

Chapter 228: Lost Time

Alara stood somewhat frozen as she watched her parents weakly limp away, supported by medical personnel. She wanted to follow, but knew there were bigger priorities at hand. "Are you okay?" Cyrenna stated firmly, both her, Riley and Wulf looking at Alara with deep intensity and care. "Yeah, uh, fine," she lied, her head pounding, chest tight, skin clammy and face pale. "Absolute crap," Cyrenna stated, whistling over a medic. "She's on observation, I want a full check-up. Sedate her if necessary," Cyrenna ordered. Alara held up her hands and shook them in protest. "Whoa, hang on! Don't I get a say, Commodore?" Alara returned. "No."

Alara sat in her assigned temporary quarters, a firm silence across the room other than inside her head. "Explain again," Alara commanded to the Demon taking lodging within her. A sigh followed, the voice gravelly and deep, and still bearing the grudge of having been forbidden from speaking, under duress of exorcism, whilst Alara was having her check-up. "The Sovereign will be coming for you," Raim repeated once again. "Not that," Alara stated aloud, shaking her head. That much was obvious – she had killed a Betrayer, there would be consequences. "How did the Sovereign control Khalid? How could she control me?"

"The Sovereign revived him. He was a great General. She killed him and brought him back, much in the same way she was. That tether to life, through her, is what controlled him."

Alara frowned. "She died? When? How? Who killed her?" she questioned quickly. She sensed the Demon shrug. "So she has a Demon too? Does any other Betrayer?" Silence followed, the Demon pausing out of hesitation rather than inability to answer. "I will remove you from my body, I have ways," she threatened. "Lord Astaroth is within her. I don't know if there are any others. I was captured and entombed for... a long time. The others have not shown themselves, and Lord Astaroth has been silent to me, but I recognise his powers." "Astaroth..." Alara murmured. "I need to tell Jayce."

"This Jayce person, he is with King Baal?" Raim questioned. Alara nodded, standing up and walking towards her door. "Then we must make our way immediately!" stated the Demon. It wasn't a bad idea, she missed him dearly, and he would most certainly have a way to remove the second voice now clouding her head, but there were bigger and more immediate things she needed first. "I have more questions for you, until then you're to be quiet. I will get you to your King, I promise. Now, be silent."

SEIZE THE SEAS

Alara found her parents waiting for her in the local hospital. Several wards had been isolated and dedicated to the Republic for the Marines and Navy that had been injured during the conflict, but her parents had been given a more private section – one that was heavily guarded. “Alara!” cried her mother, dashing forwards and pulling her in tight before poorly-hidden expressions of shock and horror crossed her face as she looked at Alara’s missing arm and countless scars. “Mother,” Alara said softly, burying her head into her mother’s hair and unearthing long buried memories of her scent and feeling. “Are you okay?” Alara asked immediately. Both her parents looked worse for wear, underweight with dark marks under their eyes, but intact, and for that Alara was grateful.

“Us?” questioned her father, placing a calloused hand onto Alara’s head before touching her slightly scarred cheek. “You look... so much older. So much time has passed and you’re... far more than I ever imagined. We dreamed of you, held you deeply for all this time... you shouldn’t have followed our footsteps.” Alara faltered, behind their sad gazes were flickers of anger and frustration. “But... I thought you would be proud? I-I followed you, here, through the Marines and... What?” Alara questioned in confusion.

Her parents sat down on a bed and invited her to sit between them. Alara remained standing, her arms folded. “We’ve been given a rough... recap, but I want to hear it from you,” stated Silas Vanathur, looking at Alara. “What happened to the Empire?” he asked firmly, his brown eyes reading her intently. “Well...” Alara faltered, lowering her arms and dragging over a chair. “It’s not a short story...”

“And... well, we defeated Fleet Admiral Gamble and the Church. But then the Sovereign attacked. Jayce fled with Corina and his crew, we stayed behind and the Sovereign snatched the Empire from us,” Alara concluded. Her parents hadn’t spoken throughout the entire history lesson. They had hardly moved, their faces stony and cold. Her mother eventually spoke first. “So... Cassandra is the New Fleet Admiral?” she asked, her voice layered with anger. Alara didn’t quite know what to say – this was not the reaction she had been expecting. “Yes.”

