

Chapter 225: Damnation

Jayce shoved his way through the mass of terrified, high-ranking Republic officers. Politeness didn't matter at this point, and their views on him were irrelevant. "Morgana?" he yelled out. "Morgana!" he screamed, dashing out into the open air and watching in horror as she soared off into the horizon aboard her broomstick. It was the fastest object they had in their possession, faster than the Dragons or Wren, faster than the Stacked Hand by far, and even faster than the flyer. They couldn't catch her. It simply wasn't possible. He took a step forwards, faltering as he felt a pair of lips breathing in his ear. "A crew is only ever as strong as their weakest mind."

Jayce shook off Scáthach's taunting, turning to his crew – now recovering from the shock of the Sea Sovereign's manipulations, threats and taunts. "We have to go after her!" Arthuria stated firmly, walking past Jayce and beginning the descent towards the docks, only to falter as she realised everyone had paused and was instead looking towards Jayce – his face twisted in pain and hands clenched. "What are we waiting for?" Arthuria practically yelled.

"Arthuria..." Jayce said quietly. Alara was outgunned, she didn't really stand a chance against Barca Khalid. There had to be a way to help her, damned be the consequences. A hand placed itself on his shoulder and he flinched, turning to look at Bjorn. "Morgana comes first, you know that," he told Jayce firmly, shutting down any question about their next move. "Fuck!" Jayce cried, grabbing his long hair and looking up at the dark skies. "You're right," he admitted. Scáthach had made her demands clear: there was nothing the Rising Aces could do without serious consequences that they weren't ready for, and there were far more pressing matters than Jayce's beloved. "Caelie, get us to the docks, we're going after Morgana!" Jayce declared, a portal appearing for the entire crew.

They stepped through, other than Jayce, Bjorn, Astris and Caelie, who instead looked back towards Final Bastion's command centre. His mother looked busy, dealing with the fallout of Scáthach, but he managed to catch her eye for the briefest moment. "Go!" she stated clearly, "we have her." He nodded, turning away and following after his crew. "Before we go, I'm taking one of those Jet things," Bjorn told Jayce. "We can't catch her. But that doesn't mean we won't catch her. Do we have any idea where she would go? She didn't go towards the Frontier, why?" Jayce shook his head. He didn't know, but there had to be clues... somewhere.

It felt wrong going through Morgana's things. It was something no one wanted to do, and inevitably that task of breaching her privacy fell on Jayce, Arthuria, Bjorn, Astris, Marisha and Yuthura: those in command and those that knew her best. "Anything, Doc?" Jayce questioned, ignoring the array of clothes and undergarments being tossed across Morgana's bed by her sister. Yuthura faltered, glancing at the others in the room as she went through her therapy notes. "Doc, I need to know."

"She's been terrified of Scáthach for some time now. The split up of the crew gave her a chance to see her old family and in a lot of ways that reinforced her attachment to... well, us. It made her think on just what we meant to her, and everything she stood to lose. That... woman, she terrifies me too. All of us, but she targeted Morgana and there's no telling what she could have been seeing instead of what we saw and heard."

"Marisha, did you see or hear anything when you two were travelling together?" Arthuria questioned. "Nothing more than I would expect any of us to have gone through. Nothing particular traumatic in relation to the Sea Sovereign. We found out information on the Guild's connection to Scáthach but... I guess Morgana is young – I don't know. I-I couldn't have predicted this. Maybe I just wasn't looking close enough?"

"You're not to blame," Bjorn comforted, tossing a notebook to Jayce who glanced through it before handing it to Yuthura. Yuthura seemed to grow paler by the minute as she flicked through the notebook. "Get Mai Lu, now!" she told Jayce with a great sense of panic. Jayce glanced towards Astris, who dashed out of the room immediately. "What is it?" he questioned. Yuthura slowly sat down on the bed, shaking her head and rubbing her forehead. "The ritual that doomed the Witches, that was only a precursor to the magic they intended to use. Morgana has..."

