

Chapter 219: The First Waves

Bjorn finally released the wheel of the Slayer, relinquishing it to the ship's Helmsman only as the advancing fleet appeared on the horizon. "We know the plan," Arthuria stated quietly as she approached his side, the pair of them walking across the main deck towards the ship's bow. Bjorn nodded, his heart racing. It wasn't much of a plan, especially since he had been the one to create it, but it was a plan after all and, at the very least – if it all went wrong – it would all be over quickly.

"I still think you should stay here though," Arthuria reiterated. Bjorn shook his head, cautiously placing a foot on the edge of the ship and glancing back towards his new crew as the Slayer and the rest of his fleet came to a halt in a staggered line. "I have to go, and there's no way I'm leaving you to fight this alone," he stated, finding Jeanne, Yuthura and Commander Foreborn by the wheel. He nodded to them before looking ahead and concentrating. "I'm never alone," Arthuria stated, leaping up and being snatched out of the air by Zhurong, the pair flying upwards hard and fast. "Nice for some," Bjorn muttered, dropping down onto the ocean. His feet hit solid ice, a platform forming underneath him before spreading forwards as he focused on freezing a path for himself. With his head held high he strode forwards towards the incoming fleet.

Somewhat civilly, the enemy fleet came to a halt and in a mirrored manner to himself a figure descended from the ship, landing with a crash into the water. Bjorn stood and waited, extending out his frozen platform, the path behind him breaking away into the water, and moments later with a heavy crash a figure launched themselves out of the ocean. Bjorn looked down at the figure that was almost twice as wide as him. The therian was bright pink, along with a greyish brown colouration to his rubber-like skin. Large teeth filled his huge maw and his eyes were small and purple. The hippo therian looked at Bjorn, a heavy set of gauntlets across his hands and a mean expression on his face. "Bjorn," came a growl from the War Hound, Kandon.

"I know of you Kandon, as you know of me. I would rather we settle this conflict peacefully and I hope you feel the same?" Bjorn prompted, remaining firm in his stance and ready for anything the War Hound was prepared to throw at him. "You stand against your brothers, your people, why?" questioned the War Hound, refusing to give his name. "Because my kind do not decide to invade a nation over a grudge from nearly thirty years ago. Do not throw the lives of your people away. Crach-"

Kandon spat at Bjorn, a heavy lump of saliva splattering across Bjorn's face. Slowly Bjorn reached up and wiped it away. "A lot of pointless lives will be lost if we come to blows. Let it go, this is not a fight worth having – there are larger problems out there that we can overcome if we simply work together. Please, end this now."

"I hoped for more than begging from someone with a reputation like you. A shame, but then again – Xerxes wants you dead and I have no intention on disappointing him." Bjorn sighed as the hippo raised his right arm and gesturing forwards, his ships sailing onwards. "So be it," Bjorn growled, flinging his arm forwards. The ice beneath the hippos feet sharpened and propelled itself upwards into the therian's stomach. He lurched backwards, a pained expression of surprise on his face, but then he punched the ice and it shattered. Kandon roared as he charged forwards, smashing the ice that Bjorn threw in his path whilst unhinging his jaw into a monstrous bite.

Bjorn drew his axe and swung but the therian bit onto the weapon, slamming into him with his body and sending them both into the ocean with a heavy splash. Bjorn pulled for the surface, taking a desperate breath of air as hands grabbed him and pulled him under before a heavy impact hit his ribs, sending a wave of pain across his body and knocking out a sizeable amount of his air. Desperately Bjorn pulled upwards, but Kandon remained with a firm grip on him, deliberately pulling him downwards. The water was the hippo's world, not Bjorn's.

More pain flooded Bjorn's body and darkening mind. He tasted blood, felt the cold water flooding his body as the light of the surface grew darker and darker. But then the darkness vanished, the surface igniting in a bright flash of orange flame. Bjorn turned, looking down with ferocious fury at the War Hound attempting to drown him. He reached outwards, grabbing the flabby skin of Kandon with his claws and concentrating on the energy within the water around him. He drew it away, the water and skin of the hippo turning colder before freezing.

