

Chapter 229: Together Again

Jayce sat at the edge of his ship, his feet dangling over the side as the warm sun of the Frontier Archipelago rested upon him. The warm waters were crystal clear, the ocean floor only a few metres down and covered in an expansive coral reef. The sun shimmered below him, only a few wild patches of white cloud breaking apart the expansive blue sky. It was quiet, a few members of his crew lounging on a nearby grassy island decorated with coconut trees. A few more were dotted across the main deck in swimsuits, lounging on sunbeds.

They'd taken it easy for the last few days. They'd needed to. The deaths of Ohno and Fenn, and the alluded death of Wam and Asmodeus had hit everyone. The Demons were solemn, pained by the supposed loss of their own – other than Paimon who was keeping quiet inside Jayce's head. Slowly his gaze drifted upwards from his dangling feet towards Bjorn, sat near the bow of the Stacked Hand, almost as far away as possible from him.

Jayce let out a sigh. Unsurprisingly, Bjorn had been distant, rarely joining the crew at mealtimes and unwilling to even look at Jayce. It hurt Jayce to have lost his friend, it hurt Jayce even more knowing that it genuinely was his fault, and that he was only going to make it worse going forwards. "I should talk to him," he muttered quietly. "No," returned Paimon. "He needs time, and you can't make him feel any better." Jayce doubted it: a single mention of Wam's likely survival would spring hope within Bjorn, and probably also a fury that would be directed solely at him. He let out a sigh, shaking his head and looking back out towards the empty expanse of almost flat ocean. No one would find them here.

Alara clutched her stomach as the purple lightning vanished, depositing her, Wulf and Riley onto the far rear deck of the Stacked Hand. "It's... hot?" Wulf questioned, looking around at the open ocean and bright sunlight. "We're in the Frontier Archipelago," Alara told him, the heat and humidity built into her very soul. "Is this where we will find my King?" Raim questioned aloud, through a mouth on her neck. Riley gagged and glared at Alara. "I hope so," Alara stated, stepping past the hung up Gambit and Last Card, strapped to the dips in the hull of the large ship. She pushed through a door, stepping into the living quarters.

A metal tankard clanged on the floor, bouncing before coming to a rest. "Alara?" Astris questioned, both her and Zeta dressed in similar bikinis – one black, the other teal. Alara smiled softly, Astris diving into her chest with a tight embrace. "What are you all doing here?" she questioned, pulling back from Alara and

carrying her embrace onwards into Wulf and then Riley before she paused. "Where's Witchford, and Brett? And what happened to you? You look like shit."

Alara's face fell, and she presumed so did Wulf and Riley's from Astris' ghostly expression. Astris dropped hard to her knees, her arms limp by her side as the realisation hit her hard. "No..." she said almost silently, her mouth open and face quickly looking up to Alara as her eyes brimmed with tears. "No," she stated adamantly. "No," she whimpered, another repetition getting caught in her throat as Alara knelt in front of Astris and pulled her in tight. "They're gone," Alara confirmed. "Killed whilst getting my parents out."

It wasn't fully accurate, but it was true. Witchford and Brett had died for Alara's parents. "And..." Astris questioned, sniffing and wiping her eyes before putting on a brave face and meeting Alara's brown eyes with her heterochromatic obsidian and silver. "Cyr is fine. Don't worry," Alara reassured, maintaining her grip on Astris' shoulders before eventually standing up. Astris remained on the floor for a moment longer, shaking her head before letting out a sigh and standing up. Riley stepped forwards into her arms and they danced as they stood in an embrace, tilting from one foot to the other. "No one else is allowed to die, am I clear?" Astris questioned, levying a painted fingernail at the trio. Alara agreed entirely. They were all that remained of the Wolfpack.

A cat brushed Alara's leg, but it wasn't Little Witch. Immediately a sharp pain pressed outwards from in, the Demon inside her trying to break out. "No!" she growled, kicking the Demon back and hugging herself. "Alara? What's going on?" Astris questioned, looking at the other two. Wulf and Riley didn't know, their expressions as desperately confused as Astris'. "It's the Demon, he wants out!" Alara growled, partially in a voice that wasn't hers.