Mai Lu and Astris both stepped into the room and Yuthura immediately scowled and shot a glare her way. "Just what in hell have the two of you been concocting together?" Yuthura snapped, throwing the book across the room to land at Mai Lu's feet. Mai Lu picked the book up, brushing the leather cover before holding it with reverence in her hands. "Nothing particularly special," she returned. "Morgana was curious, and frankly so was I. It's purely hypothetical."

"Just... explain!" Bjorn interrupted, ignorant of what they were talking about, and uncaring about the major intricacies. "It's a ritual to turn back time, one that requires a mass sacrifice of lives to achieve fruition," Yuthura stated clearly. All

heads turned towards Mai Lu. "The number of souls would be... extreme, and it's impractical – a waste of time when you cannot predict the consequences of simple changes. You also effectively doom yourself, planting yourself backwards into the time stream in an adjacent manner. It would shred this universe down to next-to-nothing. It's like blowing up a house in order to stop a draft."

"When was this... discussed?" Jayce questioned slowly, his voice almost in a growl. "A while ago – I pointed out the flaws in Zoya's work and clearly Morgana decided against the advice of Baal and myself. As said, time is not our specialty." Jayce felt a twitch in the back of his mind, an awkward bubble of emotion spreading outwards from the other soul in his body. "Paimon?" Jayce questioned aloud. "I... saw no harm in assisting," came the Demon's voice out of his neck. "Fuck!" Jayce yelled, kicking a hole in Morgana's wardrobe. "So she's looking for somewhere to do this ritual? Somewhere where she can sacrifice people to plant herself back in time – to do what, kill Scáthach before she becomes a threat?" No one could answer, there was no telling what Morgana was thinking. "How many souls?" Jayce questioned.

"A hundred-thousand or so," Paimon answered. Jayce shut his eyes – at the very least there weren't many places she could find that. "And what of the spell components, where could she obtain that without the Witches' Philosopher's Stone?" he questioned, grateful that he had ordered it dismantled and the souls released. Yuthura looked at the floor and this time it was Jayce's turn to turn deathly pale. "No..."

"It was a waste and too useful to--"

"Yuthura," Jayce groaned. "You've got to be kidding me? Tell me you're joking!" She shook her head. Jayce crouched down and hugged his head, groaning loudly. "Right!" he stated firmly, accepting just how much trouble they were in. "I want Falconer to list every possible location in the direction she headed. We're then to head there as quickly as possible. I'm guessing it won't take her long to set up the necessary ritual circle for whichever city she chooses. We're all dead otherwise."

The following days of travel brought nothing but anxiety to the entire crew. Every passing moment they questioned whether everything would simply end, whether they'd blink and find themselves in oblivion, or maybe they'd feel the world shredding apart. It was unknown what would happen to them if she succeeded, and there was genuinely no way to tell when it would happen – they could only hope they made it in time.

They continued sailing southeast, following any magical hints they could to track her. She ignored every attempt they made to contact her, likely having already either ditched her communicator or buried it deep within her bottomless bag, but Jayce had a feeling that she was still listening. "I understand how you're feeling," he said into his communicator late at night, staring out of his window at the large moon ahead of him. "I'm scared too. Believe me, I'm terrified too Morgana. Scáthach... she's a monster. But all monsters fall eventually, and I know that together we can defeat her. Please... If you can't believe in yourself, then believe in us. Don't throw everything we've done together away." Silence followed, but for the briefest of moments he thought he heard a faint sound slip back through.

They came to the Brunxchume city of Winow, a large city build in an open plane of sand and mesas, a city that both filled the necessary population size and was surrounded with a large enough expanse of earth that a ritual circle could be formed around it. "Falconer, scout it out – if she's not here then we need to move quickly to our next destination." Wren and Soteria shot up into the air, the pair of them flying quickly towards the island ahead of them. The minutes passed slowly, the entire crew holding their breath as they awaited confirmation. "She's here." Jayce looked towards Caelie, a portal immediately forming to take them forwards. The pre-agreed group of Arthuria, Jeanne, Jayce, Caelie, Astris, Zeta and Yuthura immediately dashed through, landing on top of a huge, flat mesa.