Bjorn's hands froze over, sealing themselves to the thrashing hippo, now desperately trying to pull back from Bjorn. But he pushed forwards, further into the darkness as he thought about his crew and everything that had been taken from him. They were coming, he knew it. He wasn't going to let this be his end. A flash of green came from Kandon as he transformed out of his hippo form,

breaking free from Bjorn's frozen grip. The chubby man's eyes went wide – Bjorn's frozen maw the last thing he ever saw.

Arthuria desperately glanced down towards the rough area where Bjorn had gone under. It had been minutes now and neither him nor the War Hound had come to surface. "Come on Bjorn!" she desperately pleaded, the first wave defenceless as Zhurong ignited their sails on fast diving runs, the Republic ships rushing forwards to seize the initiative and bombard the enemy. A large bubble of red broke the surface, a yellowish fur emerging along with it. Arthuria breathed a sigh of relief.

Zhurong swooped down amidst the cannon fire, plucking the hapless polar bear out of the water. "You had me worried!" Arthuria called down, angling Zhurong back towards the Slayer. "I had me worried!" Bjorn returned, transforming out of his therian form before back into his polar bear form – the various wounds for the most part disappearing. "Is he dead?" she questioned. He nodded grimly, a familiar look of disappointment on his face as she dropped him down towards the Slayer.

"Their leader is dead," Bjorn stated to Commander Foreborn, as he shook the water off his body. "Excellent to hear, Captain, but I fear more are on the way," he stated, pointing ahead towards the burning ships. More ships loomed on the horizon, steadily getting closer. "I doubt very much they're going to be willing to negotiate, reform the defensive line!" Bjorn commanded, the other ships swinging around to rejoin the Slayer, the defeated ships fleeing in all directions or sinking into the seas amongst heavy flames.

Zhurong dropped down on to the Slayer's main deck, the Dragon panting heavily from the brief battle. "How long will the Dragon need to recover?" Foreborn questioned to Bjorn as the pair of them approached. "Doc should get him up and running before long but he's going to sit this one out for the moment. Arthuria, are you ready?" Bjorn questioned to the Paladin. She nodded, placing her helmet onto her. "Most of the therians against us will have been forcibly conscripted, try to be merciful," Bjorn told her. She looked directly at him, her golden eyes shining through her visor. "We can't spare everyone, we targeted the sails as you commanded, but..."

"I know, just do what you can," he stated, placing a hand on her back and gently nudging her forwards towards the bow. Arthuria strode forwards, breaking into a run before leaping over the side and dropping down onto the ocean. She darted across the surface, striding quickly with her hands over Caliburn's hilt. If it had

been her decision she would have saved her most powerful weapon for Xerxes himself, but she had a very strong feeling that this wasn't going to be a short conflict.

Explosions decorated the surface of the ocean ahead of her as the enemy unleashed a bombardment upon her. Then, to her distinct amusement, a cloud of winged therians darted into the skies and descended upon her. Arthuria unleashed Caliburn, a golden halo floating above her head and a wide pair of glowing feathered wings spreading across her back as she took to the air. "Mercy," she muttered, "may your souls find peace," she stated.

"Gods," muttered Foreborn, watching as entire ships were cleaved in two by the angelic Paladin. The grey horizon was shredded by golden beams and arcs as Arthuria massacred the enemy with everything she had. A minute later, the gold faded, followed by several large and fiery explosions from within the wreckage of the enemy fleet. Bjorn shook his head, he had hoped it would have been a last resort but deep down he knew it never was going to be. If peace wasn't an option then he had to make certain that the enemy would hesitate – it was what Jayce would have done.

Arthuria staggered back to the ship clutching her limp left arm. "Are you okay?" Bjorn questioned as she dropped to her knees with a groan. "Yeah, I think. They got a lucky hit, I was cocky," she admitted. Bjorn held his tongue. It was concerning to see Arthuria injured so early – he knew injuries would happen, it was the sole reason he hadn't left Yuthura behind at the Capital, but he had been hoping they would happen later – after days at the least. "A War Hound?" he questioned. She shook her head. "No. Sorry."

