

Chapter 216: Songs of War

Zeta had lost track of how long she had been wandering the forests. It had been at least a few days since she had popped the brains of her would-be rapists and murderers, and each passing day seemed to be getting colder and colder. She had fed on mushrooms, fish and any berries she had come across, ignoring the chances of poison thanks to the remarkable resistance Marisha had forced upon all of them in her early days as the Stacked Hand's Cook. Sometimes she had come across people, opting to hide and wait for them to pass.

But this time there was no hiding. She stared at the hunchback creature with grotesque curiosity. And it stared back at her, its bulbous, swollen and bloodshot eyes analysing her from head to toe. Its large tongue lapped across its jagged and broken teeth. "I can't believe you were once a human," Zeta stated with disgust, twirling the recorder she had made for herself out of a reed. "Am... human..." it grunted, the three other Cannibals it had been with laying in twisted and broken forms on the floor, having each been set upon by Zeta's magic. "Sure you are," she stated, folding her arms and thinking what to do with the creature. She could see it fighting her magic, her enchantment wouldn't last for much longer. "Kill yourself," she commanded, the creature reaching inside its mouth and then pulling on its tongue with as much force as it could muster. She turned and walked away, leaving it to gargle on its own blood.

Zeta took a deep breath of fresh air as she stepped out of the forest: a small town sat before her, its walls high but gate open. She smiled and shook herself off. First task was some clothes better suited to her environment, oh, and shoes, definitely shoes. She strode up to the gate. There were no obvious guards and the mud in her hair helped to disguise the colour. "Are you... okay, miss?" questioned an elderly man holding a long pointy stick as he sat on a rocking chair just on the inside of the wall. "Yes, thank you," she returned. "Bloody carriage toppled over when we were attacked by Cannibals. I'm lucky to have made it here. Where are the shops? And is there an inn?" she lied, as easily as breathing. He stood up and approached her, leaving his pointy stick behind. "That way, my dear. Do we need to send anyone out on search and rescue?" Zeta shook her head and he nodded, his eyes glazed over. "Understood. Carry on."

Zeta immediately headed to the inn, purchasing a room and a bath and burying herself in the hot, near-orgasmic, waters. "Oh," she moaned, "thank the Gods!" She lay there until the water had gone cold, putting her dirty dress back on before moving towards the window to look outside. "A blue-haired girl," came the faint

traces of a voice from the streets below. "Wanted on murder and witchcraft." "Fuck," Zeta muttered, backing away from the window. She looked around the room for anything she could use to disguise herself, her eyes eventually locked onto a small pot of ink left out for writing letters. She sighed, taking it and smearing it into her short blue hair. It wasn't perfect, but once it dried her hair was a deep black, except for a few tiny patches of blue buried throughout.

Zeta made her way back out onto the streets, heading immediately to the nearest clothes shop. She grabbed several outfits that would help her to better blend in with the locals. She then went and bought herself a backpack, a travel tent, and long-term food supplies before stepping back out onto the streets. As she walked, more whispers of her own name and identity reached her ears, her eyes eventually spotting a pair of armed men approaching her accommodation. She let out a sigh – at least she'd managed to have a bath. "So be it," Zeta muttered, turning and heading towards the gates.

The wilderness quickly grew on her as she moved north. It gave her time to think and to plan. She built instruments for herself out of what she could find, hunted animals for food and pelts that she traded to the villages she passed through, often stopping to busk for a few hours before moving onwards as the rumours of herself caught up. Yet, with each stop and each rendition of the rumours she heard, Zeta endeavoured to at the very least leave something behind her. She sung of monsters and the darkness of the world, pairing it with tales of the heroics of her crew and their actions to bring light back through the darkness.

Zeta left behind tales of herself, speaking of the blue bard she claimed to have seen. The slayer of monsters. The liberator of people. She sung of hope, of returning joy, of adventure, and the world she wanted to see once again. As time went on, it turned from desperate tunes to keep herself going, into songs fighting back against the soul-crushed lands she wandered. She never stayed long; bounty hunters would appear only days after she arrived at a destination.

The winter fell, the snow heavy on the grounds she walked as she continued her slow journey north, but long gone were the coinless days. Her pockets jingled with coin, accumulated from audiences arriving to hear her songs of hope. Her large fur coat felt unbearably heavy as she crossed the final hill towards her destination: one of the few cities within the south of Arcastalum. She let out a long exhale, her breath white in the cold air, a small grin crossing her face.