Jayce darted towards the edge, skidding to a stop as he looked down at the large desert city before them. It was pretty, built with large surrounding walls to defend against the orange sands, with a city build mostly of saloon and ranch-style buildings. Cacti lined the streets and open desert and a huge river cut through the circular walls. But the river itself seemed to be drying up, and on either end – outside of the walls – the river had been dammed, huge masses of sand and rock placed in the river to stop its flow. "My gods..." Jayce muttered, glancing across the start of the colossal ritual circle surrounding the city. "There!" cried Arthuria, pointing to the south of the city. Morgana was floating on her broomstick, using spells and a small workforce to carve into the sands around the city. "Caelie!"

"Morgana!" Jayce yelled upwards, landing on the sands as he passed through Caelie's portal. She flinched, noticing him immediately and rounding her broomstick to face him. "Don't stop me! This is the only way!" she cried. "Morgana, enough! Stand down!" Jayce returned. She shook her head and pulled back on her broomstick angling towards the city. "Zeta, Jeanne, stop the locals

from finishing the circle. Everyone else, intercept her!" Jayce commanded. "By any means necessary!"

Jayce dropped down through Caelie's portal, landing in the sands in the centre of the city. Morgana turned and glanced back at him with a teary expression of frustration. "Leave me alone!" she cried, drawing her wand and angling it towards him. "I can't let you do this, Morgana! It isn't the way! It isn't our way!" "And I can't let you stop me!" she cried, unzipping her leather jacket and throwing it aside. She wore a simple black bralette and a matching skirt. She kicked off her shoes, stepping backwards and taking a defensive stance. "Morgana..." Arthuria said softly and with subtle shock. Morgana's entire body was covered in countless magical tattoos, an arsenal of preloaded spells ready for a serious engagement. "I'm sorry," Morgana returned. Jayce lunged forwards, commanding Sola and Luna into a pair of longswords. "Me too."

An explosion send Jayce springing backwards, a duo of red and green bolts carving through the air towards him immediately afterwards. Jayce swung with his blades, ducking the red bolt and batting the green blast aside – it impacted a house, the front wall turning grey before crumbling away into dust. Morgana was slinging lethal spells, and that immediately changed the group's response. Astris unloaded her pistols, the first volley loaded with impact rounds designed to incapacitate. Morgana tapped her shoulder and ankle, weaving to the side with an unusual speed – any shots she couldn't avoid harmlessly bounced off a red transparent barrier. "Caelie, get reinforcements!" Astris stated, the ground igniting below her feet before erupting in a hot blast.

Jayce didn't have time to worry about his companions. Morgana knew them as much as they knew her, and that meant she knew their weaknesses whilst she had prepared to cover hers. He glanced up at the hot sun, there was little cover other than buildings for Astris and an unknown number of civilians were hiding inside, reducing her usage of them. Arthuria darted forwards leaving a trail of glowing golden feathers from her wings. But rather than retreat, Morgana got in close, leaping and landing on her broomstick before riding it like a board up into the air. Arthuria followed closely, resistant to using her most powerful spells against her own sister, whilst Morgana kept a clear distance – counting down the seconds.

The wings faded, Arthuria's clock with her greatest weapon hitting zero. Morgana then struck, twisting on her broomstick and arcing downwards towards her falling sister. Their golden eyes met, Arthuria's wide in shock,

Morgana's cold and emotionless. "You always were too trusting," Morgana said quietly, unleashing a point blank blast of black energy into Arthuria's chestplate. Arthuria flew across the sky, leaving a smoking trail behind her from the impact as she descended like a downed flyer towards the ocean and the approaching Stacked Hand.