“Unbelievable...” muttered her father, shaking his head and looking at his wife. “What do you mean? That’s good, right? I was left in their care, you left me in their care, right?” Alara questioned quickly. Her father held a hand, silencing her as she looked at them with desperation. “Yes, but... Alara, my Little Blossom, you lost us for nothing at the behest of that woman. You lost us because

Cassandra was unwilling to go, and now she's Fleet Admiral. She's the reason you lost us, and she helped to make you into her weapon."

Alara knew that already. "So was Jayce. We were both guided the same way," Alara defended, shaking her head. "He has been through so much more than I have. He... he..." She faltered and looked down at her boots. Had she been manipulated? Her family sacrificed for his? Her mother stood up and stepped towards her, resting a hand on her shoulder. "We're together now, but you cannot trust the Exargas," said her mother softly, the words colder and sharper than the most deadly steel. "I..." Alara stood up, knocking the chair she was sat on over and backing away. "I need to think about it. I need to speak to Jayce." Her parents looked at her with confusion. "Why Jayce?" asked her mother. Alara froze, a realisation dawning upon her. "We're, um, together," she said with an awkward smile.

Alara sat in the dark of her room, tucked up in a ball in the far corner. The tears had dried, the frustration of her parents deep hatred of Alara's other family having eventually faded. They had been vocal about her... feelings for the devilspawn she was practically betrothed to, and now she almost felt like she'd have preferred them absent from her life. Alara slammed the metal of her palm into her forehead, drawing blood that quickly healed over. "Idiot!" she scowled, hating that she had even thought the strangers that were her parents would magically fix everything.

To their credit, she knew that they had stepped back into their roles as Admirals, and were currently in talks with Fleet Admiral Malik whilst bringing about a successful conclusion to the Khalid War. They were tidying up her mess, and for that she was grateful, but as she stared into the darkness – feeling an awkward presence in her mind – she couldn't help but think about everything it had cost: Witchford, Brett...

A knock drew her attention to the door, light spreading into her room and illuminating her like a monster caught in the glow of a light. Her glowing eyes locked onto Riley, a soft and pained expression mirroring her own as the anticlimax of their deathmarch had settled in. "The Fleet Admiral wants us back north. The fleet will sail with Cyrenna, we're teleporting – along with your parents," she informed, stepping into the darkness and shutting the door behind her. Alara heard it lock, dropping her eyes onto her knees and hugging her legs.

The soft clink of Riley's metal legs rattled across the floor as she approached Alara, sitting down next to her and wordlessly pulling Alara's slightly larger

frame towards her before wrapping her arms around her. Riley rested her head against Alara's. "It's over..." Alara said softly. Riley nodded, copying her words. "It's over. They're gone... they're actually gone," she admitted, silent tears dripping along with Alara's. "I killed them..."

"No. No-no," Riley hushed. "They chose their deaths. They chose it..." The words caught in Riley's throat. "They chose it for us. For you." Alara hiccupped, sniffing as she wiped her face. "Stupid fools," she uttered, shaking her head. "It was all for nothing. They died for my parents who hate Jayce, hate Cassandra, Philip, and feel like it was all wasted. They looked at me with... shame. I'm a stranger to them. They're... strangers to me."

"Well... at least you have parents," Riley stumbled, like an ox through a glass house. Alara pulled her head away and looked at one of her closest friends with disdain. "Idiot," she stated, a weak smile appearing on her face. Riley stuck out her tongue. "They're alive, be happy about that. If it turns out they're assholes then sobeit, fuck them. You've got me, and Wulf, Weapon, the three Kai's..." Alara reached out and wrapped an arm across Riley's shoulders, pulling her in for a tight squeeze. "Yeah, I still got you," Alara stated, placing her head to Riley's. "You die on me and I will kill you," she then threatened. Riley grinned. "Yeah, me too."

"This will get you to Final Bastion," stated Fleet Admiral Malik, glancing from Alara's parents to her. "Thank you, Fleet Admiral. We will be in touch, once we've reconnected with Republic high-command and passed on your message," stated Admiral Victoire Vanathur. He nodded to her, the Admirals giving a courteous nod before stepping away. Alara's father glanced back towards her, gesturing for her to follow. Alara remained where she was and he frowned before turning away. "Family is often complex," Malik told Alara. She smiled weakly at him before standing at attention and giving him a Republic salute. He did the same, giving her a salute of his own. "Commodore," he said with the utmost respect. "Fleet Admiral," she returned, turning and stepping away to follow after her parents.