The city of Tulo was massive, and all built around a large central castle. High walls surrounded the outer city and an inner-ring surrounded the castle, but the

gates were visibly open, and the walls were manned by locals. Even in the depths of Alberta Armin's territory people still held hope and the lack of green banners meant that she would be among friends, not in a meat camp like some of the locales she had passed through, and wiped out. Zeta began to trudge forwards, looking in faint awe at the mountain tilted on its side and floating in the air not too far away: a waterfall had frozen, connecting the landmass to the broken earth beneath it. She still wasn't used to the sights of broken and ancient magic and the devastation it had caused on the landscape.

She held her head high as she marched towards the central gate. "Halt!" cried a voice, an armoured giant of man stepping to stop of her path. "What is your business in Tulo?" questioned the guard, Zeta immediately noticing several others looking down at her from various positions. "I'm a simple traveller, on my journey north, just passing through," she answered, truthfully. He looked at her through his metal helmet, his eyes analysing her carefully. He looked to her dyed black hair and then the few instruments she carried with her. "A Bard?" he questioned. "A performer, yes," she answered. "Nothing special," she lied.

"Wait here," he instructed, gesturing to a small side chamber with a table and some chairs. Zeta bit her lip and walked inside, sitting down and folding her arms. It wasn't her first interrogation and a young woman wandering lands known for Cannibals wasn't exactly without suspicion. She sighed, chanting silently inside her head in preparation to cast an enchantment – if it was needed. Long ago it had been something she had been poor at, now it was practically second nature to her.

He returned almost twenty minutes later. "The Lord would like to see you," he stated. "The Lord?" Zeta questioned, looking towards a painting of a middle-aged, dark-skinned man on the wall. "Yes, at his castle. You will be escorted there for your own safety. Numerous people are after your bounty, after all." Zeta swore under her breath. "Right..." she muttered, standing up and walking towards the doorway. A squad of armoured men stood waiting, she opened her mouth to speak only to feel cold metal clasp around her neck – her magic fading away almost instantly. "Oh dear..." she muttered, realising quickly just how much trouble she had brought upon herself.

The walk was prompt, and somewhat scenic. The city was nice, calm, clean, and the people seemed nice enough – albeit distinctly curious of her as she walked amongst an armoured escort with an anti-magic collar around her neck. She was led straight to the castle, handed over multiple times to different sets of guards

and soldiers before guided inside. Her things remained on her the entire time, a curious choice that made her question just what the Lord wanted from her.

She was led through beautifully decorated corridors, past artwork, tapestries and luxury. She was guided to a room before being put inside. Three maids stood waiting, a warm bath ready for her. "Lady Zeta, the Lord has requested that you bath in preparation for dinner with him," stated the oldest of the three. Zeta looked at her suspiciously, before looking back at the knights stood outside the room. "Dinner... with him? Not as a course?" she questioned.

The bath was nice, albeit it was strange – as an adult – to be physically bathed by three other women. Whilst she washed, a new set of clean travel clothes was brought for her and laid out. Her fur coat was cleaned and her hair was washed free of the ink she used to dye it black. "Such a beautiful colour," muttered the maid in charge of drying her hair. Zeta didn't quite know how to respond, everything felt off, but also... not.

With her new clothes put on, her hair and body dry and her things still available to use, Zeta was marched by the knights through the castle once again. This time she was led to a large dining room. A roaring fire sat to the side under a colossal mantelpiece. A huge and long table sat in the middle of the room, the floor covered in a red carpet. The table itself was laden with food, countless meals of meat and vegetables, still steaming as the sole occupant of the room sat waiting for her at the end of the long table. "Truly, I couldn't believe my luck!" came a loud voice as she entered.

The Lord of Tulo stood up, immediately gesturing towards a seat next to him. Zeta stared at the food as she walked alongside the table, drooling with little thought – the smell was unbelievably pleasant after so long on the road. He wore a fine outfit of brilliant purple, his hair short and curly, a thick square moustache above his lip. For an older man, he wasn't bad looking. His hands were bare, other than a simple gold signet ring.

Zeta felt little other choice than to sit, so she did. "Wine?" he questioned. Zeta nodded. "Red?" he asked. She nodded and he clicked his fingers. A maid walked into the room carrying an open bottle. She poured a small amount into Zeta's glass, allowing her to taste it first. "Very nice," Zeta confirmed, nodding for more before looking towards the Lord. His own glass was filled from the same bottle. He took a heavy gulp before smiling at Zeta and raising a glass. "To your exploits, my dear – extraordinary as they are."