A bolt of golden light impacted the sand next to Jayce as Morgana descended back towards the centre of her ritual circle. The bolt faded, leaving behind it a glowing spear reminiscent of Jeanne's banner. Jayce's eyes widened and then his vision disappeared as a blast of heavy heat and light shut off the world to him. He heard Astris screaming, somewhere nearby – the intense light forcing her way from the centre of the circle. "Astris, fall back!" he ordered. She grit her teeth, her skin bubbling and melting with every second she remained nearby. "Fuck!" she yelled, dashing backwards towards cover, leaving Jayce alone and blind.

He turned towards the centre, extending outwards with his senses to feel Morgana's presence. "Go on then!" he yelled, feeling her watching him from atop her broomstick. "Finish this! Kill me! It's what you're going to do anyway!" She shook her head, descending to the ground – her wand still pointed at him. "You don't understand, do you? I'm doing this for you! For all of you!" she screamed. "A world where this never happened! A world where you and Alara are dumb and happy! A world where my family are together again! A world where we can be happy and free from the inevitable loss that she will inflict on us! We will lose, Jayce, this is how we win!"

"By sacrificing thousands of lives? How is that a win?" he questioned back. She shook her head. "These lives mean nothing. They won't even realise they're dead, it's just a cost and then it undoes it all. They live too! Are you blind?" she questioned, only to then immediately regret her choice of words. "Yes!" he returned with genuine anger. "What about us? Your crew? Your friends? Your family? You're throwing us away, after everything we've done together! It will all go."

"Yes... it will. And I'm sorry for that, but I will treasure it, always. I will bear the burden of our memories and what we lost, but I cherish that you will all get what you have always deserved in exchange – peace."

"Morgana, please – I beg of you, don't!"

Morgana descended down to the floor, placing her hand into the sand. Jayce lunged forwards but a bolt caught him in the chest. He fell to his knees, eyes wide

and unseeing before he hit the ground – his body refusing to listen and his very breathing hot and painful. “Forgive me...” Morgana said quietly, pulling out the red orb containing the souls of the Daughters of Shade from her bottomless bag. But she then yelped, turning and pulling a dart out of her backside.

“You!” she stated, a heavy explosion of dark smoke detonating at her feet. She coughed, staggering backwards as her vision blurred. “No! Stop it!” she yelled, her words slurring and eyes closing on their own as she tried to keep them open. “Yu-” Morgana slumped to the floor, the red orb rolling free from her hand. A cane prodded Jayce’s lower back. “Come on, get up. It takes more than that to put you down,” Yuthura stated, a sharp pain between Jayce’s back jolting him back to consciousness, his vision slowly returning to see Yuthura place a pair of antimagic shackles on Morgana’s wrists. Jayce groaned as he looked up at her. “It worked then?” he questioned to her, forcing himself to his feet and looking down at the unconscious member of his crew. “Indeed, but I’m hesitant to call it a success. Now what do we do with her?”

Jayce genuinely didn’t know. No one did. For the first few days, whilst the Rising Aces were destroying any and all traces of the ritual circle and Morgana’s notes on it, she was sealed within her quarters – kept under guard by rotating members of the crew, except to Jayce who focused on catching up on everything he had missed. It had been a lot, but his one relief was that it seemed that Wicke and her little group were doing well on their mayhem-causing journey. He sat in his quarters, staring deeply into Little Witch’s large eyes whilst pondering his options, until finally he made his decision.

“You’re to leave this ship and not return until I send for you,” he stated firmly to her in front of Arthuria, Bjorn and Yuthura. Morgana looked up at him, her eyes wide and mouth slightly open. “Jayce?” Arthuria questioned on her behalf, sitting down next to her sister with a groan – her ribs not entirely healed yet. “You’re to go north to the Ice Floes. You will find Wicke, Damian and your sister – Morgause – waiting for you. You will help them with the Dungeon there and will give them these communicators such that we may keep in better contact with them. This is your punishment and I hope whilst you’re there you will think over both how lucky you are that it is this light, but also why I am giving you this chance to make up for your actions. Do you understand?” he asked. Morgana looked down at the floor, silent tears falling from her chin and nose as she nodded. “Pack your things. You leave in an hour. Soteria will go with you, she’ll keep you safe. She has already been informed, the others have not.”

