

Chapter 214: Tears and Tears

Zeta let out a yelp as she landed awkwardly on a slope, her left ankle folding and her body immediately tumbling backwards into a large fern. "Ugh," she groaned, laying on her back and looking up the forest of evergreen trees all around her. "Guys, where are we?" she questioned, touching her necklace and thinking of her crewmates. Silence followed. "Guys?" she questioned once more, standing up with a wince and leaning onto her right side. Silence continued. "Great..." she muttered, patting down her long, frilly, glamourous, and, hand-made, blue dress. It was un torn, and luckily she had avoided a nearby patch of mud – landing instead on a heap of moss.

Zeta looked around: there was only forest, but she could see a walking path not too far away – a simple dirt track cutting through the woods. "Better than nothing, I suppose," she said to herself, trying to still the rising panic inside her. "The others have to be nearby, surely. Just... somewhere. Come on Zeta – you've got this. What would Marisha do?" She looked down at her injured ankle, patting her side for her bottomless bag. She continued to pat, frowning before switching sides then looking down and spinning around. "No... no, no, no... no-no-no-no-no!"

She buried her face in her hands. "Why?" she whimpered. She let out a long and heavy huff into her hands before standing up straight and fixing her hair. "It's okay! Breathe," she told herself. She was missing her instruments, her healing potions... her money pouch – she literally had nothing but the clothes on her body. She took a step forwards before hobbling on the other foot. She took another step, and another, and another – shutting away the pain until it became a numb sensation in the back of her mind. With a squelch, her foot splashed into a cold and muddy puddle – ruining her shoe. She stared outwards with a cold and dead expression before shaking the forest with an ear-bursting swear.

The path had tracks pressed into the mud – signs of civilisation: wagons, carts, or carriages. It was life, human life and that meant people who could help her. With a silent mental coin toss, Zeta followed the tracks downhill, cautiously half-walking-half-sliding down the muddy path until the forest began to open up. She found herself stood at the top of a small cliff, the path winding downwards beneath her. A small town sat ahead of her, the buildings wooden and medieval, with smoke rising out of the chimneys and the windows lit by lanterns and candles. The clouds were thick above, the air cold, painting the land in a soft shadow that matched her temperament. People wandered the streets in simple,

colourless clothes. "Great..." she muttered. "It's going to be one of those kinds of peasant villages." Beyond the village were open fields and more forests beyond them.

Cautiously, Zeta began to her descent, eventually making it down to the final path leading up to the village. There were no defensive walls, no obvious guards, and the village likely only held a few hundred – if even that – people. She trod through the mud into the village, hugging her chest and shivering slightly as she glanced at the villagers all looking towards her. None stepped forwards, no one spoke to her – they just stared and whispered. She almost preferred it, but equally she couldn't help but feel as if something was off.

She walked the main road, looking at each building: mostly rural shops, or a church, or a town hall, eventually settling her gaze on the only building making any noise: a tavern called 'the Old Lily'. She pushed the heavy wooden door open, a bell tinkling above the entrance as she stepped into the fire-warmed, smoky room. Eyes continued to fall her way as she limped into the men-filled room. Zeta held her head high, forcing down her caution as she looked for someone that stood out amongst the room full of coarse wool clothes in greens, browns and creams. Her eyes locked onto one of the only other women in the low-ceilinged room: the barkeep.

"Excuse me," Zeta began as she leant onto the bar, ignoring the eyes on her backside and chest. The barkeep, a somewhat buxom, dark-haired woman wearing work clothes and a sneer, gave her a quick glance before pulling a face. "You lost, princess?" she questioned, continuing to serve drinks and turning away from her. "Uh, yeah," Zeta returned. "Where am I? I mean, which region?" "Huh? You're in a small village called Old Keeling. You buying a drink? If not then get out. This is an establishment, we don't host loiterers and the upper class."

"I, um, lost my money pouch," Zeta said. The barkeep looked back at her, her eyes glancing towards Zeta's bare ears and then the necklace on her chest. "You can pay with the necklace." Zeta clutched her necklace: her translator and her communicator. "Sorry, I'll be back with some money," Zeta stated, stepping away from the bar and walking quickly towards the door. She ignored the jeering and the whistling.