"Why am I here?" Zeta questioned bluntly, looking towards the food as the Lord began to fill his plate. She then reached out and filled her own with the various vegetables and meats within her reach. "Quite simply, because I wanted to meet you. I am Lord Dolion Cozbi. Ruler of this city. And you, are Zeta – of the Rising Aces," Dolion stated. Zeta nodded, looking down at her plate and digging into the vegetables. He smiled as he watched her, taking several bites of the meat on his plate.

"And why did you want to meet me?" she asked, sipping her wine. He smiled and leant back in his throne-like chair. "Because the rumours surrounding you are quite extraordinary. They say you're a liberator, striking back against the darkness polluting these lands and bringing hope and light to the people. How could I not wish to meet someone like that? It sounds exactly like the sort of person I could use by my side. I could use you. My people could use you. Hope is in short supply and when the people are without hope they turn sour and bitter."

Zeta faltered. "People need hope, they need to feel safe, and, in these trying days, safety is not easy to come by. I will pay if that is what you wish, otherwise I can offer you magic items, status, whatever it is that you desire. I just want you to keep singing the right kind of songs," Dolion stated. Zeta looked down at her plate and then further along at the fresh dishes lining the table. "What do you mean by sour and bitter?" she asked.

"Well, when hope disappears community falls apart – desperation builds and the experiences that help to foster growth fade away. It sours people, turns them against one another. I hope you got to see the joyous community I have helped to build. I can imagine you have equally seen the opposite on your journey here." Zeta nodded, some communities had been hostile to newcomers, brutal to people with differences, and otherwise cruel to their fellow man. "So, what do you say? Will you join me? I hope to expand beyond this city and continue to bring hope back to the darkness."

"How have you... gone unaffected by Alberta Armin and her Cannibals?" she questioned. He cut a large piece of meat off his steak, lifting it up to his mouth and chewing it. "What do you mean?" he asked with his mouth full. "Why have they left you alone?" she questioned, all of a sudden grateful that she had only eaten the vegetables. "Who says they have?" he asked, his green eyes staring deeply into her, a thin dribble of red juice dripping down his chin. "Why am I alive?" Zeta asked the Cannibal.

"It is as I said. You bring hope and that helps to bring out the best in people. I need you, I want you. Help me help these people. It won't change their fates, but a happy cow makes a better steak. Why let them live their lives in misery when it could be filled with joy? You could be that joy! A hero! An artist! A hope in the darkness and a guiding light! What more could a Bard ever want? You would have everything you could ever ask for, and you would never need to eat anything you don't wish to. I do not force the Grandfather's delicacies upon those that do not wish for it. You should want to join me, not be forced, in the same way that when people know that there is no choice they will happily sacrifice for the greater good. Every meal I have ever tasted has been a volunteer, each and every one – having given up their lives so their loved ones do not have to. It's the way the world should be. Don't you think? Choice, not by force."

"You want me to convince people to... give themselves over, to sacrifice themselves to be your food?" she questioned in disbelief. He nodded with genuine belief, as if it wasn't an insane concept. "Yes, exactly. Sing songs of praise, of how great it is to sacrifice for others. To be a light to them so that they can continue onwards. It's perfect. Beautiful even," Dolion stated with a wide grin. "You're insane!" she stated.

His smile faltered before it fell into sadness. "Oh..." he said softly, as if she had broken his heart. "I would have thought a Bard, a manipulator of emotion, would have understood. A pity. I take it the answer is no?" he questioned, his face cold. "Go to the abyss!" she stated, standing up and picking up a steak knife. The knife clattered the floor before she could even blink. She was sat back in her chair, forcibly pressed down with a simple outreached hand. He was monstrously strong and she felt her ribs threatening to break under the simple press.

"I tried. The Grandfather's chosen is on her way. She will be here soon to see you personally, and from what I've heard Alberta is not of a particularly positive mindset at the moment. I can imagine it's to do with the emotions you have fuelled to the south. You have until the morning to consider my offer, it is truly the only thing that can save you. Guards!" he yelled, his knights striding in and immediately grabbing Zeta by the arms before dragging her kicking and screaming out of the room.

