

Chapter 224: Reunification

Astris held her breath as Final Bastion came into view. It had been a long and slow journey back north - one taken deliberately, much to her frustration. The only real benefit of the journey was that it had been the perfect chance to keep in contact with Jayce – entirely through Caelie’s shamanic technique of entering the Underworld. It felt awkward talking to him through her, and the information he provided was far from helpful: often only a brief interrogation on their status before he disappeared back into the Scourge. Still, if the Anvil of Agron panned out then hopefully she would see him soon. Hopefully.

The fortress island ahead of them was as massive and defended as she remembered, but now in addition to the heavy cannon emplacements were countless floating airships, all armed to the teeth with their own swarms of flyers. A sizeable fleet was staggered between the fortress island and the Frontier, and a backup reserve was stationed on and behind the island. The Null Legion were prepared with a vengeance, clearly eager not to let any more Republic vessels break through and into the Old World.

“Commodore!” came a voice from lower down on the deck. Astris immediately glanced towards her brother, his attention also on the enemy horizon. He turned and looked at the sailor, who pointed outwards to the east. An advanced and armed flyer was coming towards them on a direct intercept. “Battle Stations!” her brother declared. But the flyer then flashed a light at them, repeatedly in a pattern. “Hold on!” Astris called out, her brother shaking his head and making a single gesture to end the alert. A smile spread across Astris’ face as the flyer zoomed over the ship, barely avoiding the masts but angling the cockpit to give the only two people on the ship it mattered to a clear view of the pilot. Astris reached for her communicator, as a blue portal formed next to her and Caelie dashed through it. “Marisha?” Astris questioned, stepping through and finding herself inside the flyer.

“Good to see you,” Marisha stated, leaning her head into Caelie’s shoulder as she adjusted the controls whilst Caelie wrapped her arms around her. Eventually Caelie released her grip and Marisha glanced backwards towards Astris, the pair seeing each other’s faces for the first time in quite a while. “Just the two of you then?” Marisha questioned, turning her attention back towards the controls and the ocean below them. “I’m afraid so, but we know where Jayce is – roughly.” “Glad to hear. The others should be coming in just... about...”

SEIZE THE SEAS

A series of large and continuous explosions erupted across the bow of the Stacked Hand as it leapt free from the trees of the Frontier, the various spells and cannonballs all getting caught in Soteria's and Tempest's shields. "Captain, mighty generous of you to let us be the vanguard!" Ordo half-complained, an irritating grin plastered across his wrinkled face. "Quit your whining, sink some ships! Away team, get the hell out of here!" Bjorn commanded, spinning the wheel so as to get out of the way of the fleet hot on the winds of the Stacked Hand, but also to provide cover for the two gleeful Dragons and the large roc, all waiting below deck. He heard the clatter and thuds of the hatches built into the hull flapping open before quickly closing and almost immediately the loud roars of Taranis and Zhurong began to lure away some of the hefty cannon fire.

"Much appreciated, Rising Aces," came Fleet Admiral Exarga's voice through the Rising Aces personal communicators, the orders and commands of Admiral Exarga echoing in the background from the communicator machine provided by the Republic. "Do what you do best!" Bjorn returned, scanning the battlefield for any weak points he could exploit to break out of the kill box. "Falconer, give me an overview."

The New World Fleet was currently caught within a semi-circle of death, with the circumference manned by all manner of enemy ships. The airs above was littered with enemy flyers, gunships, and airships, albeit now with the added chaos of two Dragons, their Soulbound, and a few other airborne members of the Rising Aces with distinct orders to destroy anything hostile. The island of Final Bastion was utilising all of its long-ranged coastal artillery, and a reserve battle-cluster of enemy ships lay beyond the initial line, ready to patch holes and hunt anything that broke through. "There is also an allied fleet of ships not too far beyond the rear line," filled in Falconer, a great relief filling Bjorn's very soul as the Navigator resumed his duty as eyes-in-the-skies. "And another allied bird in the skies!" Marisha stated through the communicator, drawing out a bold grin from Bjorn. "Respectfully, I'm not coming anywhere near that field of death with this new flyer I have on loan. But I have two others with me who are itching for a scrap. Eyes up."

