

Chapter 227: Boys to Men

The news of an island blowing up had spread quickly. Destruction of that scale was not unheard of, but it was beyond rare. The Rising Aces didn't have time to worry about it; another explosion was going to occur, when and where were the questions, and how to stop it was the follow-up. Marisha put down her transceiver, standing up and rubbing her forehead before flicking through her notes. "I've got it. I know where we need to go!"

"Run this by me one more time," Jayce told her, the crew assembled in the living quarters. "Whilst Morgana, Ohno and I were with the Guild, we came across records of explosives being bought and shipped by the Sea Sovereign. A lot of them, but to who was unknown and by whom was also something that was a mystery. She was basically acting as the middle man," Marisha clarified. "It's pretty obvious who, right?" Ordo inserted. Marisha nodded and then glanced towards Bjorn. "For an explosion of that size... he would need a lot, and a lot of financing. Even with the Therian lands under his command, to get that sort of money without notice..."

"Means that the Sovereign in one way or another is supporting him," Jayce concluded. Marisha nodded. "But why?" Astris questioned. "What purpose does blowing up the New World provide that benefits her?" No one had an answer. "And that's what we need to find out. We need to know who in the Guild is supplying Xerxes, that will give us a pressure point to work on against the Sovereign. We also need to know where it is being supplied to." Marisha cleared her throat, drawing the attention back to her. "We know that part already."

After a quick teleportation, the Stacked Hand eventually set its eyes on the familiar seas of the southwest of the Old World. Xerxes had been storing the explosives on an island not too far from Belluabella, a reaching point close to the therian capital that would, for the most part, go unnoticed. It was also unfortunately so close to Belluabella that any alarm would likely spring a wave of reinforcements far larger than anything the Stacked Hand was equipped to deal with without maximum bloodshed.

"I need a group who can go in and get out without drawing attention and who the therians will not be expecting," Jayce stated, as his crew gathered on the open deck. He looked towards Astris and Caelie. "We'll do it," stated Wam, stepping forwards with his two brothers. Jayce looked at the Demon therian; he wasn't unrecognisable. "Absolutely not," stated Bjorn, stepping forwards and placing a hand on Wam's shoulder. "You will be recognised," he stated firmly. Wam shook

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his head, the magma colourations fading from him. "Maybe I will, but these two won't," he stated, gesturing towards Ohno and Fenn. "You're too recognisable, and there's no point sending anyone who isn't a therian. They'll get recognised almost immediately, especially given what we are after."

"Captain, there is literally no one better suited for this job," Fenn stated. "Wam is the muscle we need if we get into trouble. We'll be in and out before they've realised they've been robbed. We can confirm the island has the explosives and also confirm where their targets are. That information can be sent forwards to the Republic and then we can return to dealing with the Vampires and Cannibals. Trust us, we've got this."

Jayce looked towards Bjorn, who firmly shook his head. "Boys-" Jayce began but the trio stepped forwards, past Bjorn, to face him directly. "We can do this. If it was anyone else you wouldn't even question sending them," Fenn stated. "We've got this, Captain!" Ohno stated, pumping his fist. They looked towards Jayce, who looked towards Bjorn. Bjorn shook his head and Jayce then looked towards Marisha. She turned away, unwilling to give an answer. "Okay," Jayce confirmed. "Get your gear, you'll take the Jet. In and out with no fighting. Take photos and return. You pull out the second it gets too much, am I understood?" The Beastly Boys nodded, rushing off to get their things. "Jayce, a word," Bjorn growled.

"They're not ready," he stated firmly inside Jayce's quarters. Astris and Marisha both stood to the side, both with their arms crossed and deeply uncomfortable. "They said it themselves," Jayce stated, "it's the best chance we have and they're not kids anymore. We have to count on them, or otherwise countless lives could be lost. If we did nothing and the New World Capital was the price, then how could we live with ourselves?"

