

Chapter 218: A Captain and His First Mate

Jayce grinned as his hands flashed in technicolour, cycling at his command across the various colours of Focus. He had done it, he had mastered it for all its worth and even as he stood in the void of the Scourge, he still held command of his senses. He turned, looking at the army of skeletons assembled between him and Rosalynn's home. He flicked out Sola and Luna, turning to face the bones before charging forwards. Jayce danced through the field of bones, lighter, faster and stronger than he had ever been before. They were never-ending, but he didn't care – he laughed with glee as he cut, smashed, and decimated everything in his path.

He struggled to stop smiling, even as he lay in his bath – washing off the dust, sweat and grime from his training. A meow drew his attention to the side of his room. Little Witch sat watching him, the cat's tail flicking from side-to-side impatiently. She wasn't alone in the impatience – RK kept wandering off further and further into the desert, the rokken nervous if not afraid of the fate of Tempest. Jayce's smile dwindled and he lay back looking up at the ceiling. He only knew the fate of Astris and Caelie, both currently sailing with Astris' brother on their way to reinforce Cyrenna and Alara, everyone else was still a mystery. He sighed, descending below the surface of the water and shutting his eyes in the hot darkness. "It's time to go," he stated in his mind. A few moments of silence passed. "You don't say," came a sarcastic response from Paimon.

Rosalynn sat waiting for him in her usual position for the time of day. "I made your favourite," she said, looking at him with what he presumed to be a smile. It was always hard to tell given she had no skin – a skull after all was a poor conveyer of feelings. The blue glow to her eyes were particularly intense this evening and she was wearing simple white robes, the closest clothing she possessed that amounted to casual. "Thank you," he returned, sitting down next to her as Little Witch leapt onto the table and dug into her own meal.

They sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes as she watched him eat. "So," she eventually stated as he sat back sated. "You've succeeded in your training?" He nodded. "Good, I must confess that I am deeply impressed. To have such control in such a harsh environment should make it a 'cakewalk', as you have put it, when you return to your home," Rosalynn said softly. Jayce smiled, nodding appreciatively. "I hope so. And on that topic..."

"Ah," she realised, looking down. "I suppose the time has finally come." He nodded. "Yeah, I'm sorry, but my people need me. I need to return to them."

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Silence followed as Rosalynn thought, a slow mental sigh following as she raised her head and looked at him. "Then I suppose we best make the most of this night. Let me find you the good wine," she stated, getting to her feet and walking off. "The rest wasn't the 'good' wine?" he questioned after her.

They sat and talked long into the night, talking both of their time together and their own separate pasts. Rosalynn obviously had far more of a past to talk about but Jayce couldn't help but notice how much of the conversation had been about him, as if she was savouring every last word he was leaving her. "So what will you do next?" she eventually asked, the wine all gone. He looked at her, fighting the sheer volume he had consumed with every bit of his constitution. "I... need to get my friend back. To free him from the Sovereign."

"Vexx?" she questioned, laying on her front and kicking her legs slowly behind her as she looked at him. "Yeah. Him," he said, leaning back and looking up at the ceiling. "I failed him last time. And... I'm still failing him now. I need to find him, find Captain Valentine, stop the Sovereign," he stated. She nodded. "And you will, I have no doubt about it." Jayce looked at the skeletal companion he had spent so many months with. "I wish you had been born in this era, I feel we could have been great friends," he stated a little stupidly. She looked down. "I wish you were born in my era. Perhaps the world wouldn't have ended. And..." she trailed off and sat up, shaking her head. "I think it's time for bed. You have a long journey ahead of you." He let out a sigh and nodded. "You're right, I guess I will retire. Goodnight, Rosalynn," he stated, unsteadily getting to his feet. She watched him go. "Goodnight," she said after him.

Jayce lay in his bed, looking up at the ceiling of his room as he thought on their conversation, on their conversations – there had been so many across so many hours. As he finally began to shut his eyes he heard the door open, a soft pair of feet quietly making their way across the room towards him. He felt the covers move, a body climbing in and nestling up to him. He felt soft hair across his chest, an ear placed to his heart. His eyes peeked open, not wishing to disturb his visitor.

Long blonde hair lay across his body, a soft and cold pale body resting upon him. She looked up at him, her large eyes a beautiful and soft green colour. He felt her hands caress his skin, before reaching up towards him, cold fingers rubbing his beard before searching through his hair. She rose upwards, the brilliant eyes looking into his, her bare body sitting across his waist as she leant down and kissed him. He kissed back.