"Demon, she has a Demon?" Zeta questioned, Astris turning and looking at her. "Get Mai Lu!" Astris commanded, Zeta dashing off without question. "Byleth!" Alara growled, looking down at the orange cat with shining green and blue eyes standing on his hind legs. The door to the living quarters burst open, Mai Lu and Caelie both dashing inside with Falconer and Zeta. "Cease!" commanded Baal, Alara dropping to the floor in a slump as the Demon she had been suppressing immediately gave up.

When her eyes flickered back open, a large lump of clay was twisting in front of her, a small arcane circle painted on the floor around her. It sprouted black feathers and then a beak before the tips of the feathers turned golden. The Demon cawed at her before clearing his throat. "I apologise, Alara Vanathur," stated

Raim, the large bird bowing to her. "It felt like you were tearing me apart from the inside out!" she growled, grabbing his legs with her hand and getting to her feet. "Alara!" came Jayce's voice, the Demon dropping from her hand to the floor.

Jayce stood almost frozen as he looked at her. He almost didn't recognise her. Her soft, almond-shaped, brown eyes were cold, harsh, and lacking the light he remembered. Her long, wavy, brown hair was a mess, tangled and uneven. She was broader, but also looked malnourished, as if she had been eating the bare minimum for a while. And her olive skin was covered with deep, scattered scars, leading all the way up from her exposed collarbone, up her neck and across her jaw before fading out around her cheeks. It looked like she had survived an explosion face first. But his eyes inevitably drifted to her metal right arm.

Similarly she stared at him, her eyes reading the glowing orange eyes on his gaunt face and the way his clothes hung off his previously broad and muscular frame. He had lost a lot of weight, and if she hadn't looked more closely she wouldn't have recognised him. "Jayce...?" she questioned cautiously. He stepped forwards and she mirrored him before diving into his chest and burying her face in his shirt. "You look like crap!" she told him. "What happened to you?"

She felt his hand hover over her scars, unwilling to touch her for fear of hurting her. She immediately pressed her cheek into his hand, feeling the rough touch of his calloused hand that felt like the gentlest touch she had felt in a long time. "It's a long story..." he told her, pulling back and looking at the other three guests who had come with her. His eyes landed on the ritual circle. "How did you come to have a Demon?" he asked her.

"I killed Barca Khalid."

The room froze. Jayce's eyes widening as he locked his gaze upon her, all of the Rising Aces turning and looking at the pair of them with admiration and distinctive horror. "Oh crap," Astris stated first, her and Jayce locking eyes. "Right," Jayce said, more gently. "Table any thoughts. Make sure everyone knows," he commanded. He then stepped forwards towards the ritual circle, Alara's hand trailing after him. "I need Paimon out of me," Jayce told Falconer. He immediately began to shape a vessel for her. "Why? A Demon only makes you stronger," Mai Lu questioned.

The real answer would have sounded insane. "You Demons have a lot to catch up upon." He turned and looked at Alara. "As do we," he stated with a warm smile. "Ugh," Mai Lu stated, shaking her head. "Just get used to it." Jayce scoffed,

the ritual circle glowing and the clay taking the shaped of a crowned bear as Paimon evacuated his body. He felt hollow without the Demon he had grown accustomed to, but equally it felt good to have his own body again. He then stepped back towards Alara, sweeping a hand under her legs and lifting her up with a yelp and simple ease. She hugged his neck as he turned and looked at his and her crewmates. "Don't disturb us," he said with a dumb grin.

Many hours later, Jayce found himself gently running his hand up her thigh, her breath warm on his neck and body laying across his. She felt hot, but the metal arm of hers was icy cold. He still wasn't used to it, and she could tell. There was no hiding it from her, in the same way she touched him with a gentleness that was unusual and felt more like she was worried he would break under her rough touch. They lay together, sweaty and tired, in the darkness of his quarters and the soft mess of his bed.

They'd said a lot, but nothing they needed to say, and finally they both knew the time had come to ask. "My parents hate you," Alara said first, guiding the conversation her way. He faltered, frowned and then looked at with absolute confusion. "What did you tell them?" he questioned in disbelief. "I know they say your in-laws are always..." She pinched him and he shut up. Alara shook her head. "They hate your family."

"Well that's rude. I mean I understand Damian but--"

"Jayce! Serious time, please." He could feel from the way she was touching him, the gentle tension across her muscular back and the firm squeeze she was craving, that she was nervous – afraid. "Sorry," he said earnestly, kissing her forehead and paying the utmost attention to her. "What happened?" he asked. Alara remained silent, trying to process her emotions and her feelings as she fished into a well of memories she would have preferred to leave alone. "We set off with a goal of eliminating three weapons platforms that we called the Brunxchume Sentries..." she began.