"It is too dangerous and those boys' lives are not worth it!" Bjorn snapped. "They are not soldiers to be used and thrown away, they are just boys eager to prove themselves, and too stupid to understand just what they're throwing themselves into. They play with fire and are walking into an island full of fuel." "I'd have thought after what Xerxes did to your tribe that you'd-" "This is not a game! Not some petty feud, and it is not their war! Xerxes can't understand that, he physically cannot understand that his war is over – that is why he is dragging new blood into his lost war. I will not do the same! Don't do this, it will go wrong! They're not ready!"

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A knock came from the doorway, the three therian boys all looking at the floor. "Bjorn, we are ready..." Wam said quietly. "You can't protect us forever." Wam then looked up, his fur turning a magma orange. "You couldn't protect me before, it's time we stand on our own feet." Bjorn glanced towards Fenn and Ohno, who both nodded in agreement. "Please," Bjorn pleaded quietly. "Don't do this."

"They'll be fine," Marisha reassured, holding Bjorn's hand as they watched the trio fly forwards across the top of the water aboard the Stacked Hand's jetboat. Bjorn glanced away from them towards Jayce, his arms folded and a similarly nervous look on his face. Slowly he glanced back towards the skull-like island ahead of them. Something in his stomach was twisting, an unconscious feeling warning him that something was going to go wrong. Disastrously wrong. "I hope so."

The ride over was quiet, all three of them feeling the monumental pressure of the task that lay ahead of them as the island grew bigger and bigger. "Tell them you know how they're feeling - that you care," stated Asmodeus into Wam's head. "In and out," Wam stated. "We can do this. I'm nervous too, but they're all counting on us. So is the Republic." Fenn scoffed, glancing up at the dark clouds above them and steering the jet towards a small pier. "Since when has it been about the Republic? This is for us, to show them all that we can do it. That we are Rising Aces!" he stated. Wam nodded in agreement, looking towards Ohno. The panda turned and looked to him, extending out a fist. "Together," he said simply. Wam nodded, tapping it back and so did Fenn. "Together," they both said. "Together," followed Asmodeus' voice.

They parked the jet facing outwards, such that they could escape at a moment's notice, before creeping up along the pier into the caves of the large island. It didn't take long to confirm that they were at the right island. The entire skull-shaped mountain covering the island was hollow, full of countless caves and caverns with connecting tunnels laden with rail tracks and minecarts. And there were also countless crates all marked with warnings of highly flammable and explosive material. "Not a single flame," warned Wam to his pyromaniac brothers. "You, of all people, don't need to tell me," Fenn retorted.

They followed the tracks inwards, staying in the shadows and behind cover as they took notice of the therians moving items around. They were loading the crates carefully into the minecarts before slowly pushing them along and eventually bring back out empty ones. The workers didn't look particularly

special, they didn't wear any special clothing nor did they look like civilians. "Hurry it up!" growled a boar therian. "Boss wants the crates counted and ready for transport." Two of the other therians near him scoffed. "Like we aren't already aware. Shut up and help." They sauntered off and the Beastly Boys crept out from cover.

Wam and Fenn began to move forwards in pursuit of the workers but Ohno stopped them. "Look," he stated, pointing at the crate. The other two looked at him with confusion before he pointed at the image of a small green serpent on the crates. "It's the Serpent," Ohno stated. Fenn shook his head in disbelief. "Probably just from her suppliers. It's just a stamp. Doesn't mean anything." Wam wasn't so certain. "Come on," he stated, snapping a quick photo before moving on.

They followed the tracks forwards, sticking to the shadows as much as they could before eventually deciding instead that the best cover was to work in plain sight. Grabbing a minecart of their own, Fenn dove inside, the other two placing crates around him before covering the entire cart with a simple cloth. Together Ohno and Wam then began to push the heavy and slow cart, the rusty wheels grinding loudly as they pushed it forwards. The tracks undulated as it dug deeper into the heart of the island, eventually opening up into a colossal cavern filled with searchlights.