The goodbyes were tense and brief – the majority of the crew having already had their chance to voice their anger and bitterness towards her across the previous couple of days - and without anything more than a simple: “I’m sorry,” she departed – flying off north aboard her broomstick with her Dragon following behind. They all watched her disappear into the horizon, the eyes slowly drifting away one by one towards Jayce. “How do you know she won’t try it again?” questioned Wam.

“She’s young, like you, it’s only normal to be afraid of the monsters that await us and the consequences that will happen to us for challenging them. She’ll grow from this – I know she will – and the Morgana that comes back will be different from the one we sent away.” Jayce then turned towards Zeta, Ordo and Astris. “It’s time to put some fear in those Betrayers. A promise was made to give aid to those people in the east, so let’s make good on it.”

Somewhere, far to the south, an entire island disappeared – consumed by a cataclysmic blast of fire. “Test complete,” stated Pheldor – the Elephant War Hound. “Perfect,” stated Xerxes, with a malicious grin enjoying the scent of vaporised flesh and smoke. “Begin shipping. We will wipe the seat of the Republic off the face of this planet,” he ordered. “And send the Rising Aces a gift.”

Seize the Seas Tales: One Leader to Another

Alara glanced towards the row of armed guards stood before her. They were all heavily armoured, dressed from head to toe in golden metal with mirrored glass visors that shone in a brilliant blue – flashing back her own expression of unease. The Brunxchume Elite were something completely different from anything she had seen before, and they all bore royal insignia that implied they were reserved purely for guarding only the most important people within the hollow kingdom and its greater islands. With an empty throne and no royal line to succeed it, these Elite had likely been retired, and as Alara read them through her Focus she sensed no young men or women amongst them. They were all hardened veterans, called back to serve by the retired Fleet Admiral.

“You are expected, Captain,” stated one of them, the two closest to the middle turning to their sides to let her pass between them. Alara glanced back to Wulf and Riley, Artemis and the therians were stationed at other ends of the alleyway, keeping guard. “Wait here,” she told them, their personal protests hidden well but far from invisible in Alara’s eyes. They knew her, and they knew that this meeting meant everything to her. They also knew that she was compromised.

Just that morning she had called on Brett to scout ahead, the cold and cruel loss digging in deep as she remembered his absence. They stepped back, watching the Royal Elite with caution, as she stepped forwards – down into the underground bar she had once visited, so long ago.

Just like last time, the small bar was empty other than a barkeep dressed in smart black and white flowy clothes and another old man sat on a stool at the bar. Alara approached cautiously, glancing around in anticipation for a trap; the low light left countless shadows and Alara had felt constant eyes upon her for some time now. She ran her fingers across the smooth wooden surface of the bar, stopping as she stood next to the seated old man. “Captain,” said Advisor Abdul Malik, swirling the glass containing an ochre-liquid and not looking her way. Alara sat down on his left, an identical glass immediately being placed before her and a matching drink filling it. “It’s Commodore now,” Alara returned, “Advisor.”

He looked directly at her, glancing down towards her metal right arm, the new scars on the lower part of her face. She met his gaze, glancing away from his hardened and grizzled face to the formal yet casual clothes adorning his body. He wasn’t wearing anything distinctly militaristic and Alara sensed that was deliberate. This was personal, in more ways than one. “Among my people, to become a Commodore is a badge of a lifetime of hard effort and work. It is not a title for the young and inexperienced, but... although I see that you are still young, Vanathur, you are certainly more experienced than last we met.”

