

Chapter 222: Through the Wall

“Bjorn!” called out Zeta from the deck below, pointing ahead to a Null Legion ship on a ramming course for the Stacked Hand. “Yeah, I see it!” he called out, maintaining his steady grip on the wheel. “Taranis!” he called, a shadow covering the hot sun of the Frontier Archipelago. A streak of blue-black lightning crashed into the enemy vessel, sundering it before it could impact with the Stacked Hand.

Between the Dragons, the Admirals, and a desperate group of Rising Aces eager to reunite with Astris and Caelie, there was little the defensive force of the Null Legion could do to stop the speedy and hefty advance of the Republic Old World Fleet. Red lightning rumbled across the battlefield as Cassandra Exarga was unleashed. A heavy laugh rattled next to Bjorn, his eyes glancing towards the old man that had tagged along with them. Why Evandril Xarga hadn’t tagged along aboard the Ursus Ultra, Bjorn could only guess. Cassandra had swiftly gotten over her frustration towards the stowaway amongst her fleet, but for some reason the Old Dog wished to join the, mostly, youngsters.

Ordo laughed along with him, the pair hoisting a pair of laden tankards as the Republic demonstrated its renewed might, with a host of upgraded ships and weaponry alongside the newly trained Mages amongst the Marines and Navy. “Can you keep it down, we’re trying to fight!” Bjorn complained in their general direction. “This is no fight, this is one-sided slugfest!” Ordo returned. Bjorn could only sigh as he angled the Stacked Hand to follow right behind the Ursus Ultra as it began its descent and then climb towards the entrance to the Frontier.

They broke through into the foliage, leaving the flaming wrecks behind. “All ships remain at alert,” came Fleet Admiral Exarga’s voice throughout the fleet’s communicators. “They know we’re coming, there will be traps waiting for us.” Bjorn glanced towards his returning crewmates. “Anyone sense anything?” he called down to them. “It won’t be this close,” called back Mai Lu. Her intuition was normally correct, but she always had reasons behind her statements. “Any evidence to back that?” he questioned. She glanced towards Gaea. Gaea blushed and stood at attention. “Something’s going on back home. Mother is warning us to stay away,” she stated with a salute. Bjorn glanced towards Arthuria and Morgana, both of them speaking to their Dragons. “Something is coming, Bjorn, but its far off,” Arthuria confirmed. He nodded, trying not to look too overjoyed to have his crew back. “Then rest up but keep alert.”

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It felt good to be able to rest amongst the trees. Bjorn hadn't initially liked the Frontier when he had first passed through it. It had been overwhelming to be smaller than even the leaf of the giant trees, but as the sun set and the Fleet carried onwards into the night, Bjorn couldn't help but feel peaceful. The noise of the creatures all around them, the rustling of the leaves far, far above them, it reminded him of why he enjoyed their travels to begin with. But it also reminded him of how much they had lost. Had they kept small and out of the way, would they have avoided all the conflicts that their Captain had dove into for one reason or another. Bjorn didn't know.

"Thoughts?" Wam questioned, as he and Ohno approached the helm and sat down by him. Bjorn looked at the two boys: they had come a long way since he had first met them. Whether they knew it or not, they were no longer scared and lost teenagers. They were young men, valued amongst the crew as if they were anyone else. Bjorn gestured to the wheel and Wam took his place, looking up at him before nodding. "The New World side was always going to be easier than the other. I'm expecting a serious fight when we cross."

"There will be something big tomorrow, we can all feel it," Wam added. Bjorn nodded. "Dragons," Ohno stated, both Wam and Bjorn raising an eyebrow his way. "Makes sense, right?" he then added, identifying it as nothing more than a hunch. "Could be," Bjorn stated in partial agreement. Time would be the true identifier, but for the moment it remained a mystery. "Worth worrying about tomorrow, not today," he added. Bjorn placed a hand on Wam's shoulder before stepping away.

"D- Bjorn," Wam called after him. Bjorn turned and looked at the pair. "Anything on... on Fenn?" he questioned, Ohno looking with similar unease. Bjorn shook his head. "He's either with Jayce or with Falconer, maybe both. You'll see him again, I promise. We will find them. We'll find them all." They didn't look certain but they both nodded to him, and he nodded to himself – affirming his believe in the blatant lie. There was no telling where Fenn had ended up, and of the three... Bjorn ignored it, turning away. He had to hope that the young fox was still alive.