The teleportation circle span and then flashed purple, and a moment later she found herself stood on a large stone platform, high up with a firm view of the surrounding ocean. "Welcome back," came a familiar voice, Fleet Admiral Exarga stood waiting, along with Admiral Exarga. Alara stood at attention, as did Wulf and Riley and the other officers that had come with them, the rest remaining behind to travel with Cyrenna's fleet. Alara's parents did not. "Fall

out," Cassandra stated, her eyes curious and locked on Silas and Victoire. "It's... good to see you alive," Cassandra stated once the majority of Alara's forces had departed, leaving only the three Vanathur's, Wulf and Riley behind. "If only we could say the same, Fleet Admiral," Victoire stated with distinctive malice.

Cassandra looked down in shame, but Philip stepped forwards, standing beside his wife. "Damn, cold," muttered Riley, drawing every set of eyes towards her. Alara cleared her throat. "Shall we debrief inside?" she stated, taking control. The four Admirals looked at her. "A good idea. Wulf, please remain nearby with Riley. You will be needed once we're done," Philip stated. Wulf nodded, placing a firm hand on Riley's shoulder and forcefully dragging her away. "I want to watch," she protested as she was dragged away. Alara tried not to smile. "This way," Philip stated.

They soon found themselves within a large office, the colours mostly red – distinctively Cassandra's. "Alara, perhaps it's best that you wait outside," Philip advised as tension filled the room. "You will not tell her what to do!" snapped Victoire. "He's probably right, dear," Silas stated, the briefest glances of respect crossing the pair of men. "She shouldn't be forced to be here." Alara opened her mouth but then closed it, turning and stepping towards the door. "Alara," came Cassandra's voice just as she reached the handle. Alara glanced back. They locked eyes, a pained expression on Cassandra's face. She then simply nodded, a faint smile flickering as she silently told her what Alara had always known through her communicator. "I'm proud of you," Cassandra said silently. "No matter what, I will always be proud of you." Alara stepped outside, shouting erupting before the door had even closed.

Eventually the door opened, Alara's father stepping out and approaching her before sitting down on the seat next to hers. "We have come to an arrangement," he told her, Alara immediately feeling like a child. "I want you to leave the military, for your safety. The Sovereign will want revenge for what has happened and the Exargas cannot be trusted to protect you. We'll go and be a family, somewhere safe, somewhere quiet." Alara looked at her father with disgust. "Go to hell!" she stated, standing up and looking down at him.

"You've known me all of two days, and clearly you've not thought of me once – only who I may have been years ago! I am who I am, whether you like it or not. I'm sorry you had your life stolen from you. I'm sorry I lost you and all the time we could have had, but you left. You left me! You're my father, so be one! Gods,

I dreamt of reuniting with you. I cried myself to sleep more nights than I can count thinking I would never see you again, and it doesn't matter who's fault it is, or if it was worth it – you left me! I love Jayce, and he loves me, just as the Exargas do! I am yet to believe that you love me – this me, not the little girl you left behind on an island. I am Commodore Alara Vanathur, you do not speak for me!”

He stood up and met her gaze. “And I am an Admiral, Commodore. This has been decided. If I have to make it an order I will. For your own-” Alara pushed him, hard, forcing him to sit down. “You’re still not listening!” she yelled in his face, her mother stepping out from Cassandra’s office with a grey face. “Neither of you know me - know any of us. I understand if you’ve given up fighting, but I’m not running. Too much is at stake and too much has been lost to give up. You’re not angry at Cassandra or Philip, you’re afraid. You’re free, so run away if you want to. I don’t care.”

Alara strode towards her mother, who opened her mouth and tried to stop her, but faltered as Alara stormed past her. Alara shut the door to Cassandra’s office, turning towards the Exarga’s with a furious expression and folded arms. Cassandra and Philip looked at each other before at Alara. “Khalid is dead,” Alara stated firmly, controlling the conversation. Cassandra smiled softly, leaning back in her large leather chair. “We heard. Alara-”

Alara held up a warning finger. “I’m angry at one set of parents thinking they’re protecting me, don’t make it two,” she warned. Cassandra looked down and chuckled, shaking her head. When she looked up her expression was hardened. “The Sovereign cut off your reinforcements, with Khalid dead she will be looking to make you hers.” Alara let out a sigh, she had thought as much. “So, we’re sending you to Jayce,” Cassandra stated.

