

Chapter 230: Betrayer of the Rising Aces

“You can go,” Yuthura told Jayce and Wulf firmly, the pair of them hovering in the medical room doorway as both Riley and Alara sat nervously on a bed. “Although I suppose I do have some vaccinations you both could use,” she stated, hobbling towards a cupboard. Both of them fled like the wind. “Boys,” Yuthura scowled. “Your men don’t need to hold your hand through every checkup.” Alara rolled her eyes whilst Riley blushed heavily. Alara turned and glanced at her. Riley immediately held up both her hands and shook them. “No, no, not at all.” Alara squinted at her, only to yelp as she felt a sharp pinch in her right shoulder.

“What was that?” she questioned, watching as Yuthura jabbed a similar and very long needle into Riley’s stump. “Let’s call it a regenerative cocktail,” Yuthura stated, stepping back and cautiously observing them. Riley raised an eyebrow. “My legs are going to grow back?” she questioned. The old lady scoffed, shaking her head. “Not immediately. It’ll stimulate cell replication and start to repair you but that means those building blocks have to come from somewhere. So...”

Alara doubled over, clutching her stump and thinly holding back a scream as she felt bits of her body melt away. Riley didn’t hold it back, her scream agonising as her nails dug into the bed they were sat on and the ends of her stumps bubbled and swelled. The pain lasted only seconds, but it was agonising, and when it faded both Alara and Riley stared at each other before both looking back at Yuthura with anger. “It didn’t work!” Riley protested, her legs slightly longer but only by a couple of centimetres, the same true of Alara’s arm. “No,” Yuthura corrected, prodding Riley’s stumps with a long metal rod. Riley didn’t react. Yuthura then reached to do the same to Alara’s stump but Alara stopped her, afraid of the inevitable pain. “Trust me, some people call me a Doctor.” She prodded the stump and there was no pain.

“I don’t understand, what did you do?” Alara questioned, looking at Yuthura with shock and joy. “I’ve regenerated the ends of your stumps. It’ll make any prosthetics you use easier to graft, and when the time is right – it will make it easier to attach your replacements as the flesh will be more uniform. Tempest will sort out your limbs,” Yuthura stated, looking at the samples she had taken from the pair of them. “I would prefer to not have to regrow your joints, so I’ll need to administer another dose in a few months once you’ve replaced what was taken, and probably another few across the next year or two. You’ll get your limbs back in time, don’t worry.” Alara wasn’t worried, it was the best news she

had had in a while. "Thanks, Doc," she stated, standing up and offering her back to Riley. "Yeah, thanks, gran," Riley stated, getting slung onto Alara's back like a backpack.

"Better?" Jayce questioned, as Alara and Riley returned to the main deck. "Most definitely," Riley answered, standing on her tiptoes – a pair of stands dropping to create a pair of heels. The heels looked awfully sharp, and Jayce got the feeling they were for more than aesthetic. The dark black metal had countless glowing blue lines, glyphs and runes. Riley crouched and then jumped, her jump easily landing her on the crow's nest with a faint trail of blue electricity. "I can feel the wood under my feet!" she yelled down, before dropping with the gentlest touch to the floor.

Jayce glanced towards Alara. Her arm was golden, with distinctive muscles and joints. It too had glowing lines, runes and glyphs, but hers were a fearsome red. Alara reached towards her metal hand and pulled it back, the wrist opening up – the inside swirling with orange energy that swiftly roared before unleashing a bolt of energy out towards the ocean. It sailed far and then detonated with a horrifically large blast. She closed the joint. "I'm happy with mine," she said with a menacing grin. "Uh, good," Jayce returned. "No plans for the day. Marisha's running a bar. Fruit and snacks are available and we'll grill some meat for lunch." Alara's stomach rumbled, her body desperate to replenish itself. "Come on, let's find you some food," he stated, standing up and taking her hand.

It felt nice to have guests on the ship once again, and, although there were periodic discussions about the inevitable conflict ahead of them, both the Wolfpack and the Rising Aces did their utmost best to just enjoy the peace. Between an abundance of drinks, consistent good food provided by Marisha, the hot sun during the day and the warm baths during the night, luxury was enjoyed by all. But they all knew it couldn't last.

"We should start to come up with plans for our next move," Jayce stated, summoning all crew of the Stacked Hand and their guests to the main deck. It had been a little over two weeks since Alara had joined them, and she sat with her head in Astris's lap, the others in similar positions across the deck. "And what would you propose?" Wulf questioned, a pair of sunglasses on his wolveren head. "Are we truly thinking of taking on the Sovereign?"

Unease spread throughout the entire group. It had all been on their minds but the more they thought about it, the more it became both a task that felt increasingly more dangerous, and also more pressing. "Yes," Jayce answered.

