standing unafraid, directly in front of the opening.

"There," Ordo stated, pointing upwards as a shadow descended from the castle high above the city. It fell fast and hard, landing in a splash of red mist in front of the terrified crowd. It was a Vampire woman, dressed in a crimson corset dress. She had long, light-brown hair, her skin ghostly-white. Her features were tight, with high cheekbones, narrow, blood-red eyes and a prominent nose. "That's one of Strigon's Generals."

"Then now we move," Mai Lu stated, looking back towards Ordo. He nodded in agreement, stretching before moving next to her. Screams came from the marketplace, an interrogation beginning as the Vampire General attempted to turn the hunt around, but Ordo and Mai Lu ignored them. They dashed in the opposite direction, heading straight towards one of the large chains binding the floating castle to the ground. They ran unopposed, leaping onto the giant metal binding and surging upwards towards the castle.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, the castle was basically empty. No one stood guard – there was no need to, after all. They walked straight through the courtyard, pushing the huge main doors open and entering into the entrance hall. The dark castle was lit by simple torches on the walls. Crimson tapestries and rugs lined the large walls and floors, the high ceiling had carved vampiric imagery. "Can you feel the source?" Ordo questioned. Mai Lu nodded, stepping towards a nearby staircase and leading the way as they hunted the strong source of magic within the castle.

She led them to another pair of ornate doors, pushing them open and leading the way inside into a throne room. It was similar to the main entrance hall, only with huge paintings on the wall, a gigantic stained glass window on the far wall sitting

over a large and dark throne. The glass was almost entirely red, and depicted a naked young woman in the arms of a dark-skinned Vampire biting into her neck. Corpses lay at their feet, blood running down her pale skin. But neither Ordo nor Mai Lu paid it any attention – instead their eyes lay locked on the grotesque monument before them. “Fascinating,” Mai Lu muttered almost subconsciously.

“Fascinating?” Ordo questioned in horror. It was a twisted form of numerous corpses, stuck together with metal spikes and pins, the skin flayed from the two dozen or so bodies. It was hard to tell where one body started and another ended. Some were skeletal, almost entirely rotted away, whereas others were clearly fresher. A soft moan escaped the monument, a movement coming from what used to be a man.

Mai Lu approached the source of the magic, pausing to touch the dried pool of blood beneath the monument before flicking her finger upwards. A thin and sharp spear of black-red crystal ended the suffering, the spear branching outwards to ensure that every body was for certain dead. “Not going to argue that we could have saved him?” Mai Lu questioned, as if to herself. Ordo stepped closer, the stench horrific. “No. There’s no... no. So this is... the source of the magic?”

“Most certainly, but it’s not something Baal or I recognise. It’s a curious monstrosity. Eldritch, and cunning,” she stated. “It should fade on its own, or perhaps it’s a conduit to something else. I don’t really know. Morgana would know.” Ordo scoffed, it wasn’t worth playing who was and wasn’t helpful at one particular moment or the next – they were on their own, they would have to handle whatever they encountered. “Then let’s destroy it and get out of here,” he stated, looking to her.

But Mai Lu’s expression went blank, her face morphing as Baal emerged. A pair of red curved horns curled upwards from her forehead, another pair emerging out her temples. Her skin turned dark crimson, other than her face which turned a pale, bone white. Mai Lu’s teeth sharpened into a maw of points and a forked tongue rolled across her lips as her red and fiery pink eyes stared at the evil before them. “Give me a moment,” Baal stated, staring intently and curiously at the despair before them. “Mai Lu,” Ordo said with a growl. Baal looked briefly at him. “Do you not trust me?”

Ordo didn’t answer. It wasn’t worth answering. “Truly fascinating,” Baal muttered, reaching up to the monument to rest his clawed hand on the bloody chest of the nearest corpse. The blood vibrated, as if channelling a heartbeat,

before each and every corpse twitched – the countless heads all turning unnaturally to stare at him. “What the fuck?” Ordo questioned, taking a step back and drawing his greatclub. Each black eye stared at Baal and he stared back with an inhumanly wide grin. “You belong to me,” he growled, the numerous mouths opening wide in a silent scream before the entire monument erupted in an explosion of blood and gore.