The cell she was thrown in was cold and her bed was little more than a blanket on the stone floor. The guards locked the heavy door before walking away, leaving her alone in the moonlit cell. "Finally," she muttered, reaching up to the antimagic collar and ripping it free with her Focus. She smiled as she set it gently

down, ever grateful that Ordo and Jayce had bullied her into learning Focus. "They never question it," she muttered, looking at the door and at the bars on her cell window. "Guard!" she yelled out, chanting inside her head.

"What do you mean: she escaped?" growled Dolion, as he got out of his bed and looked at the pair of guards before him. They stood shaking in their armour, unable to look at his face and instead looking at the bony and twisted muscle across his body. "She..." gulped one of the guards, "she broke open her collar. Used her magic on us and then escaped into the city. The gates have been sealed and the guards are all on high alert. She will not escape, not without help."

Dolian swore, rubbing his bulging forehead, his milky white eyes looking out and down at the city. "Fine. I want her found before the morning, and most certainly before the Betrayer gets here! Which of you opened her cell?" he questioned. The guard on the left stood back. "Leave," Dolion commanded, the guard hurrying quickly towards the door and shutting it behind him. "My Lord, please! It wasn't—"

The scream rang throughout the castle, a steady stream of blood flowing out from beneath the doorway long into the night.

Seize the Seas Tales: A Return to the Start

"The Capital," Bjorn stated, leaning into the wheel of the Last Card, "it's been some time. It's good to be back." Yuthura slowly turned and looked at him. "Just what are you whittering on about?" she questioned, rolling her eyes and looking back ahead. "It's just good to be back, that's all. The others are probably waiting for us," he returned, spinning the wheel to bring the small boat into the correct lane. "Anyone here?" Yuthura questioned into her communicator. Silence followed. "Fuck!" Bjorn stated.

They docked the ship, Zhurong circling high in the skies above the city before diving down somewhere on the Isle of Duty for a nap, most likely scaring the soul out of a few Marines in the process. "Plan?" Arthuria questioned, looking towards Bjorn as Jeanne glanced out towards the city, her gaze settling on the Isle of Sanctity – all traces of the Church now long gone. "We're going to go and find Admiral Exarga. He may have information on the others, or at the least he can probably help us." Arthuria nodded in agreement, stretching her arms before taking her first step back onto the solid ground of the Capital. "Then let's go!"

They found the High Office of the Republic in an unusual sense of panic. People were rushing about, guards looked tense, and remarkably no one seemed to pay

them any attention, at least until Bjorn pushed open the doors to the Admiral's offices. "Identifi- holy, a-are you Bjorn of the Rising Aces?" questioned a Marine in a black uniform. "Yep," Bjorn returned. "Where's Admiral Exarga, son?" Bjorn questioned. The Admirals are in an emergency meeting within the Fleet Admiral's office, they are not to be disturbed," stated the young Marine. "Understood, we'll wait here for them. Go about your duty," Bjorn stated. The Marine stood at attention. "Yes sir!"

The second the Marine turned around, Bjorn strode forwards and pushed open the doors to Fleet Admiral Truth's office. "For Gods' sake!" Truth yelled. "I said no interru- Bjorn?" Bjorn glanced at the small group of senior Admirals: Truth, both Exargas, Koga and Blackwell. "Apologies for the interruption, Admirals," Bjorn stated. "What is going on?" he questioned. "This is an official meeting, I do not have time to play games with any more Rising Aces!" Truth growled.

"An attack is incoming. Xerxes has launched an invasion and is currently on his way to the Capital with an armada," Fleet Admiral Cassandra Exarga explained. "Is the rest of your crew here?" she questioned. Bjorn shook his head. "Damn." "Fleet Admiral, might I refer back to our previous discussion about involvement with Pirates?" Truth growled. She waved it off and turned to face Bjorn. "This is a major crisis and any and all help would be appreciated. He will arrive in a little over a day and reinforcements will take far longer than that to arrive," Cassandra stated. "How can we help?" Arthuria asked, drawing out a gentle smile from Jayce's mother.

Cassandra turned to Truth and he simply sighed, gesturing for her to go ahead. "We need to evacuate the Capital, but equally we also need to prepare our defences. We need time, and that is something we are lacking. We will launch an offensive to stall the enemy. Can I count on you to help be a part of it?" Cassandra questioned. "Yes, but first I need access to your communicators," Bjorn returned. "Why?"

"I need to send a message. I'm going to call the others here!"