The bright beams of light slowly panned across the ground, passing over rows upon rows of flyers, stacks upon stacks of crates, a huge magical circle carved into the floor, and a sizeable army of workers loading the powder within the crates into bombs. "Gods..." Fenn muttered, staring upwards through a gap in the cloth at a huge airship hovering thirty or so metres above them. It was a flat crimson colour, a large black lion's skull painted across its sides. A flat platform was slowly raising up towards its open belly, carrying countless crates and prepared bombs.

"What a monster..." muttered Asmodeus in Wam's head. He shook his head, keeping his head down, grabbing Ohno's arm and pushing the cart forwards into a siding. Fenn tumbled out of it, crouching behind it before looking up at his brothers – only stepping out when they were certain no eyes were upon them. A pair of unknown therians working on the island was plausible: a trio stood out too much. "They could bomb the entire New World without much effort if that thing can teleport," Wam told his brothers. Fenn snatched the camera out of Wam's hand, darting forwards and snapping a quick photo. There was a brief

flash, but he believed he had timed it well enough to blend with the panning searchlights.

Near the edge of the cavern was a stack of large metal boxes, a small improvised structure with visible wooden boards covered in sheets of paper. Fenn turned and looked at his brothers, pointing forwards before dashing ahead. "Idiot," Wam uttered harshly, faltering as the spotlight panned between him and his brother. The crates had been stacked to create small roads throughout the cavern, leading to key destinations like the command centre Fenn was rushing towards, but also to the improvised accommodation and hangars. The only difference was that the other areas were busy, the command centre was notably, and suspiciously, empty. "Come on," Ohno stated, darting somewhat clumsily forwards and sticking close to the cover of the crates as he rushed after Fenn. Wam followed after him, the pair of them having lost sight of Fenn.

"Wam..." came Asmodeus' voice in his head. The voice was cautious, nervous. "What is it?" he questioned back, his heart slowly racing as he and Ohno were forced to stop and crouch down as a searchlight panned over them. "This feels off," replied the Demon, Wam's entire body tensing as he heard a yelp from up ahead. "Fenn!" called out Ohno, dashing forwards from their cover. Wam reached out after him, his heart pounding in his chest. "Ohno!" he yelled after his brother, the Demon physically holding him back. "Wam, if there is a single spark – not even my affinity for fire will protect us."

"That doesn't matter!" Wam returned, breaking forwards after his brothers. He ran out of cover, darting through the small labyrinth of crates until he emerged into the open in front of the command centre. Ohno stood frozen ahead of him, Fenn squirming in the air with a large hand around his neck. Wam froze too, his body tensing in fear as he locked eyes with a huge shaggy white boar therian stood in front and an even larger pink hippo therian holding Fenn. He knew them both, Bjorn had spoken of them – warned him of them. They were two of Xerxes' War Hounds: Mardoni and Hydar.

"A liar as well as a spy then!" Mardoni growled, turning his huge head away from Fenn towards Wam and Ohno. "Well spies, I hope you've enjoyed your visit but nothing escapes here – you've made a one way trip, but first you're going to tell us who you work for," he declared, tightening his grip on Fenn. The fox gasped for air, but he didn't yield. Fenn dug the claws of his left hand into the wrist of the Mardoni before raising up his right. A flash of orange flame spread across the fur. "Fool!" yelled Mardoni, immediately slamming Fenn to the

ground. Without hesitation Fenn rolled over, scrabbling forwards whilst reaching into his bottomless bag.

“Wam!” Fenn yelled, tossing the camera across the way – the small device clattering across the floor and skidding past Ohno and the boar War Hound to Wam’s feet. Mardoni snarled, lifting up his huge hoof before stomping down directly on Fenn’s back. His eyes widened, a horrific and grotesque crunch following as the impact met his flesh and then broke down through his spine and into his chest cavity. Fenn’s body briefly lurched before his arms slapped the floor, his death instantaneous.