Mai Lu faltered as she found herself in a ringed circle of white light, as if a beam had descended down upon her – everything around her was grasped in shadow. She was alone, but she could feel the hot and wet breathing of Baal across her neck. “Be on your guard,” he warned. “I feel... something new.” Another breathing joined the air: wet and raspy – guttural. A pair of eyes illuminated within the shadow, green – yet bloodshot – both of them bulbous and looking in opposite directions. They moved independently before snapping onto Mai Lu. Slowly the eyes moved closer, a heavy shuffling reaching her ears as something dragged itself across the floor. Then the body rose upwards, the eyes moving from her eyeline to towering above her – at least several metres in height. “Fiend...” came a raspy and deep voice.

“Mai Lu!” Ordo stated, placing a hand on her shoulder – Baal’s form fading back into her as she stared vacantly at the stained glass – a brilliant sunlight breaking through and painting the blood and gore-soaked floor in red light. She looked at him, blinking quickly as she questioned just what she had seen. “Yeah?” “You good?” he asked, taking his hand off her and flicking blood to the floor. She grinned, unaware of the blood soaking her from head to toe. “Better than good.” “Good, cause something is coming!”

The doors slammed open behind them, a badly burnt woman striding in with fury on her face as her flesh began to heal. The Vampire General stared at them with utter rage. “You dare!” she yelled, taking an offensive stance and drawing a large and long knife out of thin air. “What? No introductions? No speech?” Ordo questioned, as she screamed and charged at them. Her knife brushed the air in front of his throat, but black-red crystals latched to her ankles as she tried to take another step.

Ordo stepped forwards, twisting and swinging with his greatclub to send her flailing across the room towards her throne, directly into the sunlight painting the floor. She screeched in pain, writhing in agony before darting towards the shadow by her throne. “I will flay you alive for this!” she screamed, looking

between the pair of them with crazed rage. "Strigon will have your heads!" she yelled.

Mai Lu took a step forwards but Ordo held out his arm, stopping her as he looked towards the growing shadow in the window. The glass exploded inwards as a large black and blue Dragon crashed through the window, snatching the Vampire General in his mouth. She wailed in pain, her arms locked to her side in his maw before a loud revving sound filled the room. The two halves of her fell with a thud, before disintegrating into ash. "Took you long enough, you big reptile!" Ordo stated.

"Die," Taranis returned with a deep growl, shaking his head and looking down at his vanished meal with disappointment. Ordo chuckled. "Let's get out of here, no point waiting for Strigon," he stated, turning to Mai Lu. "We should find you a bath, or a lake." She shrugged, placing her hand to her chest before pulling her hand away – the blood lifted, coalescing into a large crystal that she dropped onto the floor, shattering it to remove any traces of her presence. "Fair enough, can you do that for my boots?"

"No."

"Fair enough. What did you see? You blanked out for a moment once Baal... ate that monument," he questioned, clambering aboard the back of Taranis. Mai Lu took his hand and sat behind him, Taranis flying once around the large room before diving out of the shattered window into the bright sunny sky. "That thing... the monument. It belonged to the Grandfather. The Cannibals and the Vampires are working together here," she answered. Ordo nodded, it was hardly surprising. "Then let's head south. We'll make our way to the capital of these lands. Let's find what makes these monsters tick, and then put a spanner in their works."

Seize the Seas Tales: A Greater Understanding

Rosalynn the Lich would have smiled if she could. It had been a while since the stranger, Jayce Exarga, had crossed her threshold, and during that time he had filled her mind with ludicrous tales of his travels, read a respectable portion of her library, and sweated away with his weapons out in her courtyard. She found herself most days watching him from the window as he danced along the stone with a variety of weapons. Sometimes he would brave the sands beyond, often collapsing and needing her minions to drag him back to safety after over-exerting

himself in an attempt to harness 'Focus', as he put it, outside of her protective field. It was cute. Like watching a puppy fail to catch a butterfly.

But sometimes... rarely, but growing more commonly, she would see a technicolour array of power crossing his body – inside and out of her castle. He was growing stronger, and quickly, and soon he would leave her – as she always knew he would. Her would-be smile faded. She didn't want him to go.