The morning came without fault, bringing with it a renewed sense of uncertainty as they all felt tension within the air. There had been no attack in the night, no sudden explosions or creatures in the shadows, but they could all feel something was coming. They could hear it too. "Bjorn," came a familiar voice across his communicator, his attention swiftly turning towards the Ursus Ultra and his eyes locking on its leader. "A sound you recognise?" questioned Fleet Admiral

Exarga, her bold white and red uniform visible for all to see amongst a sea of dark uniforms.

"I think so," Bjorn returned, looking down towards his Dragonlords. Arthuria met his gaze, nodding in silent agreement. The Stacked Hand and the Ursus Ultra turned around a bend in the path, the consistent chattering from high above suddenly falling silent. Bjorn's eyes widened as he looked upwards: the canopy above the narrow and long stretch of river ahead of them held all manner of colour. A thousand Dragons lay in wait. "By the ancestors..." he muttered, his eyes upwards, but every experienced fighter on his ship with their eyes locked down on the bubbling waters ahead of them.

Arthuria mounted Zhurong, the pair of them darting off the side of the ship and towards the colossal, white, serpent-like Dragon coiling beneath the waters. "Thákane!" Arthuria bellowed, as Nanabolele burst out of the waters and unleashed a huge torrent of concentrated water towards the Stacked Hand. The ship lurched as the water impacted against Soteria's and Tempest's shields, the impact strong enough to decimate the vessel without its protections. The Dragon then dove back under, likely moving to attack from below.

Bjorn scanned the air for the Pirate Lord Arthuria had called out. He couldn't see her, but no doubt she was present, watching somewhere. "Red!" Bjorn called out, the ocean crawler moving to the edge of the ship to dive overboard. "Hold your jiaoren back!" came an order across the communicators, Ordo immediately ensuring that Red received the message too by intercepting his body. "Now!" came Admiral Exarga's command, his voice firm and cold.

The water rippled as the numerous ships activated their sonic disruptors, a second later Nanabolele erupted out of the water, thrashing in pain. As if on cue, or realising that their leader was actually in danger against the fleet, the countless Dragons above began to dive, releasing a cacophony of cries, bellows and roars. "Open fire!" Flames, bullets, and explosions filled the air as the Navy unleashed their cannons and heavy guns on the skies. "Zhurong, Taranis, keep low!" Bjorn commanded, his crew sending their own attacks towards the Dragons.

Movement was limited, for both the ships and the Dragons, but through the hail of bullets some Dragons were managing to break through, using the corpses of their fallen brethren as walls to defend themselves. Bjorn did his best to ignore it, the best thing he could do was maintain course and keep the Stacked Hand moving forwards along with Ursus Ultra. The other ships would have to make do on their own. An explosion came from somewhere behind, panicked voices

filling the communication channels. "Ordo, Thalia, assist the flank!" Bjorn commanded, the pair darting off with Taranis to do exactly that.

Zhurong and Arthuria continued to battle with the water Dragon, the pair managing against the ancient creature on their own for the moment now that the Dragon's main domain had been removed, but Bjorn knew that was only temporary. "Morgana!" he called out, the young woman rushing closer to him. "Where is the Dragonlord?" he asked. She turned, scanning the swarm of Dragons still above them before she sharply angled her head towards the Ursus Ultra.

A red-lightning bolt consumed the sky, the Stacked Hand lurching as a pair of bodies crashed onto the main deck, one with their hand around the neck of the other. Thákane thrashed beneath Cassandra Exarga's iron-grip, Fleet Admiral Exarga's other hand held onto one of her giant axes - ready to strike. Bjorn had not seen the Pirate Lord in quite some time. She looked as he remembered: light-brown skin with narrow matching eyes, long, braided, brown hair and coloured clothes made from animal hides and feathers, but she looked a bit more worse-for-wear.