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"No," inserted Bjorn. All heads turned his way as he stood up and approached Jayce. "Our first priority is Xerxes," Bjorn stated firmly, towering over Jayce. Jayce faltered before shaking his head. "I'm sorry--"

A heavy backhand send Jayce tumbling across the ground. "Bjorn!" yelled Astris, darting between him and Jayce as he formed a fist. "Those boys are dead because of him! So is Magnus!" Bjorn yelled. "Xerxes must die!" Jayce stood up, wiping his face and looking up at Bjorn. "A promise was made to help the people of Arcastalum! Cannibals! Vampires!" Jayce returned. "Remember?" Bjorn grit his teeth before he turned away. "Bjorn! Xerxes will pay, I promise you--"

"You promise me, do you? Just like you said Wam, Ohno and Fenn would be fine? That they could handle a mission like that?" he snarled. Jayce looked away, uncertain of how to answer. Alara stood up and approached his side, stepping next to Jayce. "Bjorn--" she attempted, physically seeing Jayce struggling to come up with a way to respond. Bjorn roared at her. "The Marines have no say here! You have no right to speak when it's your failure to handle your own problems that led to this! When it was your desperation to make the world cater to your needs, rather than bring about order and stability and fix the damage that your people did to mine! You sacrificed my family and so many others for yours!"

Alara flinched, her body going cold and face falling as his words tore through her. "Bjorn!" Marisha inserted, spreading her arms wide in front of him to force him to look at her. He faltered, seeing the pain across the faces of his crew and the damage his words had inflicted. Alara buried her face in Jayce's chest, his arms wrapping around her. He shook his head and began to step away, heading for the hold, but he faltered, his eyes widening as he saw a jagged piece of flaming metal cut a glowing line through the air. "No..." he muttered, the line splitting apart and a trio of figures walking through the portal.

"Gods!" Scáthach stated. "I should have brought my sunnies!" Tanare stood next to her, the large tiger therian uneasy with Sétanta on Scáthach's other side. "Maybe a bikini too," she added, looking across the summer wear decorating the crew. Scáthach's glowing brown and purple eyes locked straight onto Jayce and Alara, her eyes widening and a grin spreading across her face. "So it's true," she stated with distinct elation. Jayce released Alara and stepped in front of her, Sola and Luna flicking out into blades as the rest of the crew summoned their own arms.

Scáthach stepped forwards, standing directly in front of Bjorn and looking up at him. "You're in my way," she said softly. "Will you stop me from going to them?"

she asked, her face curious. Jayce wanted to rush forwards but he knew Scáthach was after Alara. They all knew she was. But Bjorn stepped aside, looking down at the edge of the ship. Jayce felt his heart twist, like a dagger had been plunged into it. Scáthach patted Bjorn on his arm. "Thank you."

The Sovereign then stepped forwards alone, both Tanare and Sétanta holding back, as if waiting for something. No one other than Scáthach moved, slowly and deliberately she approached the large group – a distinct caution to her face that previously she hadn't carried. Astris moved first, pointing her pistols point-blank at Scáthach and stepping in front of Jayce and Alara. "Let me make this clear, to all of you, but you especially, little Vampire, I am here to talk. But make me feel that isn't possible and I will exterminate members of this group until only those that are willing to talk remain."

Astris' pistols shook slightly, eventually lowering in defeat. "Good. Marisha, could you whip up a cocktail for me, please? Something like that blue one Zeta has," Scáthach requested. Marisha didn't move. "Tanare." Tanare looked at Bjorn, still stood in silent defeat with his gaze to the edge of the ship. Marisha darted forwards to prepare the drink. Scáthach then walked past Ordo and Thalia unopposed, stopping in front of Wulf and extending a hand. "It's a little bright." Shakily he handed her his sunglasses, but they were too big for her so they sat awkwardly, somewhat stupidly, on her face.

Scáthach then circled around towards Jayce and Alara, sitting down on a sunbed next to Arthuria. "Where's your sister?" Scáthach questioned, maintaining her gaze on Alara and Jayce. "Not here," Arthuria growled. Scáthach sighed. "A shame. Oh well." Marisha returned with the cocktail, handing it to Scáthach in a glass. "Here you go," Scáthach stated, handing it to Arthuria. "Drink up," she said with a sinister grin. Arthuria looked up at Marisha, Marisha giving the faintest of headshakes. "Drink!" commanded Scáthach quietly but firmly.

Slowly Arthuria put the drink to her lips, taking a heavy gulp. Arthuria then presented the drink, only to find Scáthach sipping a drink she had stolen from Caelie. "Finish it," Scáthach commanded, the warning clear. Arthuria lifted the glass back to her lips and Marisha lunged forwards, slapping it aside. "Stop playing with us!" she cried, the glass shattering on the floor. Scáthach stood up, drink still in hand and loudly slurping the colourful straw within it. Scáthach's eyes were cold and dull, and locked hatefully on Marisha. She took a step forwards and Marisha took a step backwards. Scáthach faltered, grinned and then leaped forwards, Marisha tumbling backwards to the floor in fear.