“What?” Alara questioned, looking at Philip. He nodded in confirmation. “You, Riley and Wulf have earned some leave. You’re going to teleport to the Stacked Hand, it’s been prearranged. Whilst there, you’re going to prepare for whatever comes next. Share with the Rising Aces what you did to defeat Khalid... and you’re going to grieve.” The final words hit hard and fast. “We’re sorry about your friends. The Rising Aces are going through something similar, and for the moment there is nowhere safer. We’ll handle whatever fallout comes from the Sovereign, and when you come back...”

Alara nodded. “Do or die,” she said softly. A final battle was coming, one way or another. “You’re to set off immediately,” Cassandra said softly. Alara glanced

towards the door. "Do they know?" Alara asked. Cassandra shook her head. "We've got them. Whether they admit it or not, they are surrounded by friends. I'm sorry they let you down. I'm sorry we let you down." Alara let out a sigh. "Don't ever think that again. I don't care what they said. I'm not what they imagined I would be, but I'm who you made me to be – and I'm not ashamed of who I am." Cassandra stood up and walked over to her, placing Alara in a gentle and warm hug, her hand inevitably reaching for Alara's still somewhat fresh scars. "You're more like your mother than you know," she told her. Alara smiled before pulling away. "I will come back when you tell me to, Fleet Admiral. Do not shelf me, this is only temporary. Right?" Cassandra nodded. "No, of course not. I need you to kill some more Betrayers for me, Commodore."

Alara left the office, faltering as she found her parents talking to pair of familiar figures. "Ah, there she is," stated Old Dog Xarga, the giant scarred man towering over her parents, with Admiral Yashiro stood next to him and a Killer standing in the shadows behind him. He wheezed as he talked, his one remaining arm resting on a giant cane. Alara approached, both her parents looking at her cautiously before their gazes past onwards to the Exargas exiting the office. "You've gained your fair share of scars Alara, and achieved the first kill against the Sovereign's forces. Silas, Victoire, you should be proud of your daughter and the leader she has become. You should tell her as such," he added firmly, his stern expression cracking briefly to give Alara a quick smile. "We are proud," Victoire stated, almost desperately, and in a defensive manner.

"Good," Xarga concluded, shutting down any attempted follow up. "Alara, you are now going to be the most watched person on this planet, with the largest drawn target imaginable. Your parents and I shall work to minimise that." Alara's parents looked at him with confusion. "Admirals, were you intending to flee and leave your daughter behind?" he questioned. They shook their heads, glancing around at the others with caution and confusion. "No, of course not," Silas stated quickly. "Perfect, there is much I have to teach you and not much time. Fleet Admiral, I will require the presence of these two for at least a week if not longer. Is that alright?" Xarga questioned, looking towards Cassandra.

She folded her arms and looked instead towards Alara's parents, giving them one final chance to leave. "That is up to you. I have others that can take the places I set aside for you. I don't blame you if you stay or go." Victoire looked desperately towards Alara, but found no sympathy within her. "I will be off base, for an unknown length of time. Either be here when I get back, or don't," Alara warned. Victoire looked at Silas and he at her, and then one after another they

seemed to physically shed off their fears. They stood taller and had more firm expressions before looking to Xarga. "I am willing to learn," Silas stated, "if you have something to teach, my old Captain." Victoire smiled, glancing back to her daughter. "We'll be waiting for your return."

Alara left her parents to the undoubtably brutal revivification that Xarga would put them through, finding both Wulf and Riley waiting for her not too far away. "We've been told," Wulf stated efficiently, turning and beginning to lead the way to the nearest teleportation circle. "Good. This is our chance to lay low, but also to make all the preparations we need. The Admirals will be planning in our absence, we need to be ready to provide all the information we have that can fill the holes in their strategies," Alara stated, trying not to let her excitement show, but also deeply aware of the emotional fatigue affecting them all. A mage stepped forwards, beginning to chant as they approached the teleportation circle.

"See you soon, Rising Aces."

Seize the Seas Tales: Grief

Silence filled the Stacked Hand as the retrieved photos were processed and analysed. No one dared to speak, no one dared to unleash the feelings they were all bottling up. The only exception was Bjorn, who was sat in the Beastly Boys quarters sobbing wildly as he mourned the boys. Marisha had gone with him, feeling almost identically to him, but she eventually returned, her face red and stained with tears. "Marisha..." Jayce said quietly to her as she entered the living quarters, the photos strewn across the main table. She shook her head, wiping her nose with her sleeve and steeling herself as she approached the table. "I'm sorry..." he said quietly, the rest of the crew looking to her for her reaction.