There was a shimmer and parts of her skin peeled away to reveal white scales, her brown eyes flashed, changing into a bright, icy, reptilian blue, and a frilled cyan mohawk popped out of her back and neck. She pushed free from Cassandra's grip, darting backwards towards the centre of the Stacked Hand's deck. Another woman appeared next to her, Arthuria skidding onto the deck after her before holding back as the pair stood back-to-back against the Stacked Hand's crew. "Hold!" Bjorn commanded, swapping his position with Ohno and stepping down towards the main deck. His crew held back, and, cautiously, so did Fleet Admiral Exarga. The second woman had ghostly-white skin, a white hooded leather jacket across her upper body and a cyan skirt covering her legs. Her eyes were the same reptilian cyan as Thákane's Dragonlord form. The Ancient Dragon Nanabolele, Bjorn realised, exactly as Arthuria had described.

"Why have you attacked this fleet?" Bjorn questioned the Dragonlord and her Dragon, plainly and promptly - battle still raging around them. "You'll doom us all!" Thákane declared, still clearly eager and ready to fight. "An invasion will only wash away what little temporary peace this side of the Frontier has!" She was young, Bjorn could tell that much, but it was clear that she had been through a lot and her words were not meant in harm or confrontation - they were out of genuine fear. Equally he knew that that meant she wasn't going to back down.

“Peace is a lie,” Cassandra inserted. “The Null Legion, the Sovereign – it isn’t peace, it’s conquest. They have subjugated the New World and the Old, this is how we start to take it back. Call off your Dragons, now!” she commanded. Thákane shook her head. “No!” she returned, the pair darting towards the edge of the ship through their shared idea of the path of least resistance – that path being through Morgana and Gaea. With a heavy splat the pair crashed into Soteria’s barrier, only to immediately pass through Gaea’s portal in the floor of the main deck, throwing them somewhere Bjorn could only question. “Where did you send them?” Admiral Exarga asked immediately, Gaea pointed vaguely ahead through the trees. “To my mother,” she stated with a proud smile. Bjorn shook his head. It was a trick they could only use in the Frontier, but it had worked. “That’ll buy us some time,” Bjorn stated, “we need to clear out these Dragons and fast before their leaders return.” Cassandra nodded in agreement, leaping back towards her own ship.

Despite the heavy losses the Dragons had taken, countless more seemed to be continuing to arrive and descend from above. The noise was overwhelming: screams from the fallen consumed by the fires, acid, lightning and ice of the Dragons, the roars and screeches of the dying reptiles, the thundering of the cannons. But then something cut through it all: a cry that turned the heads of every Rising Ace, and every Dragon. “It can’t be...” Bjorn muttered, another long cry echoing through the battlefield.

A large winged creature darted around an upcoming bend, the shadow dark against the wood of the trees behind it. She flapped her wings, darting forwards before flying over the Stacked Hand with a cry declaring her hunt. A pair of figures fell off her back, landing onto the Stacked Hand with a duo of soft thumps. A familiar fox therian looked across the crew, immediately rushing towards his brother’s arms. An unfamiliar wooden figure stood next to him.

The battlefield became irrelevant in an instant. Between Wren engaging in a brutal feast on any of the now smaller Dragons in her path, and the arrival of Falconer and Fenn, Bjorn and the others had their attention solely fixed on their returning companions. “By the ancestors...” Bjorn muttered, handing off control of the wheel to Xarga who gently nudged him forwards. Falconer looked... inhuman.

His head was still shaved, albeit shaved a little imperfectly. His unique eyes were still the same: both a firm green with a golden cross across his pupils and iris. For the most-part he looked well, muscular, strong, confident, but there was also a

distinct sickness to him. The wooden arm had grown, turning from something vaguely humanoid into something intimately monstrous. It was huge, extending downwards in length all the way until his ankle, with a width more akin to a muscular leg than an arm. The shoulder carried upwards, as if to protect the face like a large pauldron. Bjorn could see Falconer's old bow buried within the wood, a now permanent feature to his body. The twisted wood had entered his torso, spreading beneath and through his skin to cover almost a third of his torso and then upwards to cover the right half of his neck... and face. Where the wood met his face it looked skeletal, as if exposing a wooden skull beneath his skin.

