

Chapter 217: All Together

Zeta was grateful to see the breaking of dawn. It had been a long night avoiding the patrols and the random searches of the Lord's knights. But dawn didn't mean safety, she knew that more than anything; what it did mean was opportunity. Dolion wanted her to lead the masses to his whims, she wasn't going to do that. She refused to do that. She stepped out of the shadows, walking straight to the town's central church.

"May I help you?" questioned the priest, looking at her with confusion more than anything. "Do your bells work?" she asked. "I was hoping to ring them." He frowned, looking at her. "They do, but might I ask why?" he questioned, following her as she continued to stride forwards. "The Lord is a Cannibal, it's time to unmask him," she stated. She felt his demeanour change without even looking at him. He lunged at her but she stepped aside, concentrating her Focus into a powerful kick straight into his lower back. There was a crack and he toppled to the floor, his legs limp behind him. "You're going to tell me everything I need to know."

The bells rang out across the city of Tulo, stirring anyone who could have potentially still be slumbering. Zeta rang them long and hard, long enough to draw attention, but short enough to give her the chance she needed to escape. After slipping away from the guards that immediately rushed to investigate, she fled to the main square where countless people had gathered, all curious to find out about the emergency and what was going on.

She walked through the crowd, her bright blue hair visible and clear. "The Blue Bard!" came whispers. "It's her! It's Zeta!" She ignored it, walking straight to the statue in the middle of the square and climbing up it. She stood next to the stone figure of Dolion, pulling out the violin she had stolen from the church and beginning to play a soft tune. Eyes flooded towards her, fingers pointing as she began to play.

Zeta began to sing, her eyes glancing towards the guards rushing towards her. She sang a tale, a story of a monster that ruled the lands. A monster that fed on loved ones, the innocent and the guilty. A beast that forced people to choose between sacrificing themselves or those that they cared about. She sung about the absence of those that vanished, tears filling the eyes of her audience, and the guilt of sacrificing those that you cared about to save yourself. She could see the void in the bodies of the guilty grow, the anguish of their choices and the anger of being made to choose in the first place. She sung of Dolion the Cannibal, the

predator, the dark lord, and the people he feared. Several knights stopped in their tracks, others desperately trying to push into the crowd. "Fight! Fight for those you've lost! Fight for those that will be taken from you if you do not! Drag the monsters out into the light!" Zeta yelled, her personal mob raising their fists to the skies. "Tear down the kingdom of Cannibals!"

The knights after her drew their swords, an army of angry civilians all around them. "Enough is enough!" yelled a knight. "Down with the traitors of humanity!" he yelled, turning his blade on a fellow knight. Chaos erupted instantly, the knights on Zeta's side trampling the knights on Dolion's with the aid of the people they were meant to protect. Ordinary folk ran to grab anything and everything they could, return with flaming torches, kitchenware and pitchforks. "Drag the monster out into the light!" Zeta repeated, pointing towards the castle. Her followers charged forwards, yelling and repeating her words as they charged as an army, the knights at the lead.

Zeta hopped down from the statue, looking at the broken bodies of the fallen before running off in pursuit of her mob. She found the gates broken down, her people fighting against the enemy – their true forms revealed. The hunchback monstrosities tried to fight back, but there were too many on Zeta's side. Her people carried her forwards, bursting through the doors of the castle and into the main corridors.

Zeta let them run onwards, waiting and listening. Screams met her ears and she ran off in their direction, bursting back into the dining hall she had been in only hours before. Dolion stood waiting, a squirming knight in his elongated grasp. There was a crack and the body went limp. "You dare!" Dolion screeched, throwing the corpse at Zeta. She dove out of the way. "Kill yourself!" she commanded. He paused and then broke into laughter. "The Grandfather protects me from your trickery. I will savour every morsel as I peel the flesh off your bones!" he growled.