Astris kept one hand-cannon laden hand firmly planted to her head as she held her hat down against the wind whipping past her as she fell. A loud whooping was following behind her, Caelie quickly diving past her with her arms tucked into her body, her mask firmly stuck to her face, and her feather and fur cloak whipping in the wind. "You could have made a portal closer to the ground!"

Astris yelled on deaf ears, sighing as she abandoned her hat and tucked into a dive.

A pair of whoops and screams quickly shot by Wren, the bird several hundred metres up in the air, startling the roc as she quickly flapped backwards. "Sorry!" came a trailing voice that sounded like Astris. Falconer sighed, tucking into Wren and encouraging her to dive as well. She let out a loud cry of joy as she dove after Caelie and Astris, the pair quickly falling behind as she shot past them before pulling up only at the last minute.

Astris landed with a splash of red mist, the enemy crew of the Null Legion ship immediately turning towards her with fear and confusion as she bent her arms and held her pistols ready. "Watch your footing!" she warned. The masked figures glanced at each other with confusion before a shadow covered them, as a skeletal whale burst out of the ocean and crashed down towards the deck. Astris vanished in a burst of red mist, teleporting off the deck of the ship as it burst open, the wood of the deck suddenly reviving and growing large and twisting roots. She broke into a run, spectres and skeletons clambering out of the ocean and beginning to fight the Null Legion in her path, her eyes locked on Final Bastion.

Bjorn span the wheel of the Stacked Hand, bringing the bow towards the island. A huge swirling blue portal formed in front of the ship and a second later it landed on emptier waters, the battle far behind. Another portal formed nearby, the Ursus Ultra sailing through it. Another portal followed, then another and another as Caelie circumvented the enemy blockade from her new seat on Wren's back, using the height and the line of sight to manipulate the battlefield to her liking.

A flash of red lightning erupted next to Caelie, a gentle and familiar hand caressing the back of her head. "Good girl," stated Cassandra before crashing down like a meteorite to Astris' side. "Status?" Fleet Admiral Cassandra Exarga questioned. "Wounded are stable, dead have been buried and their tags retrieved. Commodore Kai is holding back until invited," Astris stated, the pair of them weaving across the deck to cover each other's backs from the onslaught of enemy soldiers. "Very good. Can I leave Final Bastion to you?" Fleet Admiral Exarga questioned. Astris nodded, vanishing in a splatter of red mist. "Deploy the Jets," Cassandra ordered.

A roaring of engines drew Bjorn's attention to the rallying Republic Fleet arriving through the portals all around him, his eyes immediately landed on several small

boats being placed in the water. They had no sails, no immediate and obvious weapons other than a forward-mounted machine gun buried within a small canopy of metal. Marines crowded into the back, no more than ten in number, before the small vessels launched forwards sending a huge spray of water behind them. They were astoundingly fast – basically bullets skating across the surface of the water. “Tempest, make us one or buy us one!” Bjorn called out, gesturing to the Jets. The djinn ignored him.

“Bjorn, I could use some assistance taking control of Final Bastion!” came Astris’ voice across the communicators. “Away team, leave the remaining flyers to the Dragons and move to assist your Commander,” Bjorn ordered. Zeta’s voice then drew his attention to the deck, his eyes following her pointed hand to the reserve fleet moving towards them. The now-repositioned Null Legion ships were creating a wall of ships on either side of the Republic fleet. They had escaped the kill-box formed around the Frontier and had now put themselves in even more danger. “Brace yourselves, it’s going to get bumpy!” he called out, choosing to turn towards the enemy reinforcements. “Captain!” called Wam. “Look!”

The clouds in front of the enemy fleet had begun to swirl, turning into a funnel that was lowering down towards the ocean. It sparked with purple lightning, a large purple magic circle forming on the ocean surface as something prepared to teleport in. “More enemies?” questioned Zeta in disbelief. But Bjorn shook his head, the tension in his body fading as a colossal bolt of purple lightning crashed down onto the ocean – leaving a single body behind, standing on top of the water with a pair of huge swords. “I don’t believe it...”