"Fucking hell," stated Ordo as he landed on the main deck, returning from the rear. "Language," Falconer scolded comfortably, breaking the looks of unease and worry with a firm reminder that their friend was still who he was. Falconer looked around, his green and gold eyes scanning the faces. "Is this... everyone?" he asked, a hint of nervousness on his voice as he looked towards Bjorn. Bjorn returned his gaze with a nod, stepping forwards and placing a hand on Falconer's left shoulder. "It's good to see you, my friend." Falconer nodded, taking a raspy breath before standing up straight. "Does she still sail the same way?" he asked Bjorn. "Like a drunk ox," he returned back with a grin. Falconer chuckled, placing his left hand on Bjorn's arm. "Then she'll need a firm hand to guide her." "And a keen eye, held by the keenest of navigators. Welcome back, Falconer." "Good to be back, Captain. We have an interesting tale to talk to you about."

"Incoming!" came Xarga's voice from the helm. A heavy cracking sound drew all of their attention towards one of the colossal Frontier trees to their right. "My gods," muttered Zeta, the kilometre high tree slowly beginning to fall. Falconer stepped forwards, extending his right arm – his bow sprang out of his arm, a silvery green strand snapping taught. "Gaea," he called out, the dryad rushing to his side. Falconer grabbed a small round seed from his bottomless bag, holding it out to her. She tapped it with her finger and he then inserted the seed into a small hole within an arrow he drew from his quiver. Her pulled the string back and let the arrow fly. Gaea vanished with it.

"Arthuria, Thalia, Morgana, Ordo, deal with Thákane and her Dragon!" Bjorn commanded, the Dragonlord and her Dragon breaking free from the foliage. "Aye Captain!" they returned, the quartet rushing forwards along with the trio of Dragons. The wind whipped across the deck of the Stacked Hand as a redhead set off after them. Bjorn turned his attention away, back towards the falling tree. Fresh stems and vines were coiling around the trunk of the tree, snapping onto the stump beneath the cracks. The slow topple halted, and eventually began to

reverse. Bjorn turned towards Falconer, nodding to him before turning back towards the helm. "Let's wrap this up, we have the Old World to invade!"

Seize the Seas Tales: A King's Throne

The wind whipped the cloak wrapped around Jayce's face and body. His knees lay in the red sand, his eyes shut as he meditated within RK's gentle embrace – the huge rokken guarding him from the storm. In turn, he held Little Witch – the young black cat cradled in his lap. The howl of the wind didn't bother Jayce, his mind was elsewhere – his very soul wandering the darkness of the Underworld, and he wasn't alone.

His eyes snapped open, Caelie had filled him in. It had been nearly a year since he had regained his title as Pirate Lord, a month less than that since he had last truly seen his crew. "RK!" Jayce called upwards, tapping his fist on the rocky underside of his companion. "Time to move!" he told him, taking Little Witch and placing her gently inside his backpack – protecting her from the worst of the weather – before standing up and re-entering the storm. Jayce strode forwards, a wall of Focus surrounding his body and guarding him from the wind, the rocks and the sand.

He thought as he walked south, thinking on everything he had learnt about the state of affairs from Caelie. Everything from Alara's campaign to Bjorn's defence of the Capital, it hurt to think about how much he had missed but also felt overwhelming joyful that his crew had continued on without him. A grumble came from behind and Jayce glanced at the lumbering rokken. "Soon," Jayce stated without any real evidence. "At least, I hope so."

Months of walking and scavenging had taken their toll on him, and every other night he wished he could have stayed with Rosalynn for just a little longer than he had, but he knew he couldn't have. He'd have never left otherwise. "There!" Jayce eventually called out, the wind settling and a mountain emerging from the sand. But as he glanced back, he swiftly realised that the wind hadn't settled – it was circling the mountain and he had simply stepped into the storm's eye. A loud roar then echoed from somewhere nearby. "Let's move!"

Jayce spat out a hefty amount of blood as he finally staggered upwards and onto the flat top of the mountain. He held his side, the flesh torn and sore. The monsters of the Scourge had been harsh and dangerous and he felt ever-so-grateful that he might finally be able to leave them behind. Ahead of him, on top of the plateau, was a huge and ancient citadel comprised of dark stone blocks and

surrounding pillars. Only a single, temple-like building remained intact, the surrounding buildings reduced to rubble and ruins. A deep orange glow weaved itself out through the gaps in the surrounding pillars, giving an illusion akin to the glow of hot coals.

