

Chapter 220: Broken Against the Wall

Flames rolled across the waters around the Capital. It was never going to be easy, nor likely possible, to hold back Xerxes' forces, but Bjorn, Arthuria, Zhurong, Jeanne and Yuthura had done what they could. Ships had sunk on both sides, souls descending into the abyss in their tens to hundreds, but still Bjorn held firm. "Arthuria, lure them towards the long range guns," he commanded, spinning the wheel of the Slayer and scraping the bow of his ship against the side of one of the triremes that Xerxes had dispatched. "Starboard guns!" Bjorn yelled, his words relayed across his ship as the wall of cannons ignited and devastated the ship that had attempted to ram them. Survivors leapt and clawed their way onto the deck of his ship, his Marines lunging into action to repel the boarders.

But Bjorn ignored it, he had to trust in his people to do their part. Warily he glanced upwards, as if hoping to see the once familiar shape of Wren high in the skies, but Falconer was not here to guide him from above – he had to do it himself. "Admiral, we could use those forces you promised right about now," Bjorn stated into his communicator. "Not yet," came the voice of Admiral Philip Exarga. Bjorn scowled. Both Fleet Admirals had set off to deal with the other incursions, and for whatever reason Philip Exarga was holding back the forces ready to reinforce Bjorn.

The Slayer lurched as something heavy landed on its deck. "Xarga?" Bjorn immediately questioned, looking at the ancient giant of man. "I never had the patience for strategy," he stated, looking with his one good eye towards Bjorn, wheezing even as he stood there. The giant of the man looked like a shell of himself, his face was scarred and malformed, his left eye a milky white, and he had a stump just below his left shoulder. He looked ragged... broken, but the firm glare, grim expression and mane of hair reminded Bjorn of a lion on its last legs – the perfect reminder of who Xerxes had killed. A woman in a black veil and lightweight, skin-tight clothes of the same colour floated beside him on the tips of her toes: a Killer. She nodded to Bjorn.

"Evandril, this is too much for you – the Fleet Admiral directly forbade-" she protested. The leader of the Old Dogs bellowed, his raucous laughter quickly descending into rattling coughs. "I will fight to protect the Capital. A wounded dog can still bite. Captain Bjorn, where can we best serve?" Xarga questioned, looking up to him for orders. Bjorn couldn't believe he was being asked to command the man the Exarga's were named after, but given all that was going on – a heavy barrage of explosions illuminating the glowing barrier Jeanne had

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erected around the Slayer, giving a stark reminder of the losing state of the battle – he couldn't have asked for a better ally.

"Xerxes has not appeared, nor have his War Hounds. Give them a reason to show their faces, if you please sir!" Bjorn commanded. Xarga nodded, clenching his fist and leaping towards a nearby enemy ship – with a felt scowl, his guard followed after him. Xerxes' fleet had engaged with full force, or to what Bjorn most certainly felt like full force. More than likely a hefty reserve had been left behind in the Old World, but despite the decent volume of enemy ships – this fleet felt... small. As if it was still only a probe.

Bjorn angled the Slayer, bringing it back towards the Capital to allow the defensive guns to fully test their capabilities. For the moment, it certainly felt like they were winning, even if the Slayer was only one of two remaining ships within his fleet. But as he let that momentary thought come to his mind, a wall of purple dropped down from the skies – countless lightning bolts hitting the various weapon emplacements, resulting in a swift wall of flame and death. He span the wheel once more, turning to spot a glowing purple circle appearing within the centre of the circling enemy fleet, before with a flash a colossal ship landed in the waters. Even across the large distance, Bjorn could see the glare of the black lion therian stood on the Flagship's bow. Xerxes had arrived.

"Reinforcements are on their way!" came Admiral Exarga's voice through Bjorn's communicator. "Hold out!"

The deck of the Slayer shattered as a meteoric impact struck the ship. Bjorn felt like he was moving in slow motion as the black lion darted across the deck towards him, his golden eyes leaving lines in the air as he swung his claws through the Marines moving to intercept. Blood painted the air as Xerxes lunged forwards, his claws tearing open Commander Foreborn without question or thought. He lunged up the stairs towards Bjorn, his maw open in a roar, his arms pulled back as he pounced. The Pirate Lord was out for blood. The Therian King had come for what was owed to him.

A flash of gold slammed into Bjorn's chest, a small black knight planting a banner between the therians, whilst swinging with her sword to catch the first upwards blow aimed at Bjorn's throat. Jeanne blocked the first strike, another swinging straight into the side of her chestplate and battering her aside without concern. But the moment pause had been enough. Within the aura of Jeanne's banner Bjorn felt faster, stronger, whilst he knew the opposite was true for Xerxes. Bjorn swung his huge fist straight into the Therian King's stomach.