Shakily Marisha picked up the photo of a crate, her mother's symbol stamped upon it. She then looked towards the blurry images of documents – transcripts of messages sent from her mother to Xerxes. "The Sovereign... gives permission," Marisha mumbled aloud, her tears resuming but for a different reason. "My mother is a Betrayer, she's the one who gave Scáthach the Guild." Marisha then turned and finally faced Jayce. "Tell them they did well," she told him. "Tell them... I'm sorry." She turned and stepped away, pausing at the doorway but not looking back. "Jayce... it wasn't your fault. I... I... I just want you to know that," she said, departing with tears dripping from her chin.

Jayce set a destination north, somewhere where they were far away from Xerxes - far away from everything – before slowly walking to his quarters. He felt

hollow, his emotions unwilling to clarify how he was feeling. Jayce knew he was devastated, but he also felt rage – towards himself most of all. Bjorn had been right – they hadn't been ready, and they had died trying to prove themselves. He had killed Marisha and Bjorn's sons, even if they had managed to provide information that he knew was crucial and had destroyed Xerxes' threat to the New World before it had come to fruition. He let out a sigh as he sat down on his floor and crossed his legs, beginning his delve into the Underworld.

Jayce almost didn't recognise them as he found Ohno and Fenn waiting for him. He had been expecting the panda, the fox and the badger, but instead were two young men. "Captain," they both greeted, looking at Jayce with faint smiles and sad eyes. Jayce shook his head, his face scrunching up as an immediate memory of his farewell to Xander popped into his mind. "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry," he told them, tears filling his eyes as he looked at them both.

"Don't be," Fenn stated, floating forwards and placing a ghostly hand onto Jayce's shoulder. Ohno nodded in agreement. "It's not your fault boss... besides," Ohno stated, a grin spreading across his face. "We killed two of Xerxes' War Hounds," he declared proudly with a big grin. Jayce shook his head, looking down at the dark sand below his feet. "Don't tell us we did bad, please," Fenn told Jayce, stopping him before he could say what they all knew he needed to get out. "We made our choice. Just tell us it mattered."

Jayce looked at them weakly. "It mattered," he stated, uncertain whether he was lying or telling the truth. Fenn nodded, turning and looking up towards the pyramid at the centre of the Underworld and the portal into the unknown at its peak. "Wait," Jayce stated, drawing their attention towards him. "Where's your brother?" he asked. Fenn and Ohno looked towards each other and then back at Jayce. They both shrugged. "When you find him, tell him we'll be waiting for him," Fenn stated, fading away into nothingness. Ohno lingered for a moment longer. "Tell Boss Bjorn... tell him thank you, and that we're sorry." He too then faded away. "Wait, come back!" Jayce called after them, the two boys vanishing into a sea of souls.

Jayce returned to the world of the living broken, immediately descending into half-cackles and bellows of sorrow and grief. Wam was alive – he was certain of it, but they had circled the ruins of the island for hours before abandoning their search. Jayce didn't know where he was, and now a cruel joke of fate had been thrown upon him. "This is what you showed me," he eventually said in a quiet

whisper to the Demon in his head. "Yes. Your choice comes now," Paimon told him. "I have to tell him," Jayce said quietly.

"And will you face the consequences of what happens if you do?" Paimon questioned, thrusting back into Jayce's head a sea of futures that she had first given him. Many of them ended the same way, with he and his crew dead aboard a broken ship. Others showed him dead and alone on the floor of a giant throne room. But countless others showed him being killed by Bjorn, struck down from behind, betrayed and left for dead. "Hope will kill you," Paimon told him coldly. "Bjorn must grow beyond you, and that cannot happen during a search that will take far longer than the time you have." Jayce shook his head, looking towards the photos of the pair of them. Bjorn was his brother, his closest friend. "To save him, you must forsake him."

Bjorn sat alone in the room of Wam, Fenn and Ohno. It was a mess, as it often was, but now it wasn't something that bothered him. He hugged himself as he sat on Wam's bed. He had cried for hours, their loss combined with the loss of Magnus and Inger far greater than anything he had felt before. Marisha had sat and held him, but she had left – her mind too preoccupied with making their deaths matter to stay. But he couldn't do that. He wished he could, but he couldn't.

His foot bumped something solid, his eyes narrowing as he reached down and picked up a sizeable book. He frowned – the boys didn't read. They hadn't read, at least nothing that size. Bjorn opened it, his body flinching as he found himself staring back at himself, the three boys held under his arms as he leant over them as they posed for a photo. "For Dad, thanks for not giving us up."