Zeta found an alleyway, leaning her head into the wall and trying to think as she fought back tears. She had no idea where Old Keeling was, but it most certainly wasn't New World – not unless she was in the Gardens somewhere. "Think..."

she muttered. She glanced up to the sky: it was dark but it wasn't night – late afternoon, she supposed. She patted her empty hidden pockets, there was nothing in there. Her stomach rumbled, drawing out a sigh. "Whatever it takes," she stated, stepping out of the alleyway and approaching a statue along the main road.

Zeta made herself comfortable before clearing her throat. Eyes continued to fall her way but more out of curiosity than animosity. A small child pointed at her before tugging on her mother's arm. Zeta began to sing, trying to remember the words to the song she had written about Caelie and Xander, a song about loss and grief, a song that best represented how she felt now, all alone in alien lands. She felt her voice wobble at points, the lyrics all the more impactful as she sung without her music – reliant only on her voice to carry the impact of her tale. The passersby stopped, some stayed, some went. She carried her song onwards, switching naturally into the song she wrote about the end of the Empire. She sung about the battle, the fear, the horror of both the actions of the enemy and her own. She felt like a fraud without her instruments, as if her words were only half true, or second-hand. The songs didn't feel like hers.

She moved onto her song about Jayce, a song she had called 'Hero', singing about his leadership, his courage, his love, and his willingness to do what needed to be done. She moved onto Thalia, singing a song of admiration, love and worry – a song she hadn't released for fear of Thalia's reaction and the potential damage it could do to their bond – both spoken and unspoken. She faltered at the end, her mind filling with worries over of her friends, her crew, and their fates. A hand tugged her sleeve, drawing Zeta's brown eyes back to reality. The small girl who had watched her start to end held up a pearl to her. "Thank you," Zeta said earnestly, the rest of the watchers moving onwards. "Your hair is very pretty," said the child. "Can I touch it?"

Zeta nodded, bending over slightly and presenting her waist length blue hair to the girl. The girl hesitated for a moment, almost nervous to touch the rare colour. She giggled as she touched the hair. "It feels real," said the girl with a smile. "It is real, no dyes – I was born with it this colour," Zeta assured. The girl faltered, shaking her head. "Liar, it's fake! Mummy says you're all fake!" she stated, the words cutting deep and painfully, even if it wasn't true. "No, I—" Her mother called her and the child ran back, the pair of them walking onwards. Periodically the child would glance back, uncertain as to what to think about the strange blue woman. Zeta watched them leave before looking down at the money she had earnt – enough for at least a few simple meals.

Zeta found a bakery, purchasing a loaf from the judging owner before hurrying towards the grocers as darkness began to fall. She bought cured meats, cheese, a glass bottle filled with apple juice and a little butter before making her way to the village well. The entire journey she felt eyes upon her, but it didn't matter, she sat and made herself a sandwich, eating it quickly before filling the juice bottle with water. She wrapped the rest of the bread, cheese and meat before tucking it inside a mostly broken satchel she had found in an alleyway. Zeta counted her change, it wasn't much but perhaps it was enough to stay at the village inn. She doubted it.

The night had fallen and the streets were quieter but there were still a few people walking around. She cleared her throat and began to sing once more - she didn't need much, not even a whole pearl, only a bit of spare coral, enough for a bed and a maybe a bath. Eyes lay upon her, a small quartet of men from the other side of the square. The rest of the travellers ignored her. Song after song passed, the men continuing to watch her. She could describe them with her eyes shut, their presence consistent. It filled her with unease, and as Zeta quickly became aware of just how quiet the night had become, that unease turned to fear. She shut it down, ignoring it and quickly picking up her stuff before hurrying away from the square. They didn't seem to follow.

Zeta headed through the back alleys towards the inn. She could haggle, she was sure of it, and if not then she had her magic to be extra convincing. She rounded the side of the church, preparing to make the small ascent towards the inn in the upper part of the village when she felt a hand move past her ear. "Cover her mouth!" came a deep voice, as she was pushed hard into the stone wall. Zeta grimaced in pain as two pairs of hands pressed her arms against the wall and a third forced a wad of cloth into mouth before a strip was wrapped around her head, gagging her. Zeta tried to scream, a hand on her throat, her arms and legs pinned.