Xerxes doubled over, coughing out the contents of his stomach before Bjorn rocked his skull with a heavy uppercut that send the lion toppling down the main deck. Bjorn glanced towards the Jeanne-shaped hole in the Slayer's railing. He had to count on her being fine. Xerxes landed on his feet, glaring up at Bjorn with a snarl. "You have more of a bite than I would expect for a cub of the Empire," Xerxes growled, wiping his mouth – a swift ring of Marines surrounding him and waiting for Bjorn's command. "Republic," Bjorn corrected.

"Same thing. Do you think it makes a difference to our kind, our people?" Xerxes questioned. "Truth is a therian, he's the Fleet Admiral – times have changed," Bjorn returned. "Sure they have. This is the era of peace the older folk always dreamed about, isn't it?" Xerxes asked rhetorically. "In all honesty, Bjorn, I care not. I want the years owed to me, and there is only one way that is going to happen: if I take a piece of this Empire, one island at a time, and finish what my father started."

"The father you killed? He wouldn't want this and you know it. It's why he gave you up in the first place." Xerxes let out a roar and Bjorn roared back, the wall of Marines flinching as the two therians stared each other down. Xerxes held his glare until Bjorn glanced to the Marines he had claimed as his own. In a blink they were all dead, replaced by Xerxes' remaining five War Hounds. "Kill him!" Xerxes commanded. "Slowly," he added.

The golden eagle therian was the first to move, but compared to Xerxes he was nothing. The second he entered the radius of Jeanne's banner, Bjorn easily avoided a thrusting spear and grabbed one of his wings, tearing off the limb before throwing the disabled bird over the side of the ship. Next surged the crocodile, a heavy warhammer in his hands. Bjorn scraped his axe forwards, catching the weighty blow before sending ice flowing down the handle of the warhammer. The crocodile hissed in pain as his hands froze, but his body was wrenched backwards by the shaggy white boar just as Bjorn swung his other axe down towards the crocodile's skull.

Xerxes had turned away, leaving the presumed end of Bjorn to his War hounds, but he faltered as he neared the bow – his black fur shining purple. Mare and Pheldor, the owl and the elephant therians had also both faltered, their eyes upwards towards the circling cloud somewhere behind Bjorn. "King?" Mare stated with a nervousness to her voice. Xerxes turned around, darting forwards back towards Bjorn.

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A colossal crash of thunder roared across the seas around Bjorn, the entirety of the Slayer lurching a second later as something very heavy landed on the stern of the ship. The pair of therians in front of Bjorn staggered backwards, their eyes wide as their attention looked elsewhere, upwards and away from him. Fear painted their faces as a loud revving filled the air. A pair of figures then dropped down beside Bjorn, one wielding a heavy greatclub and the other a colossal anchor. "Took you long enough," Bjorn stated, Xerxes and the four War Hounds staring down the snarling expression of the black Dragon Taranis. "What can I say," Ordo stated, "traffic was bad."

Xerxes' attention was no longer on Bjorn, his eyes were instead locked firmly on Thalia – her face twisted into an inhuman expression of fury. "Mare!" Xerxes commanded, the owl beginning to chant and the other War Hounds falling back alongside their master. Thalia took a step forwards but Ordo held out a hand and stopped her. To Bjorn's deep curiosity – she didn't press forwards. "I will see you soon, Bjorn of the Frostbear Tribe!" Xerxes threatened as the War Hounds vanished in a boom of purple lightning. Bjorn turned to Ordo. "I need to speak to Jayce," he stated immediately. Ordo chuckled, shaking his head. "Don't we all. Cap's not here. Let's mop up, we have a lot to talk about."

It all felt unreal as Bjorn sat once more in his seat within the living quarters of the Stacked Hand. The battle had ended swiftly with Xerxes' retreat, his forces had no stomach to fight without their King and they had promptly began to retreat back towards the Frontier. He looked towards Wam, the Demonic therian form a curiosity and a great fear for him. The boy should never fallen in the first place, Bjorn couldn't help but feel that he had failed him. He then glanced towards Zeta, the trauma of her past months immediately obvious. Each and every crew member had suffered in one way or another, some physically, others emotionally. They all looked to him, but every so often they would glance to the other two people in the room.