Bjorn turned back towards his friends, crew and wife, Tanare's warning hand resting gently on his shoulder. "Don't," he said quietly. "Please don't." Scáthach stepped over Marisha, standing in front of Jayce and Alara. "You killed my Betrayer, you know what that means," she said excitedly. "I need a replacement." Alara's hand found Jayce's and Scáthach's face softened slightly. "Cute, and disappointing. Because it means that someone," she said loudly and looking in Tanare's direction, "lied to me!"

Tanare met Scáthach's gaze, his expression firm. He spread his arms wide, as if waiting for a killing blow. But it didn't come. She tutted and returned her gaze to Alara. "I told you that if you succeeded I would come for you. And you succeeded, proving yourself better than that washed up General. But..." her gaze turned towards Jayce. "There is much more that we can do together." Alara's heart stopped. "Will you obey me?" Scáthach questioned to Jayce. "What will it take?"

"I will not betray my people," Jayce stated firmly. Scáthach chuckled, finishing her drink and handing it to Ordo. "Then I will make you kill her, or I will kill everyone else on this ship other than you two. And then I will take you both. Your choice, lover boy? Come with me and serve me dutifully, or I will kill her. That's your choice to make." Jayce faltered, Alara's grip on his arm tightening. "My patience is running out."

"If I go with you then you and your Betrayers will not harm anyone on this ship, deal?" Jayce stated. He felt his crew want to act, to speak, to stop him, but he stopped them with a single movement. He stepped away from Alara. Scáthach nodded. "Acceptable. You know what happens if you break your end?" Jayce nodded. Scáthach then turned, summoning a flame axe out of thin air and slashing another line. It widened into a burning portal and she stepped through. "Jayce!" Alara cried, stepping forwards to stop him, only for Ordo and Astris to stop her. "No!" He turned as he stood in front of the portal, looking at Bjorn who stared at him in horror. "I am sorry, my friend." He then looked at his crew and simply smiled before turning and stepping through. The two other Betrayers followed and the portal closed.

"No!" Alara cried, dropping to her knees and beginning to sob. One by one the others fell back in defeat. "How the hell did she find us?" Riley questioned, shaking her head as she paced back and forth. Several eyes glanced towards Bjorn. "You didn't?" Marisha questioned, desperately approaching Bjorn as he

remained looking out towards the water. He shook his head, but the fact that she had even asked hurt more than he could ever put into words. "I... didn't."

"What do we do?" questioned Zeta. "We have to go after him right?" No one answered. "Even if we do... what can we do?" Yuthura questioned. "Jayce will be counting on us to do something," Falconer stated, stepping up. Astris nodded, standing up from her kneeling position next to Alara. "Falconer is right, this is Jayce after all. He will have a plan. His last words to us was to go after Strigon and Armin. Alara has proven that the Betrayers can be beaten, so that is where we should go next. Jayce will find his way back to us... he has to!" she declared. The others nodded, looking from Bjorn's broken form to her. "Looks like you're in charge, Cap'," Ordo stated, placing a hand on Astris's shoulder.

Astris turned towards Arthuria. "I work better with you alongside me," she offered, presenting a hand. Arthuria took it. "Jayce will come back!" she agreed. "Trust in the Captain!" she stated, turning to the others. Astris' eyes fell on the defeated and sobbing Alara. "He will be fine," she said gently, crouching in front of her. "He's survived worse." Alara looked at Astris, the smile of reassurance genuine. She believed in Jayce. "Now, the Sovereign made her threat clear. She can't do anything if Alara isn't available as leverage. So that means we need to get her to the safest place possible," Astris stated.

"All of us were here and we still couldn't do anything," Mai Lu stated. Astris nodded. "True, but we were at a bit of a disadvantage. Tempest, take us to Final Bastion. We're sending the Marines home to the Admirals. They'll be able to hide her somewhere safe." The djinn nodded and began to float away to make his preparations. Alara didn't feel certain. If the Sovereign had found her on the Stacked Hand then it was highly unlikely that she wouldn't be able to find her elsewhere. "I need that brave face, Commodore," Astris stated, offering a hand to help Alara up. Alara wiped her eyes and took it, standing up and looking down at her friend. "Jayce will want you to make preparations for a war against the Sovereign. Find allies, anyone and everyone who you can, and wait for us to give the signal. I don't know when it will be or what it will look like, but Jayce will have a solution. I know it."