Alara nodded, taking an unafraid sip from her drink. It was bitter, but smooth. “I also see that you are still on the same crusade, the same foolish mission that I last recommended that you abandon. But this time it appears that the consequences of your objective have fallen on my people, as well as yours,” he stated with a cold fury that Alara felt to her core. “You wear marks of grief, I see it all over you,” he then added, the fury dissipating and a solemn sadness lining his words. “I am sorry.”

Alara shook her head. “I am too. For the losses of my people, and yours. They were casualties in a battle that wasn’t theirs. I am here-” He held up a fast hand to stop her, taking in a long inhale before following up with a longer exhale. “I have heard of your... victory. My people’s guardians are gone and Khalid’s Fortress has a new skylight. He is on his way here for repairs and a resupply, his movements hindered by the cunning positioning and sacrifices of your partner Commodore. My people will be casualties of this fight, and yet you have come here to ask for my aid?”

“Captain Irall-“

“I am aware of what he said to you. I also recall he told you I wished to speak to your command, not to you – as pleasurable as it is to see you. Where are they?” Alara looked down. “I don’t know. I am still receiving resources but I am alone.” Advisor Malik rubbed his chin. “Then the tidings surrounding you are even more dire than I thought. My spies informed me that Betrayer Khalid was given orders to keep your parents alive, on consequence of his own death.”

Alara felt her heart stop for a second. “The Sovereign interfered?” Alara immediately inferred. “Indeed, she must have. Then that means she likely also interfered in assistance coming to you. Your people have made landfall and have claimed Final Bastion for themselves – aid is present and in remarkable abundance,” he informed. Where his words would have brought relief to her, instead they only brought worry. He met her eyes, his gaze shining with fascination and curiosity. “Why you?” he asked.

Alara didn’t know. She had no idea, but the truth was obvious. The Sea Sovereign had interfered against her and also for her. He looked down. “And what could the Warhorse be thinking in letting us meet?” he questioned aloud. “Am I to aid, to deter? What is asked of me in silence?” he pondered. Alara felt the invisible eyes upon her back – her next words would mean everything. “She doesn’t care – she’s never cared,” Alara stated. “To the Sovereign we’re all just toys, pieces on her chess board. She’s set a stage for us to entertain her and all this time that we spend wondering about what it is she wants, we fall deeper into her clutches. This world is hers, she doesn’t care about the changing of borders and allegiances, she just wants something to happen. She’s like a child, desperate for her next fix of excitement, and at the moment I am her favourite toy. But it doesn’t have to be that way. The small changes might lead to big ones. And the big ones may result in a cascade of small changes that will affect her in ways she couldn’t possibly predict.”

“Advisor, your people look to you – those guards outside tell me exactly that. Once you were a Fleet Admiral, perhaps it’s time to be again, and if not that then that empty throne you watch so carefully might be better suited with you in it. I intend to kill Khalid or die trying. There may not be anyone else who will come along with as great a chance to succeed. Give me that chance, that opportunity to end his grip on you, and your people. Please?”

Fleet Admiral Malik eventually nodded. “The foolishness of youth is an inability to wait. The foolishness of the old is to not see that the world has already

changed. The world has changed, maybe I need to as well. Passivity is to live a long death. You will find Irall and a small fleet of renegades at these coordinates," he stated, handing her a small scrip of paper. "When you return, this city will be in lockdown. My people will be forced to fight against you and you will find no refuge. But any allies that I can muster will wait for you in the desert beyond the city wall. That gate has remained unbroken for millennia – you will be the one to change that, and, if you succeed, then my people will rally to you. From there the Fortress Ship will fall to you."

"Thank you."

He shook his head. "Thanks is not necessary. By all likelihood we will be long dead before we reach Khalid. Instead, thank you for giving me a chance to die standing, rather than kneeling. Take this bottle, and guard it as a symbol of our connection. With good fortune I shall drink a toast to you with your Admirals once this is over. Farewell, Commodore."