His entire misshapen body was grotesque. He held a hunch, the upper part of his body bent and cracked forwards with his spine bulging out of his back. He was pale with milky white eyes and greasy skin and hair. His fingers were long and bony, his nails cracked and broken. Zeta backed up, chanting whilst looking around for anything she could use to hurt him. He lunged across the room, his long arms flailing wildly as he ran. He swung at her, knocking chairs aside, but she kept her distance backing away. She whistled, a high-pitched and precise sound that caused him to clutch his head in pain. He grabbed a chair and threw

it at him. She dove aside, rolling to her feet and grabbing her violin before beginning to play. "No you don't!" he yelled darting towards her.

But she was waiting for it. Zeta swung, smashing the violin into him with a Focus-enhanced force that sent him flying backwards into and through the dining room table. He groaned as she began to hum, her throat glowing as she concentrated her magic not on hindering him but on buffing herself. He got to his feet and she leapt at him, swinging downwards with a scavenged sword. He held up a hand to block the blow and she cut straight through, twisting the blade to stab downwards into his chest. He lifted his legs upwards, kicking her backwards, but the blade remained in his chest impaling him to the floor. "I'll kill you! Tear you limb from limb! Boil your brains! Scoop out your eyeballs!"

Zeta glanced upwards as he tried to pull the blade out of his chest. A chandelier dangled from the ceiling. She whistled, sending out a high-pitched sonic blast that shattered the chain holding it up and sending it crashing down onto him. A rain of glass and metal scattered across the room, a cool silence following. Zeta let out a sigh of relief, slowly walking around the room to see the still corpse of the crushed cannibal, his bulging eyes wide in disbelief. "Thank the Gods," she muttered, dropping to a knee and catching her breath.

She could still hear violence all around her, her tuned ears picking up the combat in all directions, but as she looked at Dolion's corpse her mind immediately flashed back to his warning of Alberta Armin's imminent arrival. "Time to go," she stated, getting to her feet and beginning to run. "I hope they can hold out," she added, thinking about the people she was leaving behind as she ran through the castle back towards the gates.

She stopped only as the city sat as a small speck on the horizon; flames were spread across the castle – funeral pyres most likely. She had made an impact, whether for the better or for the worse she did not know. For now it was over. She had survived. She had done enough. Zeta looked towards the sun, and turned away from it. "Let's go home," she stated aloud, setting forwards on her journey west. "It's time to find a ship, it's time to find the others!"

Zeta did not bother to dye her hair, she did not need to, nor want to. The story of the Blue Bard that had slain a Cannibal Lord seemed to precede her, it got her what she wanted or needed without issue. And where issue did arise, she often found others willing to help her, biding time for her to escape or providing her routes to do so. Friends lay waiting more than enemies, all the way to the West coast.

SEIZE THE SEAS

She breathed a sigh of relief as she finally saw the ocean, the gentle, cold, blue and the spring sun filling her with joy. The large coastal town of Lanis was simple – Zeta liked simple. It was one of the main access points to the continent and a steady stream of ships seemed to be coming and going, mostly merchant vessels, some military. “You’re here,” came a voice as she crossed the town boundary, a young woman waiting for her. Zeta flinched, faltering as she slowly turned and looked at the woman. “M-Morgana?” Zeta questioned in distinct disbelief.

Morgana smiled, a long-missed smile that immediately unleashed a flood of tears from Zeta’s eyes as she dove into Morgana’s arms and began to wail. “It’s good to see you, Z,” Morgana stated, holding her tightly and crying silent tears of her own. “You’re safe, well...ish,” Morgana stated. Zeta pulled back and looked at her with blurry confusion. “I’m not the only one who is aware of your trajectory. Those Cannibals you’ve pissed off are on their way. A load of them. The Stacked Hand will be here soon, so we should get out of here before they arrive.”

“What of the people, we shouldn’t leave them to the hands of various angry Cannibals?” Zeta returned. Morgana smiled softly, shaking her head. “Somehow I just knew you’d say that. I’ll follow your lead, Blue Bard, what do you want to do?” Morgana asked. Zeta looked around at the town, her eyes eventually setting on an outdoor performance stage. “One last performance, for the road,” Zeta stated with a small smile.