The morning came and he woke up alone, other than the cat and the Demon in his head. "Ro-" he questioned, stopping himself as he noticed a letter and a scroll on his bedside table. He dressed, grabbing his bottomless bag and summoning Sola and Luna to his wrists. Jayce then glanced around the room, taking in the view and thinking back to how bare it had once been. Rosalynn had done everything she could to make him comfortable throughout the time together, crafting and making everything he needed. "Come on," he told Little Witch, picking her up and placing her in a special frontal backpack Rosalyn had made for her.

Nervously, Jayce then approached the letter, opening it before putting it in his pocket. He then unfurled the scroll, looking at the map guiding him to the Anvil of Agron – the likely location of the items he needed to get back to the New World and his friends. He put it away, taking a short breath before stepping out of his room for the last time. Jayce walked the corridors, looking for any trace of Rosalynn, any sign of her at all. Not a single skeleton stood in sight, nothing watched him, nothing waited for him. He was alone as she hid from their goodbye.

"Come on RK, time to go," he told the rokken, the now even larger mountain of a creature grumbling as he got up and began to move towards the exit of the castle. Jayce walked slowly behind, trying to process, trying not to let his emotions rule him. "If it helps," Paimon said in his mind as they crossed the threshold to the Scourge, "the illusion she put up for you, did not work for me. That was not a sight I want to see again." Jayce snorted, shaking his head. "You bastard, couldn't you have just let me had that?" he questioned. He could feel Paimon's smile in his head. "Head high, Exarga – we have a lot to do."

Jayce stopped as the castle sat a few hundred metres away, he turned and looked back – a faint figure watching him from a window. "Thank you!" he yelled out, waving wildly. "Goodbye!" He turned, looking ahead at the empty horizon he had to walk. Only then, as she could not see him, he let the tears begin to fall, knowing that somewhere his partner from another world was likely feeling the same.

Bjorn let out a sigh as he sat back in the communications chair. It was too small for him, uncomfortable and a blatant example of just how out of place he felt. The message had been sent: he had summoned his crew back to the North, and only time would tell just who would answer. With luck it would be everyone, but he

doubted that – his luck had run out, that was for sure. He could only hope that Marisha, the boys, and Jayce were okay.

“Sir?” came a voice, a Marine dressed in an all-black uniform standing to attention next to him. “Me?” Bjorn questioned, meeting the not-short Marine eye-to-eye, even as Bjorn remained seated. “Yes, sir. You have been requested by the Fleet Admirals for a meeting. I’m to take you there immediately,” he stated firmly, but with an almost-awestruck expression. Bjorn nodded, getting to his feet. “Best not to keep them waiting then. Lead on.”

If it hadn’t of been for the years of being with Jayce, Wicke and Vexx, Bjorn most certainly would never have dreamed of even meeting an Admiral face-to-face. Yet it had become such a frequent experience throughout his travels, that it had almost become an annoyance more than anything else. He no longer revered them, they were just people to him – and as he entered the room with various Admirals scattered across the numerous chairs around a colossal table he couldn’t help but smell the fear permeating throughout the air. Once upon a time these had been the most powerful people in the world, both physically and through status. Not anymore.

Eyes glanced towards him as he stopped in place near the entrance, awaiting an instruction or an invitation. “Bjorn,” came Cassandra’s familiar and friendly voice from across the room, “Yuthura, Arthuria, Jeanne,” she followed, expressing the faint greetings to his companions stood behind him. “Thank you for joining us,” she said, concluding what Bjorn imagined would be the only pleasantries to the meeting. A series of subtle nods and gestures landed Bjorn’s way, the Paladins receiving nothing and Yuthura’s reputation resulting in several cautious stares. “You called?” Bjorn returned, standing in a still habitual position of attention.

“Indeed,” Truth stated, his voice firm and clear, and his position tense. “You once served under Commodore Osiris, correct?” he questioned, his deep brown eyes boring into Bjorn. “As no more than a Conscript, but yes. A long time ago,” Bjorn returned, not liking the attention upon him nor the unearthing of his past. “Do you still remember your training?” Truth continued. Bjorn nodded. “We’ll have to take your word as is. As of this moment you are reinstated, we do not have time to wait for your Captain or your crew for aid. Congratulations, Acting-Captain Bjorn, take a seat.”

Bjorn felt his body flush with heat. He had long shrugged off any allegiance or ambitions within the Navy and its Marines, yet in a hesitant instant it all came

back. He had never dared ask for more before, a Conscript had never had the luxury to dream – but now... A cane prodded his back as Yuthura nudged him towards an empty chair. “Let it be understood plainly and clearly – this is temporary, and only as an act representing the urgency of the situation. Abuse it and there will be consequences, succeed and there very well may be a more permanent position for you.” Bjorn nodded, taking a seat amongst the Admirals. “I’m honoured,” he stated sincerely.