He held her as she cried softly, slowly working through the last year of her life. It took Alara several minutes to work through the deaths of her closest friends – deaths that even Jayce felt impacted by. He stroked her hair and cradled her until she was ready to continue, the sadness fading into a fiery rage. "I told Raim to abandon Khalid, offering myself to him. It was the only way I saw a chance to defeat him, but..."

"It shouldn't have worked like that," Jayce told her. "For a Demon to break its pact like that should have had consequences. It's why we had to use a ritual to release Raim from you and Paimon from me." Alara nodded - she had thought as much herself. "I think it's to do with how Raim first joined with Khalid. They were forced together by the Sovereign, it wasn't really their choice." Jayce frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Scáthach revived him. She brought him back from the dead - that's why he was a Betrayer, because she literally held his life in her hands." Jayce pondered for a moment. "She has a Demon herself. Its name is Astaroth," Alara interrupted. "How do you-" he began, only to set it aside. "That's what we thought too, but we hadn't locked down a name. The Demons are probably talking about it right now. So you killed Khalid, took his Demon, then what?"

"I saw my parents. But they were... shocked to see me like this. My mother had seen me before but..." Alara faded away, tucking into herself defensively as her hands rose up to her scars. Jayce unfurled her, entwining himself with her and gently lifting her up so her face was directly next to his. He guided her hands to his own scars, the ones she had once expressed great concern over. "Now we both match," he told her with a genuine and gentle smile. She looked away, not quite willing to accept his words, but not deaf to them either. Cautiously she guided her human hand towards her metal prosthetic, unclipping it with a grunt and slowly detaching the mount.

Almost challengingly, she watched his expression as he looked at her stump - cautiously letting her guide his fingers towards the raw-looking mess of grizzly flesh. A single touch send a storm of pain flashing through Alara's body, his hand quickly retreating as he saw her discomfort. "I've never heard you complain about wanting to lose weight but even I have to say that's drastic," he joked. She bit the inside of her lip to force a serious glare his way. "Sorry," he quickly added. "I'm sure you've already had the best medics look at it..." She shook her head. "Not the best. Will she be able to help?" Alara asked somewhat hopefully. "Doc regrew my eye, but that took a while - and arm will be... a while." "That's not a no. I'll pay her a visit in the morning," Alara said softly. "Morning? It's only mid-afternoon," Jayce said in confusion. She nestled her head into his neck. "Oh, we're not leaving until then."

"Fine by me." He held her in silence for a few minutes before he inevitably felt the need to speak. "So your parents don't like me?" he questioned with mild curiosity. "Not exactly... more that they don't like your parents, and, by default,

you. They were even a bit hesitant towards Old Dog Xarga." Jayce raised an eyebrow. "You saw him? Bjorn and the others said he was in the Old World but I didn't get a chance to see him. Is he..."

Alara sat up, repositioning herself to sit in front of him and using her one arm to wrap his arms across her with the giant duvet wrapped around them both. "He was... ill. He looked half-dead. I think your gramps is slowly dying, but he's still hanging on strong." Jayce looked out towards the enchanted windows, the glass tinted to darken the room from the bright sun beyond. Alara's hand caressed his chin and cheek. "I'm sorry," she said gently. He placed his temple to hers and shut his eyes. "So why do they hate my parents?"

"Well... beyond the – you know – long mission across the world and missing my life because of it, they came back to find your mother as Fleet Admiral and that their sacrifice had been arguably... pointless. You could imagine why they're not... overjoyed by everything. But it seemed more to do with me than anything. I think they imagined someone... softer. I think they hoped I wouldn't have followed them into the military, but I don't know. It's messy and your family are an easy target."

"Fair enough... I guess," he said somewhat glumly. Alara rolled her eyes. "Don't take it so personally, I doubt you were ever going to be my parents' first choice – even if they had been around, Pirate Lord Exarga." He squeezed her and she pinched him back. "Criminal," she added, sticking her tongue out. "I'm sure you've done worse," he returned, his face immediately falling as he saw her expression change into one of guilt and hurt. "I didn't mean that," he quickly added. She shook her head, clenching her jaw and fist before letting out an exhale and letting it go. "So... given how rough I look – what in the abyss happened to you?"