“Fenn!” screamed Wam, Ohno letting out a roar and charging forwards towards the two War Hounds without any weapons. “Brat!” growled Hydar, hefting a heavy hammer and swinging it down towards the foolish panda. But Ohno dropping his shoulder and dove forwards, slamming his mass into the chest of the boar and sending him staggering backwards whilst grabbing his arm and yanking downwards, hard. The boar yelled out in pain as his arm snapped and Ohno snatched his hammer, swinging the weapon straight into the white boar’s head. Flesh and bone splattered across Mardoni’s torso. The boar going down by his feet. Ohno didn’t turn, his shaky hands gripping the weapon as he faced down the hippo that had killed his brother. “Wam, go! Get out of here! Finish the mission!”

“No, not witho-“

“Go!” Ohno screamed, charging forwards. The boar getting back up, his torn open head fading away into a human face before returning back to therian form. “Run!” Ohno bellowed.

“Wam, run,” came Asmodeus’ voice in his head. Wam’s body unfroze and he grabbed the camera, turning and rushing forwards. Bullets peppered the floor ahead and behind him. “Fools, stop shooting!” bellowed a voice. “One wrong shot and this entire place will go up in flames. After him!” Wam ignored it, following the tracks back the way they had come, his vision blurry and entire body burning with rage and sadness. “Don’t stop!” Asmodeus told him, partially hijacking his body to stop the magma therian from staggering straight into a box of the explosive crates. Wam couldn’t think, he couldn’t breathe, but he couldn’t stop – the Demon dragging him forwards and a pair of invisible hands pushing him onwards.

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He broke out into open air, the Stacked Hand somewhere far on the horizon and small army of Pirates behind him. He looked down at the jet, already prepared for a fast getaway. He clambered down onto it, dropping the camera into a bundle of cloaks before turning on the engine. But he didn't stay on it, instead he stepped back onto the pier connecting to the island. "I can't leave him..." Wam said quietly to his Demon, well-aware of the likely one-way trip that it would mean. Silence followed before a sigh emerged. "I'm with you until the end," Asmodeus stated. Wam reached forwards and pushed the handle controlling the jet's acceleration, the vehicle launching forwards in a spray of water. "Together," Wam stated. "Together," agreed Asmodeus, the pair of them rushing back into the island.

Ohno staggered backwards clutching his bleeding ribcage, his breathing ragged and arm limp. The two War Hounds stood ahead of him, the hippo's left arm covered with a large and spiky gauntlet covered in Ohno's blood and fur, the boar held a large metal crowbar. "You fought well for a boy, your life would be wasted if it ended here. Join us, King Xerxes needs spirited youths like you. We assure you will suffer no further harm," offered Mardoni. The boar glanced towards him, his therian face now covered with a fresh scar from Ohno's initial swing. "Absolutely not," he complained.

Ohno almost smiled, but between the void of sadness and the bursting anger he had no room in his mind to think on anything other than killing them... and stalling long enough for Wam to get out. "I was never good at reading time," Ohno stated, throwing the hammer at the boar before reaching into his bottomless bag. The War Hound knocked it aside. "It was always Fenn who was in charge of our getaways. And Wam always dealt with the plans," he stated, pulling out a small metal lighter. "But I was always good with blowing shit up!" Ohno yelled, igniting the flame and punching his fist into the nearest crate.

Bjorn dropped to his knees as he watched the island inhale, a singular thin twister of blue flame piercing upwards through the rock and into the clouds high above. The flames then split, dropping down to surround the island like an umbrella before it was rapidly sucked in from the bottom in a large sheet of fire. The flames then launched upwards in a colossal pillar of blue and orange power before erupting outwards into the largest explosion anyone on the Stacked Hand had ever seen. It was devastating, primeval.

Flames and smoke continued to blast outwards as a colossal wave of wind and force rolled across the ocean. It impacted the Stacked Hand, blasting the ship

backwards even as Tempest mitigated it with his shield. The noise then followed, like the bellow of a monster that shook every cell in Jayce's body. He held his gaze towards the blue flames fading into black smoke, only breaking away his gaze as he noticed a small vehicle racing ahead of the tidal waves blowing outwards from the remains of the island. "Falconer, get it!" he commanded, the frozen navigator forcing himself onto Wren, cowering on the floor with her wings over her head. They took the air in pursuit of the empty jet, its riders lost to the explosion.