She stared in terror straight at the largest and oldest of the four locals that had followed her. He held up a poster next to her face, his two accomplices glancing from her to the poster. The fourth and youngest man stood nervously a few metres away. "It's her alright, Zeta – the Rising Ace Bard. You were on it today, Davy, she'll earn us a fortune," said the leader with a wide grin, several of his teeth missing and the rest a urine yellow.

Zeta squirmed, panic erupting out of her. "Be still!" threatened the leader, putting the poster away before withdrawing a jagged switchblade from his

pocket. Zeta concentrated, thinking back to her lessons with Ordo before entering into Focus. The second she did, a fist swung into her stomach. "No, you don't." Zeta couldn't understand it, they were peasants in the middle of nowhere, they shouldn't have been able to recognise Focus, they shouldn't have known to gag her and immobilise her. She scanned their grizzled, wrinkled and worn faces, looking at scar and marks. Her eyes glanced towards a wrist tattoo. The leader seemed to notice. "You're nothing special, darling. You'll find plenty of ex-militia all around the Old World."

Zeta swore internally, she had lowered her guard too much and now it would spell the end of her. "Now, listen closely. Don't kick up a fuss and maybe we'll turn you over alive. Your bounty says either so don't test us!" Zeta stopped squirming, the three in front of her all outweighed her by a significant portion, but their friend seemed uneasy, nervous and almost repugnant. She looked to him for help, desperately pleading without her voice and body. His expression steeled and he turned away, killing her soul.

"You're going to do as we say," said the brute on her right. Zeta pushed the wad of cloth in her mouth with her tongue, pressing it as hard as she could and trying her best to chew it. "Hang on, I thought you said-?" questioned the one on her left. "Yeah, yeah," said the leader. "We will. Just be careful with the dress, I want to gift it to my wife. Get her hands!" Zeta's eyes widened as they began to pull at her clothes. She chanted in her head, repeating her spell over and over as she wordlessly said it. It had no effect, she had no channel for it – she needed her mouth.

Zeta chewed the ball, thrashing against the hands even as the blade was pressed closer to her neck. "Watch it, princess, I don't want to waste you!" She concentrated her Focus on her tongue, pushing the gag down just a little before spitting with as much force as she could muster. The wad of cloth came out and she released a silent scream. Windows shattered all across the nearby church, dogs howled in the distance, and the three men released her – clutching their ears as their faces turned veiny and red. They yelled in agony, one dropping to their knees, another stumbling backwards, and the leader gritting his teeth as his nose and eyes began to gush blood. He staggered towards her, bringing the knife upwards but she unleashed her scream with even more force, his eyes popping inside his skull before his entire head popped, the other two following one after another.

The fourth member stumbled backwards, falling to the floor before beginning to scramble away. Zeta turned, still wailing like a banshee – unleashing her terror, her hatred, and her fury upon him. He fell to his knees, screaming and clutching his head before it too detonated outwards in a colourful rain of pink, white and red. Zeta fell to her knees, clutching her throat and coughing as tears and blood that wasn't hers rolled down her face.

Zeta wailed in agony and fear, only stopping as she saw a figure stare at her from down the street. The woman screamed in horror before turning and running away. "Murder! Murder!" she yelled at the top of her voice. Zeta sat frozen, unable to move as her heart hammered inside her chest, her breathing heavy. "Run!" cried a voice inside her mind. "Run!" it repeated, Jayce's voice snapping her out of her daze. Zeta looked at the bodies, and her bloody poster laying in the mud. She had moments, she knew that. A place like this wouldn't believe in law, she'd be lynched, or she'd be forced to massacre the village. She shook her head, the others probably could fight back in her position, but she couldn't fight like they could. A pitchfork would spell her end, that or a noose.

Zeta lunged for the bodies and her satchel, taking anything and everything she found in their pockets before shoving it inside the bag along with her poster. She then turned and ran, ignoring her ankle and fleeing for the woods beyond the inn. She ran up the hill, sliding on the mud and the stone and scrambling with her hands and her feet. She could see torches behind her, hear commotion in all directions, but she didn't care.