"After we rescued you-"

"Rescued is a bit of an exaggeration," she inserted. It was his turn to roll his eyes. "Hardly. Anyway, after we intervened against the Sovereign, Scáthach decided to punish us. She sent the Betrayers after the Pirate Lords. We got Kaina, who – as it turns out – is a Dragon." Alara frowned, looking at him with confusion. "A Dragon? Like the ones that belong to Arthuria, Morgana and Ordo?" she inquired. Jayce twitched at Morgana's name and Alara looked at him with passing suspicion before moving beyond it. "Yeah," he answered. "When a Dragon becomes... strong enough, advanced enough – I don't really know – they evolve. She could transform into the form of a humanoid, but still retain some of her abilities. When she transformed into her Dragon form... she was one of the

most fearsome creatures I've ever seen. Absolutely colossal, and she forced us to teleport away, but the spell was interrupted and we were scattered across the world. I ended up in the Scourge, the others all over the place."

One by one he filled her in on the adventures of his crew, a variety of expressions and emotions crossing Alara's face as she listened to the story. "And... you?" she finally asked once he had finished. "I met someone... a Lich." She attempted to cross her arms, but struggled with only one. "Like... a Necromancer?" she asked. "Yeah, exactly that. She was older than the Dungeons. In a land without mana, she had managed to create an army of skeletons feeding solely upon hers. It's not an understatement to say that she could easily take on the Sovereign. I stayed with her for a few months whilst I trained and figured out a plan."

"And?"

"And she was nice. It took time to get used to being in the company of a skeleton, but she wanted to learn more about me and us and everything, and she had lots of stories to tell. She told me about the world before the apocalypse – and the creatures that invaded the world. Eventually I headed south, to an ancient forge that is still making enchanted weapons now. I found a weapon with the means to teleport and headed north, reuniting with the others."

"Then we were threatened by the Sovereign not to help you," he stated. Alara let out a sigh. "Just you?" she asked cautiously, her feet restless as she waited for an answer. "No, the whole Republic high command. We just happened to be there." "Good, it's in everyone's interest she doesn't know about us." Jayce smiled, nodding in agreement. "Is that everything?" she asked curiously. He shook his head. "Her threats spooked Morgana, so we had to track her down and stop her from wiping out the world."

"Right..."

"And then we received a threat from Xerxes. He had killed Bjorn's father and had blown up an island."

"Okay... what?"

"So we set off to stop him. Marisha had found out that the Guild had been sending off shipments of explosives somewhere, which turned out to be to Xerxes. We found his base and Wam, Ohno and Fenn went to investigate... They found out that the Sovereign has another Betrayer within the Guild: the Serpent." "Marisha's mother?" Alara questioned in alarm. "What else did you find out?" "Xerxes had built an airship that could teleport, one loaded with enough explosives to wipe the Capital off the map. The boys blew it up, but they didn't make it out."

“Oh, Jayce, I’m sorry,” she said with genuine sympathy. He shook his head. “It’s Bjorn that your words should go to. They were like his sons... they were his sons. He had argued they weren’t ready, but I let them go... it’s my fault they’re gone.” Alara shook her head profusely, turning to face him directly. “Don’t ever believe that. You can and should always take responsibility, but the blame is on those that forced you in that position to begin with. It’s Xerxes’ fault, no one else’s. The same way it was the Church for Xander... and Caelie.”

Jayce didn’t agree, but he could understand where she was coming from. The amount of lives that had lived and died for her were likely uncountable, to accept blame for them all would have destroyed Alara. “Well, afterwards we came here... and so did you,” he concluded. She smiled gently at him, turning back around and letting him hold her again. “One hell of a shit year,” she stated. He scoffed. “Understatement of the century.”

Astris, Wulf and Riley had decided it was best to leave their esteemed Captain and Commodore to their reconciliation, and, by the time they noticed Alara stealthily sneak out of Jayce’s quarters in search of food, night had fallen and they were all very drunk. “Shhh!” Alara hushed, holding her finger to her lips as she hurried past her waving friends all lounging on deck chairs in the dark with various empty bottles and glasses. She peered up through the window into the living quarters, Jayce’s borrowed shirt not quite long enough as she stood on tip-toes. Immediately two sets of giggling hands covered Wulf’s eyes as Astris and Riley defended Alara’s modesty.