“You shouldn’t be,” Cassandra said somewhat coldly, as if disapproving of the idea – or at the least disapproving of the way it had been enacted. “What we’re asking of you is to help us delay a threat that once almost toppled the Empire. Crach is dead, and Xerxes was always held back by him. We are facing a creature of mayhem and destruction, a beast that never cared for collateral. We are asking you to help lead the first strike whilst we establish more firm evacuation routes and defensive lines. By all accounts – this is almost suicide.”

“Ah,” Bjorn uttered, deflating slightly as it dawned on him why he was there and what was expected: a miracle or a sacrifice. “And what will you wonderful folk be doing in the mean time?” Yuthura questioned from the side of the room as she drew on the floor with chalk, periodically poking a Marine attempting to politely stop her with her cane. “Jayce’s... absence left a hole,” Philip Exarga explained. “The other Pirate Lords have been attempting to claim territory – currently Kitty Deliver and Tim Kane are fighting wars of their own.”

“A fantastical coincidence,” Yuthura stated, the chalk circle glowing as she tapped her cane onto it. In a flash of red light, a comfy rocking chair appeared, along with the disappearance of numerous large floorboards, that she promptly sat down in. Bjorn smiled, shaking his head. “It’s unknown whether or not Xerxes has allied with the Engines and Ningyo, but both machines and ocean crawlers are knocking on the doors of the Republic and we intend to answer,” Truth stated. “You will have a fleet, along with some of the best officers we can muster. We ask that you stall, long enough for our other fleets to surround the enemy.” “And just how long will that be?” Bjorn questioned. A grim silence followed. “Fine.”

“This is stupid,” Arthuria stated boldly, as the Admirals began to leave the room once the meeting had ended. “They’re in a difficult position. The Republic is still reforming after the collapse of the Empire and three Pirate Lords looking for conquest is not a small amount,” Bjorn rationalised, his words sounding hollow

even to him. "This isn't our fight, Bjorn. It's not worth the risk, not when they have a room full of Admirals that are being held back for one reason or another."

Someone cleared their throat and the four of them turned to find Philip Exarga stood nearby. "Follow me," he stated quietly, turning and stepping away. Bjorn looked towards Yuthura. "What are you looking at me for, Captain?" she stated, taking a step forwards and following after Admiral Exarga. "You heard her, Captain," Arthuria stated, following after her with Jeanne close behind. Bjorn let out a sigh and followed the group.

Philip led them to his office, the door opening on its own and remaining open as Bjorn and the others followed him inside. The door then closed quietly before locking loudly. "This doesn't leave the room," Philip stated firmly as he sat behind his desk. Bjorn nodded, folding his arms as Yuthura took a seat and Jeanne and Arthuria leant against the door. "There are other reasons why you are being limited in your resources," Philip stated. "We are currently at war within the Old World."

"What?" Bjorn questioned, the others all mirroring his shock. Philip nodded, leaning back in his chair and scratching his chin. "Alara and both Kai's are currently staging an assault on the Old World with the hopes of disabling a trio of weapons, and then using them to liberate Alara's parents." Bjorn shook his head. "That sounds even more suicidal than what has been asked of me. Again, why not send the Admirals?"

"We're vulnerable Bjorn, more than you know. This Republic is run by the military and the entire world knows that we are at the whims of the Sea Sovereign. Even just maintaining control of the New World seems to be a losing task. The innumerable casualties that occurred during the war with the Church... it's not something that can be swept away. It is a lot to ask of you, it would be a lot to ask even of Jayce, but I have faith you'll find a way to hold Xerxes off. Just hold his War Hounds back until we can drive them back. We do not need to destroy them, only delay them. Only then can we launch our true assault on the Old World and, for the first time since Scáthach announced herself to the New World, take the initiative back."

"I'll do what I can, but..."

Philip shook his head. "You will do fine. Arthur limited your rank to ensure that you don't hold too much sway, but your reputation is well-known. Even without being placed into an official position, there would be few amongst the Republic

that would not follow your orders. The therians that have been swept into Xerxes' grudge will not be unaware of you, I have done my best to ensure that." Bjorn frowned. "Information spreads easily with a handful of pearl in the right pocket. You're a legend in this world, there's little reason for that to not be the case in the Old World too. Someone needs to stand against Xerxes' influence and you're the man for the job. Kill him and Crach's position is yours, and with it a guaranteed position amongst the Admiralty, should you use that position correctly. There is a lot that the Righthand of Jayce Exarga can achieve, but focus on what you can do now. Weaken Xerxes, stand up to him, push his forces back – whatever means necessary." Bjorn met his somewhat casual gaze before slowly nodding and stepping back. "That's all I can ask for. Jayce would count on you, and so will I. Buy as much time as you can, but if the chance is there... take it. Good luck, Captain."