“Ready?” Morgana asked, looking at the sizeable crowd that assembled to hear Zeta play. “I think so, I think this is also the biggest crowd I’ve played to,” she admitted nervously. “First of many,” Morgana reassured. “Give them hell! I’ll be guarding you from the skies.” She took off, leaving Zeta alone to take a deep breath, before she twirled her enchanted baton and stepped out onto the stage, transforming her reunited weapon into a glowing violin.

“Hurry up, we’re close!” yelled Ordo, darting through the forest with Mai Lu hot on his heels. “You’ve been saying that for a day and a half!” Mai Lu panted after him, her face red as she pursued him. “Yeah, this time I’m right!” he stated, leaping across a river. “Look!” he yelled. “Ahead of us!” Mai Lu looked past him, they weren’t the only ones rushing through the forest. A large swarm of bulbous hunchback creatures were bounding ahead of them. “Wonderful,” she said, “can we ignore them.”

“No! Do not let them touch a single blue hair on her head,” he stated, transforming into his partial Dragon form, a pair of blue-black wings emerging from his back and sparks of lightning flashing off his body. “Fine,” Mai Lu said,

relinquishing control to Baal. Her skin turned red, other than her face that turned a ghostly white. Red horns emerged from her head and her nails became claws. "Hunting time!" Baal cheered with joy, dashing forwards after Ordo.

Zeta ignored the flying bolts of green, white and red as Morgana flew across the sky bombarding the Cannibals that emerged from the darkness. Her audience hardly noticed themselves, their attention focused entirely on her as she sung about the monsters of these lands and how they can be beaten. A crash of lightning drew her attention to the forest, a draconic figure launching out of the woods alongside an all-too-familiar Demon. A smile crossed Zeta's face as her friends came to her aid, striking the monsters with incredible ferocity and strength.

Her audience sang her words, turning on the approaching Cannibals with weapons of their own. And where they would have run in the past, the people of Arcastalum ran forwards, unafraid, towards the creatures that had for too long claimed to be their predators. Zeta continued to play, her magic weaving strength into the people around her, their actions the beginnings of a new legend: a legend of how they took the dark continent back. And almost as quickly as the song started, it came to an end, the battle won – and the monsters slain.

"You're alive?" Mai Lu said, somewhat in genuine disbelief as she looked at Zeta. Zeta smiled faintly at the Demon girl. "Yeah, somehow," she returned before looking at Ordo and stepping into his tight embrace. "You did it girlie, you survived alone. I'm proud of you." She nodded, crying into his shoulder as he held her tightly. She was safe, they were safe. "We can trade stories later," Morgana interrupted, landing next to them before pointing out towards the water. "Our ride is here." The Stacked Hand sat on the horizon, its familiar blue, white and black bringing smiles all around. "Home..." Zeta said softly.

It took some time to recount all of the tales of the various fragments of the Rising Aces; it took even longer for Zeta to finally set the communicator down after a long and lengthy chat with Marisha. But eventually the relief of seeing each other faded and a nervous feeling emerged. "So..." Ordo questioned, looking at the assembled group: Wam, Morgana, Tempest, Gaea, Zeta, Red, Mai Lu, Thalia and Ohno. "Where are the others?" he asked. "Where's the Captain? Where's Bjorn?"

"We don't know," Morgana answered on Marisha's behalf. "There has been no contact and rumours have dried up." Zeta tucked her legs into her chest, rocking slightly as she sat on the sofa in the living quarters. "So they could be dead?" she suggested. "Maybe," Morgana said quietly. "But I doubt it. It will take more than

an awry spell to kill our crewmates." The others looked to her. "Look, we've found each other. We'll find the others. Ordo, what is our next move?" she asked.

"The sensible move is to fall back to the New World. If anyone landed there then they will have made their way to the Capital. They'll find a way to contact us. Especially with Marisha monitoring things in the Guild. Great move by the way." "Be sure to tell her that yourself," Morgana returned, sitting on the table and crossing her legs over. "So we set sail for the Capital?" she stated, various nods of agreement came from the others. "Sounds good. Tempest, are we good to teleport? No point wasting time and waiting."