“Status?” Captain Jayce Exarga questioned across the Rising Aces communicators. “All crew present and accounted for, providing you have RK in that pocket of yours?” Bjorn returned, ignoring the cheers of his crew throughout the ship and the communicators, angling the Stacked Hand away and leaving the enemy fleet to his Captain. “Perfect, let’s bring this home!” Jayce stated, darting forwards and cleaving a ship cleanly in half - those behind it quickly beginning to turn away.

Astris ignored the bubbling emotions building inside her as she darted through the tight streets of Final Bastion. Jayce was back, the Rising Aces were back together at last – after almost a whole year of separation. Civilians cowered at the edges of streets, rushing back to their homes. Guild soldiers threw down their weapons, surrendering without a question of fighting. She couldn’t blame them – it wasn’t really their fight, and death was bad for business. But the Null

Legionnaires were relentless, appearing from every nook and cranny with little concern for the people they were supposed to be protecting.

Astris darted from Marine squad to Marine squad, often firing off a single shot or two before moving on to ensure the small conflicts scattered across the island turned in the favour of the Republic. She kept moving upwards, each break in the ceiling of the tight streets showing off a golden Paladin darting through the air, or a draconic old man with a sparking greatclub. She could feel her allies fighting around her, and eventually she felt them come to a stop.

Astris broke into the enemy command centre just as Fleet Admiral Exarga quartered the Null Legion General put in charge of Final Bastion. With six fast shots from Astris' two hand cannons she dropped the remaining dozen soldiers engaging Fleet Admiral Exarga's elite squad, a cold silence filling the room other than the heavy breathing of the survivors. The Marines all immediately dashed to defensive positions, their rifles trained on the doorways. "Raise the flag, I want every last one of Scáthach's soldiers routed from the city!" commanded Admiral Exarga. "Orders?" Astris questioned, stepping forwards to stand next to Cassandra. "Go home to your crew, Commander – then bring him to me. I want a chat with Pirate Lord Exarga."

With the flag of the Republic raised high at the peak of Final Bastion the few surviving Null Legion ships quickly began to retreat, separating in all directions and quickly making for the horizon. But Jayce didn't care – it wasn't his fight, not really. Instead he stood on the deck of his ship, surrounded by his people. But they didn't want anything to do with him. "For the sake of everything that is good in the world – go shower!" commanded Bjorn, desperately holding his nose as he stared at the scaly, dust and dirt-covered, feral Jayce before him. Even Caelie was hesitant to stand near him, her hand pinching her nose tightly as she poked and prodded Jayce. "Alright, alright!" he protested, backing away from his crew and letting Little Witch be the focus of the attention instead. He flicked his wrists, Sola and Luna both dropping to the floor with a squelch before they both slunk off somewhere in search of real food.

He retreated to his room, leaving his long hair but cutting off his ragged beard. After a long wash, he tied his hair up and threw on his old clothes – now all several sizes too large for him and hanging off his skinny frame. He then stepped out to the sounds of celebrations, to flowing booze and delectable food. "You have a lot to explain," Marisha immediately stated, hugging Jayce tightly in almost a tackle as he descended the aft-deck stairs to the main deck. "Me? I feel

like I'm not even top ten in the order of explanations," Jayce stated, glancing towards Zeta's short hair, Wam's magma-like fur, Falconer's wooden appearance, and the talking Dragons. He let out a short whistle, feeling Sola and Luna stick to his legs and slide their way up his body. They took back their positions on his forearms, creating an appearance of white dragon-like tattoos – the new colour a consequence of their visit to the Great Forge.

"There's a lot of stories to tell," Bjorn confirmed, grabbing Jayce's shoulder and wrapping him in a literal bear-hug. "And they will be, I'm sure. Thank you, Bjorn – for not... well... abandoning this," Jayce said earnestly, when he was allowed to breathe again. "In all honesty, she is the one who brought everyone back together," he returned, pulling Marisha into his body. Jayce met her eye and nodded appreciatively. "Of course it was. Nice job, Marisha – I owe you several." "Oh you owe me more than that, but that conversation is for another day."

Jayce felt Caelie's arms wrap themselves around his waist. He turned and held her tightly before looking towards Astris as she approached with a somewhat serious expression. "Alara?" he questioned, thinking back towards what she had conveyed to him through Caelie. "Alara," Astris confirmed. "Your mother wants to see you in the command centre." Jayce let out a sigh, looking across his friends and family as they all once again looked to him to lead. "Let's find out what the Fleet Admiral has for us."