Zeta crossed the edge of the village, darting into the forest in her mud and blood-covered dress. She ran until she couldn't breathe, breaking through branches and leaping across puddles. She couldn't see in the darkness, she couldn't feel her skin in the cold, but still she carried onwards, glancing towards the obscured moon and the patches of moonlight breaking through the trees ahead of her. She stumbled and fell, picking herself upwards and continuing in a stumbling limp until she came to a small stream, a fallen log laying across it. Zeta looked behind her, she could see her footprints, and others likely would too.

She stood listening to the night, the faintest of sounds far behind her, she then stepped into the water and followed it downstream. The stream widened and deepened at points, the water cold and cruel. The mud and stones ripped at her shoes, stealing them away from her and forcing her to continue onwards barefoot. Her dress grew heavy with water, but still she continued forwards, only stopping as the water drained into a small pond.

The tears and blood had dried on her skin by the time she dragged herself to the shore of the stream. She felt safe, although she knew that she most certainly was not. The cold had settled in, her body in a continuous shiver and the wounds on her legs and arms numb and irrelevant. She sat on the moss by the bank of the pond, holding her legs to her chest as she listened to her ragged breathing. Zeta wanted to sob and to wail, but no voice came to her and no tears remained within her. She wanted to curl up into a ball, she wanted to hide away, but she knew she couldn't. "You're a Rising Ace. You're alone. No one is coming to rescue you. You're Zeta. Survive," she told her herself.

She continued to shiver as she collected sticks, collecting them together into the beginnings of a fire. She then withdrew the knife she had claimed, cutting away at herself as she tore off pieces of the dress she had put days of work into making. She cut it short, the skirt stopping just above her knees, she cut the sleeves off, turning them into bandages that she rolled and put away in her satchel. She then raised her knife up to her throat, taking it behind her head and sawing away at her hair. She ignored the whimpers she made as she cut it all away, putting it into her burgeoning fire before taking off her dress and underwear.

Naked, Zeta stepped into the pond, disappearing beneath the waters and letting the cold embrace her as it peeled away the blood and grime from her body. She didn't know how long she was beneath the surface, she stayed below, even as the air left her lungs. In the back of her mind, she didn't want to come up. She wanted it over. She wanted to disappear into the darkness. "Shine," came a voice in the darkness. "Be the star you were always meant to be," came the voice of her Captain, a flood of warmth fighting back the cold and the darkness as a ray of moonlight illuminated the pond and the sea of bones beneath her feet. Zeta pulled herself upwards, breathing in deeply as she broke the surface and carried herself out and back towards the fire.

Zeta shook the water off her body, using the few incantations she remembered from Wicke to dry the rest and to warm her body as she dressed in her altered clothes and lay next to her fire. She stared into the flames, the last traces of her long hair sizzling away. "Survive," she told herself. "You can do it. Find the others... or die trying."

Seize the Seas Tales: Bindings From Across The World

"How's progress coming along?" Marisha questioned, her arms folded as she stared out at the rain falling over and beneath the Guild Headquarters. It was early morning, the faint traces of the sun periodically breaking through the clouds from beneath the floating islands, painting upwards towards Marisha's face. "Not bad," came Morgana's response in her head. Marisha smiled, shaking her head and turning away from her window. "And just what does that mean?"

Morgana sipped her coffee as she sat in the Stacked Hand's living quarters, watching the snow falling around the ship. "Travel is slow. Someone is definitely spreading word of our reformation – it seems every other day now that Wam has to torch a ship or two. Is that your guidance, by any chance?" "Of course not. If I could do anything to speed your journey up I would. I can only imagine what it's been like for Zeta this past half-year, all alone from the sounds of it."

"Are you sure? Not to be... too harsh, but of everyone to survive alone—" "I know, she preens and performs but she survived on her own before joining us. And, of everyone who is still missing: Jayce, Astris, Caelie, Yuthura, Ordo, Mai Lu, Jeanne, Arthuria, Fenn, Falconer, RK – do you think any of them would have wandered in the realm of Strigon and Armin in silence? The Blue Bard legend has escaped the very realm of Cannibals and Vampires. She's alive, and if there are others there then they will rally to her – I know it. Just... find her, please – for my sake. I miss her, as much as she does annoy me."

Morgana nodded, not that Marisha could see it – they were hundred of miles away from each other after all. "We'll bring her home - in what piece, however... only time will tell. Stay in touch, keep me informed, Marisha. Morgana out." "Find her. See you soon."