"A definite option," Tempest returned. Morgana looked towards Ordo, hoping he would take command as the most authoritative member amongst the group. "Then that's what we'll do. Better to rest in familiar waters than unfamiliar ones. Will our communicators still reach Marisha?" he questioned towards the djinn. "They should. I have little reason to believe otherwise," Tempest returned. "Perfect, then let's go right now. Prepare the ship, Tempest – when you're ready." Ordo then turned towards Zeta. "Zeta, join me in my quarters for a moment. Morgana, you too," he stated, standing up and exiting the room. Morgana and Zeta glanced towards each other, raising an eyebrow.

They found him adjusting toppled items and checking for dust. "That djinn bothered to dust but didn't bother to fix my knocked over things," he scowled, taking a seat on his bed and looking up at the pair of them. "I just want to say that I'm very proud of you both. And I know that Jayce, Arthuria, Bjorn – they would all feel the same way. Morgana – you've brought us back together. Zeta – you survived on your own for so long. I am sorry we let this happen in the first place, I hope you can forgive me for letting you down," he said, with unusual softness and sincerity.

Morgana and Zeta glanced at each other. "Ordo, this wasn't your fault," Zeta immediately returned. He held up a hand and shook his head. "No, it is. I failed to prepare you, and failed to prepare myself, to deal with an enemy such as Kaina. That Dragon destroyed us, and it is miracle that we survived. I have no doubt that the consequences of that loss will echo amongst our crew for far longer than it takes us to reunite. We need to do better, and I should have been a catalyst earlier on to bring that about."

"That's unrealistic," Morgana returned, folding her arms. "We can't always be the strongest – it's not possible. A Dragon is a reasonable foe to have struggled against - if not, then what is?" Ordo smiled and shook his head, standing up and

looking at them. "Our next foes are going to be the Betrayers, you both know that – right?" Zeta nodded, gritting her teeth and clenching her fists as she thought about what she had seen. Morgana, however, looked at the floor and shied away – her pupils dilating, and her breathing growing sharper and quicker. Ordo placed a hand on her shoulder. "Focus on finding the others, just as you have before," Ordo reassured. "We will be fine."

Zeta found a familiar figure stood leaning against the wall outside of Ordo's room. "I'm surprised you survived everything you went through," Thalia stated bluntly. "I am relieved though," she promptly added. Zeta looked up at her, reaching up and placing a gentle hand to Thalia's cheek. "I heard you didn't exactly have a walk in a park either. Arena Champion?" Zeta questioned. Thalia leant into her hand before shaking her head and pulling away. "No, I gave that chance up to be here."

Zeta raised an eyebrow. "That doesn't sound like you... Are you alright?" Thalia nodded, putting on a smile as she looked down at Zeta. "I guess I've softened." "Never." Thalia chuckled, leaning her head against the wall. They locked eyes. "I've missed you," Zeta said bluntly. Thalia nodded, a brief look of uncertainty crossing her face. "You too, at times." Zeta smiled, stepping forwards and placing her head into Thalia's chest. Awkwardly, Thalia placed a hand on Zeta's head. "Your hair looks better short," she stated clumsily. Zeta shook her head. "No, it doesn't."

"Come on fuckbuddies, get a room," Ordo stated, stepping out of his room and immediately causing them both to separate. They both flashed red. Ordo rolled his eyes and stepped past Zeta, placing a hand on Thalia's shoulder. "Come on, show me how you've improved these last few months. You'll see each other later," he stated, dragging her away. Zeta shook her head as Thalia sauntered off after Ordo before leaning into the wall. She made a fist and tapped the wood. "Still the same awkwardness," she muttered. "The Barbarian and the Bard... not meant to be." She turned away and retreated back to her room.

"All crew," came Marisha's voice, almost the second they landed in the waters outside of Last Drop. She sounded shaky, almost on the verge of tears. "Bjorn wants us back at the Capital, now! Get moving, I'll meet you there!"