Bjorn couldn't help but feel uneasy as he stepped onto the Slayer, a heavy warship with more cannons than he could count. It was most certainly the largest ship he had sailed on, but not the largest he had ever boarded. "I hope you're proud of me... Osiris," he muttered, a uniform stamp drawing his attention to the waiting Marines and Navy all looking towards him. "We greet Captain Bjorn!" called the foremost and most decorated Marine, a somewhat shaggy ox therian with a pair of large and wide horns. "Commander Foreborn, I take it?" Bjorn questioned, trying not to show his nerves as he glanced at the more-than three-hundred bodies now under his command. "Aye, Captain," returned Foreborn, glancing briefly from Bjorn to Yuthura, Jeanne and Arthuria, before finally upwards at the Dragon circling above the ship. "At ease, fill me in on everything you know," Bjorn told him plainly.

The large Marine nodded, turning and looking at the crew of the Slayer. "We are at your command, so is the Hellbringer, the Icon, the Bad Day, and the Dawnstar. Roughly fifteen-hundred souls in total. We are ready to set off on your command, we know the cost, we know what is at stake, but with you here it doesn't seem quite so bad - if I may say so, Captain," Foreborn stated. Bjorn nodded, letting out a short exhale before straightening up. "The crew are hoping you have some... words of encouragement, if you don't mind?" Foreborn turned and looked at Bjorn, the stoic and firm expression on his face giving away his real feelings for a brief moment. The Commander was afraid; likely they all were. "Please," Foreborn said a bit more quietly. Bjorn nodded, approached the Helm and gripping the wheel of the ship with his own hands.

"I don't ask for much, just for you to have my back! Can I count on it?" Bjorn called out. "Aye, Captain!" clamoured the crew. Bjorn nodded, a small smile spreading across his face as he looked down at all of them. "We will hold the line, for hours if we must! For days, if we have to! Until the last man or woman takes their final breath, so that these scum do not lay a hand on the civilians of our Republic! We fight not just to survive, we fight to win! And win we shall!" "Oohrah!" Zhurong flew across the tops of the masts, unleashing a heavy and bright plume of flame into the air that Bjorn felt across his nose.

"To your stations! The Helm is mine – let's see what this beauty can do!"

Seize the Seas Tales: Ruination

"I want all batteries primed and ready, all squads prepared and ready for deployment - and a coffee," Alara stated to Weapon, as she stepped out of her quarters, rolling her metal arm and testing the grip of her fingers. He nodded, setting off to carry out her simple command. It was early in the morning, the sun fresh on the horizon, along with a thick haze of smoke and the consistent thunder of cannon fire.

Alara's eyes lay on their destination, the wooden railing groaning under her grip as she unconsciously crushed the wood. Her wounds were still fresh, the scars across her neck, chin, chest and stump aching in a near consistent stream of agony. But she did her best to ignore it, to temper the fury that threatened to consume her. Two sentries were gone, along with Witchford. They weren't going to come back and that meant the final one ahead of her was her last chance to cripple General Barca Khallid's fortress ship. It was her last real chance to rescue her parents, and her last chance to avenge her fallen friends.

The wood cracked within her grip, snapping her out of her wayward thoughts. A Marine handed her the coffee, a nervous look in the Ensign's eyes. "Thank you," Alara told him, dismissing the survivor. He nodded, glancing outwards towards their new battlefield. Alara hugged the warm cup as she stepped into her quarters and grabbed her weapon. She downed the drink and set it aside, reaching up for her communicator. "Cyrenna?" Alara questioned firmly.

"Vanathur, is that you?" came Cyrenna's voice through the communicator. "It is; we're not much but we're coming in hard," Alara returned. A chuckle slipped through from the other side. "Link up with the Rear-Admirals and come and find me, I'll be waiting. See you soon!" Alara frowned, turning and looking towards Riley and Wulf who both shrugged. Alara then looked ahead, watching

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as another cyan barrage descended down from the heavens, illuminating a dozen or so ships all wearing Republic colours. A smile spread across Alara's face. "Reinforcements! Reinforcements have arrived!"