Jayce limped forwards, Little Witch wriggling free from his backpack and walking ahead of him. "Little Witch, it could be dangerous," Jayce warned, gesturing for her to return to his side. But the cat ignored him, her tail upright and flicking as she followed the stone path across the barren mountaintop. Jayce and RK followed after her, approaching the giant building's main entrance. Broken stone guardians lay in fractured heaps by the main entrance, and almost immediately Jayce found himself caught between a cat that hurried on ahead and a rokken that began to gorge on a fresh meal. "RK!" Jayce attempted, trying to physically pull the mountain onwards, but the rokken grumbled, shovelling the pieces of dark stone into the furnace in his back.

He turned to watch Little Witch but she had vanished. "Let me die..." Jayce muttered, looking upwards towards the clear and sunny sky. He bit his lip, debating between leaving the mountain behind and likely any chance of defeating any creatures that had made their home within the Great Forge versus letting the cat explore and trigger any traps that may be waiting. "We can take some with us!" Jayce told RK firmly. "I'm going in." RK ignored him.

The Anvil of Agron was very different from what Jayce had been expecting. For one, he had been expecting some semblance of life inside – whether ancient creatures or golems smithing away. Instead he found inside a giant, and almost flat, stone conical disk taking up the majority of the space. The disk was covered in countless metal moulds, awaiting something to fill it and above it swirled a ball of golden and crimson metal. The ball looked almost alive and was held between four large pillars sparking with red lightning. Little Witch sat curiously in front of the stone disk looking up at the fidgeting ball of metal. "Little Witch?" Jayce questioned cautiously, approaching the cat with his eyes on the orb. The cat ignored him before getting up and approaching his legs, rubbing herself against him as if to stop him going any closer.

A spark of lightning hit the metal disk, the entire object grinding loudly as it began to spin before slowly lifting up. The ball of metal twitched and lurched, as if trying to break free. It was then swarmed with red lightning before falling still and dripping onto the floating and spinning stone disk. The moulds were filled with the entirety of the previously suspended liquid metal, the disk taking the

balls place amongst the four pillars. The lightning then bombarded the stone, breaking pieces of it away until only the metal weapons remained, which floated for a moment longer before dropping downwards through a hole that had been covered by the stone disk. The Anvil then fell silent.

Cautiously Jayce approached, looking down into the pit. Countless weapons lay beneath him in a colossal mound, slowly filtering away as they slid down towards a ring of glowing portals at the edge of the room. A hiss drew Jayce's attention to Little Witch and then a huge stone disk slammed down to cover the hole, where his head had been a moment before. "Thanks," he told the cat, grateful for the warning.

A loud audible pumping sound then filled the air, Jayce's eyes falling towards a series of bronze pipes connected to several of the dark pillars around him. They led upwards, the ends depositing a thick and crimson liquid into the position where the moving metal ball had been. But instead, now a stone bowl floated between the four pillars, catching the falling liquid. Little Witch once again began to explore, setting off past the Anvil. Jayce pursued her, the pair of them following the pipes to another huge room, only this one filled with various colossal vats and a conveyer belt covered in glass vials. The automated machinery in this room was filling the vials as well as pumping the liquid to the Anvil and downwards through the floor to presumably other parts of the Great Forge.

Cautiously, Jayce plucked a red vial off one of the belts, dipping his finger in the hot liquid and tasting it. He then poured the hot liquid onto his wounds, the flesh knitting together. "I guess this explains where the magic items and potions in the Dungeons come from," he muttered, looking around at the operation and scratching his head. A meow drew his gaze to the cat as she sat on an ancient terminal. "Get off that, you don't know what it could do!" he scolded, approaching it and quickly picking her up. A stone tablet covering in glyphs sat to the side, the words glowing and moving before his very eyes. It seemed to be an instruction manual of sorts, carrying out orders written long ago. Little Witch wriggled free and dropped to the floor.

Jayce set it down and followed after her. She led him down a set of stairs, the pair of them stopping in front of a colossal vault door. With a bit of manual effort, and Sola worming his way into the machinery the door opened, revealing a small circular room displaying countless ancient weapons neatly on various racks. The

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cat then sat on his foot. "Well done," he told her. "This will do. Let's find something that will take us home."