The Beastly Boys were gone, but somewhere, deep underwater, sinking slowly into the darkness, was a faint orange glow.

Seize the Seas Tales: Cold Relations

There was not much that Soteria could say to Morgana to comfort her. They didn't really have that kind of relationship, nor could Soteria truly empathise with the human. They were different, completely, regardless of their bond. A few months back, Soteria wouldn't have cared, but now that they could truly communicate she felt something for the girl. Something alien, something strange. The humans may have called it love, but Soteria called it a pain. Their contract was a binding, a mutual agreement of growth. She didn't want it to become anything else, but as she watched the tears continue to fall, trailing behind Morgana like her own personal rain, Soteria couldn't help but want to help.

"We can speed up, if you desire," offered the Dragon, only just able to keep up with the speed of Morgana's broomstick. They had long crossed the Frontier, stopping off only occasionally for sleep and some food on their journey north. "No, it's fine..." Morgana said quietly, her eyes down on her bloody hands – the skin raw from consistent scratching and picking. She wasn't even looking where they going, flying beyond second nature to her. "Then what is the issue?" Soteria growled, the pearlescent Dragon moving up to fly alongside her. Her ice-coloured right eye glared directly at Morgana.

Morgana began to scratch her skin again, but it felt smooth, hard. She looked at the Dragon, its shield lining her skin. "Nothing," Morgana lied blatantly. The Dragon huffed. "Sure," she stated, returning her gaze onwards. Morgana sighed, taking out a healing potion and sipping it. "I just... regret failing to do it. I should have fought harder, I've doomed us." Soteria shook her head. She didn't necessarily disagree with Morgana's decision: the predator of all was a monster, and something far beyond almost anything Soteria could think of facing, but Morgana's actions had been cowardly. "A coward's perspective: a selfish one.

You shouldn't fear the greatest predator, you should seek out the means to turn it into your prey. That's the Dragon's way, and you possess a Dragon's heart, so use it. Do not... fear what could be. See what is, and go from there." Morgana faltered, it almost sounded like caring advice. "Since when do you care?" she asked. "I do not. But I would like to feast on the Sovereign someday, and at the moment that dream seems far from reality."

Eventually, after flying through wind and rain, the weather turned to soft and continuous snow, an unfamiliar environment surrounding them. "The northern Dungeon should be... there," Morgana stated, a surprising amount of ships surrounding the most northern landmass. She frowned, pulling back on her broomstick and assessing the environment. The ships all belonged to the Guild, and there was a surprising amount of armed guards and new buildings surrounding the Dungeon. "Curious..." she mumbled, reaching for her communicator.

"Wicke, it's Morgana. Jayce has sent me to join you," she stated, looking around for anything that stood out. "They might have not arrived yet," she stated to Soteria. "Morgana?" came a broken and staticky response. She sighed – her communicator could reach almost anywhere thanks to its upgrades, but Wicke's was outdated. "We best get comfy," Morgana warned her Dragon, looking down at the outpost below before turning away and heading towards one of the many drifting icebergs.

Eventually a somewhat derelict boat made an appearance on the horizon. "Is that you?" Morgana questioned, brushing the snow off her tent and beginning to disassemble it. "It's us," Wicke returned, her voice clear and uncertain. "Where are you?" she questioned. Morgana mounted her broom, Soteria letting out a yawn and slowly dragging herself to her feet. "Here," Morgana stated a moment later, hovering over the main deck and looking at the alarmed ragtag group before her. Her eyes landed on Wicke, her burns healed and expression cautious but also full of relief. "Morgy?" came a voice Morgana was not familiar with. She turned her gaze towards a silver-haired girl with golden eyes wielding a very large sword. "Hello sister. It's been some time."