"This was only the first wave. It was a probing strike," Foreborn stated. Jeanne nodded in agreement. "The next will be larger, more deliberate. If I was Xerxes, I wouldn't hold anything back. He now knows our strength – I have no doubt we are being watched. The next strike will be everything he has." Bjorn glanced out towards the stormy horizon. "We've bought some time. Everyone should get some rest."

Thunder crackled above the Slayer as Bjorn sat in his assigned quarters. It had been hours since the first wave and there was still no sign of Xerxes' fleet, but Bjorn knew better than to assume that meant a battle couldn't start at a moment's notice. He shook his head as he thought over the lives that had been lost from the first encounter. "A waste..." he muttered, resting his chin in his hands and looking at the floor.

A flash of lightning illuminated the room and the door opened, Arthuria standing in the doorway. "Any news?" Bjorn questioned, sitting upright and looking at her as she stepped inside and let down her long golden hair before setting her helmet aside on his bedside table. "Still quiet. We're in the position you ordered, but there's still nothing from either the Republic or Xerxes," she stated, dragging over a chair with her leg to sit next to him. "Can't sleep?" Bjorn asked. She shook her head, looking out towards the rain rattling against the window. "Jeanne is out like a light, so is Doc. The crew are nervous and... well... if I were to strike, now would be the time. In the night... in the storm..."

"He won't," Bjorn stated confidently. Arthuria glanced his way, frowning as she read his wayward expression. "Why not? It makes tactical sense. Slaughter us whilst we sleep – especially if he has therians capable of swimming efficiently." Bjorn shook his head, glancing towards her. Sometimes he forgot that, although he himself was only in his thirties, that Arthuria and some of the others were practically still children. She and Jeanne were only just over twenty, Morgana was even younger, so was Caelie. "To Xerxes this about more than just invading and seizing territory. This is about revenge. This is about concluding the Blood Wars."

"How so?"

"The Blood Wars happened long before you were born, but the consequences of it are still felt even now. It was a... waste, a time of pointless conflict, but no one then could really see that. I mean, it was all orchestrated by the Church after all. A means to put the therians down in status and elevate the Church into the military. Crach and his rebels slaughtered the hierarchy of the Empire, they all but eradicated all senior leadership. Only the Old Dogs were really left of the generation before Crach and the Exargas, but due to Gamble's tensions with them it pushed a lot of new blood into power, forced the Exargas, Truth and the other Admirals to create new ideas, new methods, that actually worked against Crach. They created the Marines, incorporated therians into positions of power, rather than just as conscripts, and forced the Church to only operate within the Navy. And with therians on both sides of the conflict, Crach's influence crumbled – forcing him into peace talks."

"But Crach had created monsters within his armies. The War Hounds were allowed to be feral, unhinged destroyers with little oversight. But peace doesn't really work with those types of people. So..." Bjorn sighed, shaking his head. "They were given up," Arthuria concluded. He nodded, watching the flashes of

light in the surrounding darkness. “They were meant to be killed, and had they been then we would have never been in this mess. But for some reason or another, the Church wanted them – as potent ingredients or for some other purpose. They were locked away for years, decades, until I let them out.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have, maybe I should have let them be buried underneath the Necropolis. Crach would probably still be alive and I wouldn’t be forced to kill my own kind. We’d have another ally within the Pirate Lords, what remains of them,” Bjorn lamented. Arthuria watched the storm with him, uncertain of what to say back to him. He wasn’t wrong... “I think, Bjorn, you oversell yourself. No one is that important, and Crach was old. Someone would have taken his position eventually. And then we’d probably still be in a similar position. Maybe it’s just bad luck, or maybe it’s being taller and stronger animal-folk that has led to your people being consistently conscripted into mercenaries. I don’t think you can change that. I think Admiral Exarga has placed the idea of your importance into your head to give you a reason to make this fight yours. I think it’s what Jayce would have done to convince you to fight, as he often does – he makes it personal. His father is probably the same.”