Seize the Seas Tales: Back to Form

Thalia looked at Ordo, the pair of them circling each other within the Stacked Hand's training room. Ordo clenched his fist, the cyan around it turning black as he mirrored his opponent. "Still got it old man!" she goaded, lunging forwards and throwing a fist that for the majority of the people on the planet would have been lethal. Ordo tucked into it, guiding his fist on the inside of hers to force her punch on a wide trajectory, whilst his continued forwards, square towards her face. But instead she grabbed it, turning, twisting and flipping him over her body in a heavy slam into the floor. She grinned as she stood over him. "You've gotten slow."

"No, you've gotten technical," he stated with a surprised groan. "It suits you. You're using the brain that sits inside your massive head again." She concentrated on her fist, the black flames swirling around it as she pulled back her arm and then threw her punch towards his skull. He rolled away as she cracked the floor. "My head is not big..." He chuckled, limping slightly towards one of the benches – the room a mess from their several rounds of battling. "No, it's not," he stated, taking a sip of rum before offering it to her. Rather than sit down next to him she sat down on the floor and leant her head on his leg, taking the bottle from him and taking a heavy drink. He placed his hand in her sweaty hair before taking the bottle back from her. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"I... don't know. I... have changed, but I don't know if it's for the better." "Maybe it is, maybe it isn't – it's not something we can control: we're moulded by our experiences, our connections. We are who we are. What's the change you're worried about?" he asked. She thought for a moment. Her mind flashed with images of Zeta, Athena... Jayce. "I once threatened to take this crew from Jayce, to lead it rather than be led. But now..."

"You've grown, Thalia. You're beyond petty squabbles for power, you don't need it. There's no one to prove yourself to, and it's not something you should want or need to return," he told her, stroking her hair. She looked up at the old man, his own mind thinking as to how he had changed. "But I've lost my courage," she confessed. "You saw it. I'm... cautious, afraid." Ordo shook his head. "No, you're confused – you always have been when it comes to Zeta. You both are. You're not right for each other, no more than the Doc and I are. Some people just aren't meant for that sitting by the fire and growing old together happy ending."

Thalia looked down, her shoulders slumping. "Do you wish it to be?" he asked. She shook her head. "What is it you want then?" he asked. A thousand options filled her mind, eventually fading into one distinct image – her grandfather sat on a throne with his concubines. It flickered to an image of herself in his place, a dozen or so children running and fighting each other in a large house. "More," she stated. "She wants that too," he stated. "She wants to be a star, to travel the world and perform. But her more is different from yours, it doesn't mean you're incompatible – it just means that you won't always sail on the same ship, if you understand my meaning. You're thinking too much about it, rather than enjoying that the wind is in the right direction. Ignore the destination, enjoy the ride. That's the deal I have with Doc." Thalia shuddered slightly, a hard fist tapping the top of her head a moment later. "Ow!" she complained.

Wam swirled the beer in his bottle as he sat next to the Stacked Hand's wheel, watching as Tempest made his final preparations for teleportation. Ohno sat next to him, sipping his own beer. "Do you think Fenn is still alive?" Wam questioned. "Yeah, definitely," Ohno returned. "Why wouldn't he be?" Wam sat in a silence. "I... died, Ohno. Brother, I died-died, and if he was in a similar situation as to Zeta..." Ohno shrugged, looking out across the waters before reaching over and placing a hand on his brother's shoulder. "He's fine. No doubt. He always is." "I wish I had your confidence."

"Sounds... fascinating," Morgana said to Mai Lu, as she finished her recount of the magic the Cannibals and Vampires had used. "Anything you've encountered before?" Mai Lu questioned. Morgana shook her head, trying to think of anything that could have possibly come close. "We were more about using materials as ingredients, rather than people as conduits. But... it does make me think about just what the Grandfather could possibly be. If it's strong enough and old enough to have its own kind of magic, then perhaps it is a Demon, or something else that is primordial – maybe it's something similar to whatever the True Vampire is."

Mai Lu shrugged, leaning back into the sofa and shutting her eyes. "Do you think Arthuria survived?" Morgana questioned quietly. Mai Lu scoffed, shaking her head. "Do you doubt she has? If so then you clearly do not know your sister as well as I thought you do." Morgana looked down at her feet. She rubbed her thumbs against one another. "Maybe I don't..." she muttered.