They docked temporarily at Final Bastion before Jayce pulled the Stacked Hand back into its container. He had been expecting some of the crew to remain on board, but no one wanted to be left behind. The Dragons took to the skies to scavenge and Wren set off on her own flight, enjoying the once-again quiet skies to herself. Everyone else then followed after Jayce, Bjorn and Astris towards Final Bastion's command centre.

People parted for them, some bowing their heads in reverence, children pointing in awe at them, and Marines and Navy standing at attention as they passed. Little Witch remained firmly in Caelie's arms as they walked, the cat purring softly as they travelled upwards. "Is Myra here?" Jayce questioned towards Marisha on route. "No, she's heading up the Syndicate with Holli," Marisha answered casually. "What?" Jayce questioned in distinct confusion, but Marisha shook her head. "Later." He simply sighed and shook his head.

His mother was waiting for him, the command centre containing a whole variety of Admirals, Commodores, Captains and Commanders. Jayce immediately noticed his father. Philip gave a quick look of concern his way and a silent

question of if Jayce was okay. Jayce nodded back, looking back towards his mother. "Fleet Admiral," he greeted, stepping through the mess of command staff towards the centre of the huge room. "Pirate Lord," returned his mother, her eyes twinkling and a pained expression crossing her face before firmly being buried as she shunted away her feelings. "Thank you for your assistance," she added. Jayce grinned, turning and looking at Bjorn. "Oh, it was all him."

"Indeed. Captain Bjorn, you have my gratitude," Cassandra stated, the words unfamiliar in Jayce's ears, but not exactly uncomfortable. "Captain?" Jayce questioned, looking at his first mate with a raised eyebrow. "Someone had to be." "Fair enough. Anyway, Fleet Admiral – you wanted to see me?" Jayce stated, folding his arms. "Seizing the Frontier and Final Bastion was the first concrete step in our invasion into the Old World. Now is the time for expansion and to cement our position here!" Fleet Admiral Exarga declared. Astris stepped quietly away from Jayce, taking a position next to her brother.

"But first we must reclaim what is ours. At this very moment, Rear-Admiral Atin and Commodores Kai and Vanathur are undertaking an invasion of their own. As of just yesterday, they successfully invaded and took command of a Sentry, using it to damage Betrayal Barca Khalid's Fortress Ship. They are now in pursuit of the vessel with intention to force it to ground and to then stage a rescue of Admirals Vanathur and Vanathur. I am dispatching Admirals Exarga and Yashiro to--"

The lights in the room cut out, sending the entire room into an unnerving and thick darkness. The only light in the room were seven pairs of eyes: Jayce's glowing orange eyes, Mai Lu's pink and red eyes, Caelie's hazel and gold eyes, Tempest's electric blue, Wam's red and orange eyes, Astris's white and obsidian – the inside glowing blood red, and a pair of eyes floating above the central table locked firmly on Jayce: brown with a purple glow. Jayce felt his body freeze, the brief panic across the room silencing as everyone felt their lives hang in the balance.

"You will do no such thing," Scáthach stated firmly, the lights returning solely to illuminate her in the centre of the room. In the room full of the Republic's best and Jayce's entire crew, no one dared to move. Scáthach hopped down off the table, stepping forwards towards Jayce and looking up at him. She had grown out her dark orange hair, shaving the sides of it into a messy mohawk. A black lip ring sat in the left corner of her mouth and she had added extra piercings to her nose, a trio of black rings linking together. Her dark makeup was fierce and

she looked ready for war, even though she wore casual clothes – a tank top and a pair of shorts, wooden sandals on her feet, her nails painted black.

“Lovely to see you, Pirate Lord Exarga – I thought Kaina had killed you. I’m glad to be proven wrong, albeit I see that you still haven’t shaken your attachment to the Republic. Can’t deny that I’m not disappointed, but I’m not here for you. Fleet Admiral Exarga!” she chided, turning on her heels and showing her back to Jayce. She lay within an arm’s reach of him, completely exposed – yet Jayce felt she was anything but.