“But it is my fight. Regardless of Exarga influence. It’s my tribe’s fight, it’s... the boys’ fight too. Wam, Ohno, Fenn – they will all have to deal with this eventually. Should I not try to bring an end to... to it all, before it gets to them?” he asked, before sitting back as he read the uncertainty in the youngster next to him. She wasn’t capable of answering. She was too young and she seemed to know that herself. “I-I’m sorry, I... I don’t know. But you’re the closest thing I have to the Captain I chose to follow, so... whatever you decide – I will be there. I promise.” He nodded appreciatively. “Thanks. Get some sleep. It’ll be a long day tomorrow.”

The storm had cleared in the night and it felt like the clouds had also lifted from Bjorn’s mind. The start of spring sun shone down upon him as he stood by the Slayer’s Helm, his eyes ahead to the fleet amassing on the horizon. “And here I thought we would be lucky,” stated Yuthura, leaning unsteadily on her cane. “Since when has that ever been an option?” Bjorn questioned to her, with a small smile. “Hmph,” she returned, shaking her head. “Plan?” she asked. She wasn’t the only person looking to him for one, but compared to the twenty-plus ships ahead of them, the small fleet under his command well and truly stood next to no chance. “We stall,” Bjorn told her and the others. “We hold the line for as long as we can, and we pray that help comes.”

Seize the Seas Tales: Orders

“Admirals,” Alara greeted, standing to attention on her own ship as a pair of tired Rear-Admirals stepped on board. Alara recognised them both: Marka Atin and Reva Robot, both had been Commodores before the war and both had swiftly been promoted after the Sovereign’s arrival to fill the holes the conflict had left. They were by no means new or inexperienced, and both had reputations as bold and fair Marines, but Alara couldn’t help but harbour a twinge of disappointment. Marka stood taller than her, a broad, dark-skinned man with an eyepatch over his right eye and large split in his upper lip. Reva was otherwise similar to Alara in height, if only a little shorter, with similar olive skin to her and green eyes. Her curly brown hair was held back with a series of golden bands.

“Commodore, it is good to see you... mostly intact, the reports were... unpleasant to hear,” Rear-Admiral Robot stated, nodding to Alara before turning and watching the battlefield. “Are you fit to fight?” Atin asked, with an almost unnervingly genuine care. Alara nodded. “Yes, Admiral,” she returned. Robot nodded, continuing to look outwards. “Good, cause you’ve got one hell of a mission ahead of you,” she stated.

“Kai is out there almost entirely on her own. Her fleet was forced to ground and what remains of it has slowly been picked away. The landmass is large and it seems the enemy have responded to the destruction of the other two Sentries. More and more reinforcements keep arriving whilst ours are limited to the dozen ships we brought with us and the few that you have with you. For the moment Khalid has remained away, for reasons unknown.”

Alara folded her arms: there were all manner of reasons why he hadn’t engaged, but none were good. “My objective?” she questioned, hoping to hear words she knew she wouldn’t. “You’re to reinforce Commodore Kai,” Atin stated. “We’re going to hold back and maintain Naval superiority. The majority of Kai’s problems have come from being surrounded after being driven to ground. This is only the start, we cannot allow that to happen again. We will secure and establish a supply line. Admiral Robot will support you from afar with tactical information and orders, I will ensure that supplies, reinforcements, and anything else you require makes it to you.”

“Respectfully, how will you do that sir?” Alara questioned. A small snarl of a smile crossed Atin’s face. “We’ve received some upgrades since you departed. Communication is still slow but our mages are fast. They will teleport what you need to my ship. Can you get in there? Are your people able to still fight?” Atin

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asked her. Alara nodded, standing up straight. "Yes sir!" she stated. "We'll get to Cyrenna for you."

The Admirals nodded, glancing towards each other. "Then get moving Marine!" Robat stated. "Dig Commodore Kai out of her hole and show them what the Republic can do!"