Bjorn turned. "I owe you a great debt," he stated to Xarga. The old man shook his head. "This is my home. I would die for it and I could not stand by any longer," he stated. "You owe me nothing, Captain." That final word brought levels of discomfort to the others, and Bjorn could feel it. It had always been his position amongst the crew to take over in Jayce's absence, but this was different. It had been nine, nearly ten, months since they had been split up. Jayce was still missing, so was Caelie, Astris, Fenn, Falconer, Wren, RK and Little Witch. And although he knew where she was, Marisha was also absent.

“Thank you. Then... respectfully – what do you want from us?” Bjorn questioned. “To go with you,” Xarga stated – ignoring the silent pleas from his bodyguard. “Fleet Admiral Exarga has refuse to take me on this next leg and I would like to tag along. So may I request transport?” Xarga questioned. Bjorn nodded, looking back to his crew. “So we are heading back then?” Zeta asked trepidatiously. “Yes, but not immediately,” Bjorn answered. “I need to speak to the Admirals, but I believe they intend to take Final Bastion for themselves. The others must still be the Old World and we need to find them. No man left behind.” The others nodded in agreement. “Rest up, stock up. Who knows what awaits us.”

“You have no idea how good it is to hear your voice again,” came Marisha’s voice in his mind, as Bjorn held his upgraded communicator in his palm inside his quarters. “And you, I’ve been so worried. I’m glad you’re safe,” he stated, thinking over everything Ohno and Morgana had told him about their travels. “Safe is a curious term, but yeah... I will make my way to the Stacked Hand when you guys cross back over to the Old World. In the meantime, there’s a lot to talk about. A lot of... strange things.”

A knock came from the door and Bjorn sat up. “Sorry, someone’s at the door,” he told her, feeling the silent sigh from halfway across the world. He opened the door to find Morgana in front of him. “Admiral Exarga has called for you. He says it’s urgent,” she stated firmly. Bjorn scowled and hung his head before reaching for his communicator. “I’ll call you later. Exarga wants me,” he told Marisha before following after Morgana as she led the way.

Philip was waiting for Bjorn within the living quarters. “Bjorn,” he stated, not getting up from his seat and gesturing for Bjorn to sit. Other Rising Aces decorated the room, watching and listening. Bjorn sat. “Well done,” Philip said first. “Thank you, but I owe my survival to this crew and Xarga, not to you,” Bjorn returned fiercely. Philip nodded subtly. “Perhaps, but regardless the outcome was our victory. And now our next task is to plant our flag firmly and permanently into the Old World.”

“Our next task?”

“The Republic’s. I have permission to place the Stacked Hand within the Republic’s Fleets as a special operative. You could be military, officially, with your own unique designation,” Philip offered. A few chuckles came from around the room. “You seem to have forgotten that we’re Pirates. We’re allies, but that’s still optional,” Bjorn reminded. “Jayce wouldn’t accept, so neither will I.”

Admiral Exarga nodded, sitting up in his chair. "Fair enough. Then in that case I offer for you to join the Old World fleet. Fleet Admiral Exarga has personally asked for your aid in breaking through the Frontier and then helping to seize Final Bastion for the Republic."

"And why should we? As you can see, we're not full strength and we've already done a lot for you." Admiral Exarga reached into his personal bottomless bag and pulled out a file before placing it on the table and sliding it towards Bjorn. "Two of your crewmates are heading to Final Bastion on orders given to Commodore Beowulf Kai. They are going to be there, in the midst of the battle. This is not a threat, there is no intention to coerce you – I am simply telling you that Caelie and Astris will need your help."

Bjorn grit his teeth, 'not intended to coerce' – as if. "Fine then. We will join you," he stated. "But I expect to have all the details. I want full transparency." "Shouldn't be an issue. This fleet will be under mine and Cassandra's care. Truth has no oversight on this and we have no intention on hamstringing you. But let me make this clear from the get-go: you are not Jayce, I do not have any loyalty to you or the rest of your crew. Break our trust, put this operation at risk, do anything that makes us question you and there will be consequences – am I clear?" Philip stated coldly, firmly and plainly, with a simple malice that made Bjorn swiftly realise that the Admiral would easily eliminate them and wouldn't think twice about the decision to do so. "Most certainly, Admiral," Bjorn answered.

"Perfect. Let us hope that we can see ourselves at the end of this in a more peaceful world. You'll be kept informed, but be ready to depart within the next few days. We will take a slower pace as Cassandra makes her final preparations, so account for that with your resources. Equally, I've been told my adopted Granddaughter is fond of the ice cream here, so please stock an abundance for her."