“As your... ruler, Sea Sovereign – blah, blah, blah – I’m denying your request to send assistance to Commodore Vanathur. You are not to send a single ship. A single soul. I have endeavoured to keep the prize of your dear Alara alive, and I’m having a ball seeing how she engages the task. It’s remarkable, honestly – I’m so proud. But if I catch wind of anything, and I will know, I will slaughter those Admirals publicly and will deliver their heads to their daughter, before her head to you.”

“Why intervene? Why is this a game to you?” Cassandra questioned, stepping forwards towards Scáthach. “Game? This isn’t a game, this a crucial moment for that young woman. A chance for her to be the hero of her story – would you dare strip that from her? She succeeds and she becomes a legend, and gets her parents back. I lose a used-up tool and gain a far better replacement. Win-win,” Scáthach answered. “Now, I’m not unfair – you’ve earned your place in this side of the world. Final Bastion is yours, as is anything else you can conquer. Make your mark, bring about some change. I’m rooting for you, honestly.”

“Why? We’re fighting your people, your Null Legion! Conquering your lands! What do you get out of this?” came Astris’ voice. Jayce glanced towards her, as did Scáthach, but Scáthach just grinned. “Little Astris, this world is mine – in its entirety. Why should I care if some pieces move around. It’s all mine regardless. It doesn’t affect me in any way at all.” The words rung out across the room, countless faces all turning pale and grey as the inevitable truth rang out. “It’s all pointless...” muttered Morgana somewhere behind Jayce, her words trembling.

“Keep yourselves busy, just... you know, don’t go anywhere,” Scáthach stated, approaching Fleet Admiral Exarga and looking up at her with a cruel smirk. “Am I understood, Fleet Admiral? You’re not to help Vanathur in anyway at all.” Cassandra remained silent for what felt like several minutes before finally she slowly opened her mouth. “Yes... Sea Sovereign,” she practically whispered, the

words feeling like knives in her throat. "Attagirl," stated the younger woman, patting Cassandra on the shoulder.

She then turned and looked at Jayce, walking across the room and standing in front of him with her hands on her hips. "The same goes for you. I don't know your connection or investment, and frankly I don't feel the need to know... yet. But this isn't your fight. In fact," she then stated, leaning to the side and glancing towards Zeta with a sadistic grin. Morgana flinched, cowering as she stood next to Zeta – her very breath stopping. "You've got your own battles with my Betrayers to undertake. I loved your songs, Blue Bard," Scáthach stated. Zeta shuddered, forcing a nod and a fake smile of appreciation. "I loved how much it pissed Strigon off even more, he begged me to kill you. So... kudos to you. Astris!" Scáthach then called out, turning on her heels and looking towards the Vampire Lord. "Kill him for me. I'll do anything for you if you're successful. You're much nicer to look at."

"Will you kill yourself if I do?" Astris stated. The entire room flinched, but Scáthach just smiled. "Noooooo," she returned with a chuckle. "But nice try. I hope that's enough motivation for you, Rising Aces," Scáthach concluded, turning on her heels once more to look at Jayce. Her face was angled towards him, but her eyes were looking elsewhere. Jayce heard feet moving quickly across the floor, someone racing out of the room in a panic. Scáthach's eyes finally looked back towards Jayce. "You might want to follow her. Desperate people do desperate things."

Scáthach then vanished into thin air and the room took a collective breath of relief. But Jayce turned immediately, looking where Scáthach had been looking. Morgana was gone.

Seize the Seas Tales: On The Hunt

"Commodore?" questioned Rear-Admiral Marka Atin, leaning on a crutch with fresh stitches across his right cheek and left stump of an arm. "Sir?" Alara returned, looking back across her shoulder as she stood in the doorway of his quarters. "Vanathur... we can't. Surely you understand the situation?" he questioned. Alara more than understood. She turned and faced him with cold fury. "Before you arrived, sir, this mission was to injure and wound Betrayed General Barca Khalid, to then hound him and retrieve our stolen people. A lot of time has passed and our forces have been decimated down to the few ships we still have, but I will complete the mission."

“Vanathur, I understand your... attachment, but...”