Marisha let out a sigh as she picked up the tray she had covered and set aside, opening the door and presenting it to a blushing Alara. “I hope to see you both a bit more sociable tomorrow,” Marisha told her, handing her the food. Alara smiled appreciatively, holding the tray with both hands. Marisha’s eye glanced to the prosthetic. “Doc said she’ll see both you and Riley tomorrow for a check-up. That one hasn’t been in a fit state for any examination since she arrived,” Marisha levied, pointing at Riley who burst in cackling laughter along with the other two. “Thank you,” Alara whispered. Marisha nodded, gently closing the door. “Sleep well,” she said, just as it shut.

“Well?” Bjorn questioned, as Marisha stepped back into the living quarters. “Nothing,” she answered, joining him on the sofa and picking up her wine. “But it’s probably the happiest they’ve both been in quite some time.” For a moment Marisha felt Bjorn tense – as if he was going to say something, and as if what she had said had upset him – but it soon dispersed. “Good... I’m glad,” he said defeatedly. Marisha turned and looked up at her partner. “I’m as upset as you are-”

“Are you?” he snapped. “You seem to have forgiven him rather easily.” Marisha paused deliberately, letting her emotions focus and the impact of Bjorn’s words resonate with him. “I will remind you,” she said with a steel tone, “I am grieving my boys too, and you are not angry with me.” She remained tucked into him and slowly she felt his tension fade away. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “Good. That anger... you can place it on Jayce, fine, that’s your choice, but Wam, Fenn... Ohno... they asked for the mission, and it’s because of them that the Republic isn’t in flames. You can’t let their choice eat you in a way that punishes everyone whose fault it wasn’t. It was Xerxes’ bombs, and you know better than anyone that those boys... they blew up that island, because of course they would.”

“If you can’t forgive Jayce, then you should leave. No one would blame you. I would understand completely. I will always love you, and if you need some space then that’s fine. But please don’t take it out on our friends, on me, on yourself. It’s not fair when the person to blame is the person who dragged those boys into this conflict in the first place, the person you pleaded not to,” she stated through quiet tears and deep worry. Bjorn slowly stood up, leaving her behind as he walked towards the door. “Bjorn!” she called after him. He shook his head and stepped through the door, leaving her alone.

Seize the Seas Tales: Kin of the same Kind

The Demons all looked at each other, Baal and Belial both through Mai Lu and Caelie’s bodies, Paimon, Raim and Byleth in their golem forms. “And...” Raim said nervously. “Asmodeus is for certain... gone?” he asked, looking towards Baal. Baal stroked his pale chin, the white face firm against the red of his dark crimson body. His glowing pink and red eyes bore into the small crow with melted gold on the tips of his wings; similarly Raim’s brown eyes glowed back at his King before they were swiftly averted. “It is believed,” Baal confirmed.

Paimon tried not to react, her small bear form sitting quietly as she had listened to the stories of her brethren. King Baal was wise and cunning, and his words did not provide confirmation, but greatly hinted that he knew what she was hiding. “And we know at least that Astaroth is in the Sovereign’s clutches, what of the others? Bune? Morax? Avnus? Seir?” Raim questioned. The other Demons all shook their heads. “We do know that Pursan is with a human called Kitty Deliver, but the rest are all unknown,” Belial stated, the gold ichor dripping from his crescent eyes fading into the air as it fell from his mask-like face. “So what is our next move, my Lord?” Raim questioned, looking at Baal.

“There isn’t one. We’re safe here, and here is our best chance of finding the others. Even if it does mean serving the mortals on their journey,” the Demon said,

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almost shamefully. Raim let out a sigh, looking at his companions in their miniature form. "At least in this form we have our sanity and some of our abilities. Are the mortals at least rightfully fearful of us?" Raim questioned to the group.

Astris and Riley leant on their wrists, with a drink each in their other hands, watching the group of Demons with curiosity and bemusement. "It reminds me of my teddy tea parties," Astris stated with a big smile. "Don't you think?" "I had neither teddies, tea, nor parties, rich girl, but I do remember watching a raccoon and a monkey fight over a bagel once. I'd say this is pretty similar."

"So cute."

"Vicious fuckers. The bagel was good though."