It was only as Philip departed the room that Bjorn realised that outside of Jayce there were actually two members of the Rising Aces that the Exargas were fond of: Caelie and Astris, both of whom Jayce's parents had gone out of their way to provide for. He looked outwards towards the Rising Aces around the room. "Let's get Caelie and Astris back. Inform the others, I want the Stacked Hand ready to go at a moment's notice," he commanded.

An uncomfortable feeling filled Bjorn's mind as the Capital sunk into the distance several days later: a feeling of loss and grief – as if he was witnessing the city for

the last time. It felt unpleasant, but by all accounts – given the enemy he was about to piss off – it very well could have marked the end for them all. First came Final Bastion, and from there – if they couldn't find the others – their next enemy was most likely the Sea Sovereign and the Betrayers.

A hand tapped his elbow and he turned and looked down at Arthuria, Morgana stood by her. "Captain," she said with a smile. "You ready?" He smiled back, looking out across the deck of the Stacked Hand – his crew, the Rising Aces, looking up at him. Beyond them was a fleet of more than a hundred ships, with the Ursus Ultra at the lead. Fleet Admiral Exarga was visible from his position, the Stacked Hand sailing just to the side of her. Admirals Yashiro and Exarga were with them, along with a few other Rear-Admirals and numerous other Commodores, Captains and Commanders. For the first time in a while, Bjorn felt complete. He nodded, looking out to the sun high in the sky. "Always. Let's take this world back from the Sea Sovereign."

Astris struggled to fight back against the tears drowning her vision as she felt Beowulf's ship turn away from their heading. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she whimpered, feeling an agony of grief as she was forced to abandon Alara, Witchford, Riley, Brett and the others. There had been no word from them, but she knew something bad had happened – she could feel it in her blood. A hand slipped into hers and she looked towards Caelie, a look of sympathy on her face. "I'll be okay," she stated, wiping her eyes and sniffing. "It's stupid to be upset over."

Caelie shook her head. The news was good, Bjorn had contacted them, but Caelie knew what Alara and the Wolfpack meant to Astris. She would feel the same if she had been forced to leave the Rising Aces to an unknown fate. "Not stupid," Caelie said firmly. "Reasonable," she added, hugging Astris gently. "Home soon," she added. Astris nodded. It would be good to see the crew again. It had been so long without them.

She pulled away and looked outwards towards the horizon. Alara was out there. Cyrenna was out there. Both of them in the midst of heavy combat and fighting for their lives. "Survive, please," Astris begged quietly, leaving them to whatever fate awaited them.

Seize the Seas Tales: To Where It All Began

Wicke let out a half-scream, half-exasperated sigh as she realised that had she arrived a day earlier she would have encountered her crew: the Rising Aces, right in the Capital. “Look, relax – it wouldn’t have made a difference,” Damian reassured, drawing out an even greater well of frustration from within her that she was all but ready to channel into him until Enki stepped between them. “What he means is that they have their own task and we have ours. They’re close by, now is the time to get any information we can from them. You have questions, right Wicke?” Enki pressed. Wicke nodded, the ocean crawler was right – as he often was. “Yeah, no – you’re right. Rest up, we’ll reconvene in a few days – okay?” The others nodded and Wicke immediately turned on her feet and hurried off.

It was a little longer than a few days, but eventually Wicke reunited with her party. They had spent their time using their funds on nice food, baths and massages, new clothes and equipment, whilst she had been slaving away sending letter after letter to Mai Lu and Morgana for information on the Demons and how to capture them, whilst sending her own information on what she had found within the Dungeons so far. When the messages had finally dried up the emotions of their absence and the cruel reality that Jayce, and several others, were missing finally wore her down. The worry and guilt of being unable to protect her friends devastated her, but she knew that she could only allow her misery to affect her so much. She had a job to do, a mission to complete, a Dungeon to conquer.

“So the North then?” Morgause questioned, new thicker clothes covering her body. Wicke nodded. “It’s most likely going to be the least guarded of all of the Dungeons. It’s our best chance for multiple attempts,” she stated. Sabine turned and looked at the pier they were stood at. “And this rotten hunk of junk is our way there?” she questioned, a small worn boat sat waiting for them. Wicke looked towards Damian, the purveyor of the vessel. “It’s literally called the Reliable. What more could we want?” he questioned, to the groans of the others.

But Wicke smiled. It felt nostalgic. Just like when she had first set off from the Capital. She stepped forwards and leapt aboard. “Shall we get going? Or are we going to stand around until it gets dark?” she questioned with a grin. The others clambered on after her. “To the Ice Floes!” she declared.