“There is no ‘but’, sir!” Alara returned on the brink of yelling. “We have lost so many and to give up now is to spit in their faces. My comrades’ faces. Rear-Admiral Robot’s face. My friends’... faces. I am going, whether you give permission or not, Admiral. If I have to go alone... I will.” The hardened Admiral in front of her, the one who had desperately supported her campaign, looked at her with an expression she was not expecting, not from him: it was fear, and Alara flinched from it as he stumbled back and sat down on the bed behind him.

He looked up at her with his one good eye, his singular hand trembling as he cautiously looked to the edges of the room. “There are eyes watching, and externals are invested in this Vanathur. Don’t, please. I cannot help you if you decide to go,” he warned, a genuine tremble on his voice that send shivers down Alara’s back. “How did... Rear-Admiral-” He shook his head, shutting off her line of questioning. “I will not stop you, and I can’t help you – I’m sorry. You may ask for volunteers, I will remain with the wounded and a single ship until our allies arrive. If I hear confirmation of your failure then we will retreat to the New World. Am I understood?” Rear-Admiral Atin questioned. Alara nodded, standing to attention before leaving the room and shutting the door behind her.

Alara looked at the assembled Commanders, Captains, and Commodore before her. They were weary, tired, and some injured to a serious degree, but they had all come when she had asked. “I am setting off in pursuit of Khalid,” Alara stated immediately, standing next to the wheel of the Omen – her latest adopted ship since the Blood Moon had met a slow and inevitable end after dropping her forces off. “When do we depart?” Commodore Kai questioned. “I take it the Admiral asked for a delay?”

Alara smiled and shook her head. She had intended to leave immediately, but the state of her forces had been worse than expected. “As soon we can. The wounded will stay here with the Admiral,” Alara stated. There were several immediate looks of concern and surprise. “The Admiral is not coming?” came Wulf’s voice. Alara shook her head. “He’s too wounded,” she lied – a lie pretty much all of them immediately saw through; none of the Republic’s Admirals would take anything less than death as a reason to not lead. “Is this sanctioned?” Alara nodded. “Will you join me?” she asked back. The entire group stepped forwards. “The Guard will remain here with the Admiral and the wounded. Any Marine or Sailor that wishes to stay behind may do so. Volunteers only, this is likely a one way trip. We are hunting a Betrayer after all.”

The sun was setting by the time Alara's forces were truly ready to set off. It felt like her body was burning as she impatiently tended to all documentation that was sent her way, but at least she had something to do whilst volunteers were rounded and rudimentary restocking was undertaken. She couldn't allow herself to stop. She knew if she did, then the emotions of the loss of Brett would destroy her, and any willpower she had mustered to continue the mission. Of the original Wolfpack, now only four of them remained: Alara, Riley, Astris and Wulf. Everyone else had retired or died. She shook her head, slapping her cheeks as she shunted the thoughts back into the darkness of her mind.

"Alara, we're ready," Cyrenna stated, stepping into the Captain's Quarters of the Omen. "Then let's go. Even split – choose your three ships, I will take the other three," Alara stated immediately, abandoning the paperwork and walking towards her. Cyrenna caught Alara's shoulder with her hand, blocking her path and setting her gaze firmly on Alara's face. "There's nothing for you to do. We have time, so rest. Weapon is sorting out an interception path, we'll cut off the Fortress Ship and delay its path back to Chull. As it stands, we need reinforcements."

"I can't guarantee anyone is coming."

"That's where you're wrong. The Brunxchume Fleet Admiral asked to see you if we were successful. Well, now is the time. I will take the five ships and hound that Betrayer, delay him as long as we can whilst you muster up some allies." "Cyr, I need to go with you, I need to--"

"Exactly why you're not. You just buried a friend, a damn good one at that. I've buried almost all of mine. I'm not burying you. We need fresh forces, and your team needs to rest, I need them to take him down and get your parents out of that fortress. Agree to whatever conditions he requests: introduction to Fleet Admiral Exarga, acceptance into the Republic, whatever is needed, but get us reinforcements. Understood?" Alara didn't respond. "Alara?"

"Okay," Alara said quietly. Cyrenna reached up and placed a rough hand on Alara's face. "Commodore, I'm counting on you. Come rescue me, I'll keep him busy, and then we'll rescue your parents."