Those words repeated over and over in Alara's head as she sat in front of the Admirals of the Old World, telling them exactly what had happened. "He... went willingly?" questioned Cassandra, sat in disbelief with all eyes upon her. Alara nodded. "The Sovereign threatened my life, the deal was for my safety, but I

doubt that it is permanent. One way or another Scáthach has secured loyalty from her Betrayers. She will try to do the same with Jayce,” Alara said quietly, rubbing her palms with her thumbs as she looked down at her lap.

Firm footsteps approached her from behind, a hand resting gently on her shoulder. Alara turned and glanced up at the Old Dog. Xarga gave her a big grin of reassurance. “The Pirate Lord’s crew are correct, he is his father’s son. Jayce will have a plan, but that means that we all have a part to play. The Sovereign will want vengeance for her fallen Betrayer, even with her hand in it. And she’ll want our Alara too. Jayce was first, she’ll come for you next.”

The Admirals all looked at the old man with respect, nodding in agreement with his words. “In which case, now is no better time,” stated Admiral Yashiro, standing up and approaching Alara. “Commodore Vanathur, for your actions in the rescue of Admirals Vanathur and Vanathur, as well as your accomplishment in defeating Betrayer Barca Khalid, we wish to present this commendation to you.” Yashiro presented a golden medal of a fortress with a blue ribbon. Alara looked at it, glancing from the hollow commendation to the others in the room before she shook her head. “I don’t want it, I don’t care for it. I just want Jayce back...” she said, tears falling from her face as she stood up and stepped away.

Footsteps followed her, a cautious hand grasping her shoulder. “It’s okay, but now is not the time. You’re a Marine,” said her mother, but Alara knocked the hand off her shoulder and stepped hurriedly into Cassandra’s embrace. Cassandra met Victoire’s stunned gaze, giving the softest shake of her head as she held her daughter. Cassandra rocked her gently as she hugged Alara, brushing her hair. “You’re safe,” Cassandra reassured in a whisper. “I won’t let her touch you.”

“Commodore Vanathur is grounded until further notice. She is not to leave my side and will aide me in negotiations with Brunxchume’s Fleet Admiral. The crew of Pirate Lord Exarga will be endeavouring to ensure that he returns to them – we have to trust in Jayce and his crew that they will sort this. In the meantime, we are to prepare for an outright conflict with the Sovereign,” Fleet Admiral Exarga declared. Alara pulled away and looked at her. Cassandra gave Alara a reassuring smile. “Better than anyone, you know we can only trust that he’ll find an answer.”

“But that doesn’t mean we can’t help,” Alara stated, wiping her eyes and straightening up. “Before he left, Jayce gave me information. The Serpent is a Betrayer. She handed the Guild to Scáthach. Marisha of the Rising Aces has gone

to intervene, and is working on depowering the Guild." Expressions of surprise and intrigue spread across the room. "After we speak to Fleet Admiral Malik, we should pay the Syndicate a visit," Alara told Cassandra. Fleet Admiral Exarga nodded in agreement. "Then those are our first moves."

Seize the Seas Tales: The Sovereign

Jayce couldn't help but stare at the enormity of Scáthach's throne room. The ceiling was at least twenty metres in height and painted with beautiful artwork of countless battles waged by warriors dressed in black armour against therians, mages, and soldiers in blue and gold. The colossal walls had ginormous paintings displaying people Jayce didn't recognise and scenes of the ocean and islands. The room was bright, the floor stone and shiny, and a giant crystal chandelier hung in the centre. Pillars lined a long purple rug leading up towards an elevated platform where a colossal gold and white throne with purple cushions sat. The platform had a long set of stairs leading up to it, putting Scáthach's throne well above Jayce's head.

It was just the two of them. Tanare and Sétanta had departed with a simple gesture and no other Betrayers had joined. "Come," Scáthach stated, walking up the stairs to her throne and gesturing for Jayce to follow. Hesitantly he did so, stopping at the top of the stairs as she sat down on her throne. "Do I kneel?" he goaded. She smiled, brushing her dark orange hair behind her pierced ear. "I would be flattered if you did, but you've been wondering how to kill me since you've arrived, so I doubt it would be sincere."

"Why am I still breathing? Why take me prisoner rather than wipe us out?" he questioned. She crossed her legs and leant forwards. "It would be boring to kill you and your friends. I think you hold the greatest potential to be my rival... my replacement..." she stated. Jayce frowned, a shimmering golden light falling down upon her head. A simple golden crown then appeared. She smiled, taking it off and showing it to Jayce before physically handing it to him. The inside was marked with countless runes and a word: 'Sovereign'. The metal then faded away, reappearing on Scáthach's head. "It's enchanted," she clarified. "It took a lot to find the right craftsman but I think it made it worthwhile."

"This crown will only present itself to the strongest. To the Sovereign of this world. And when I am killed, as all villains are, my replacement will receive it. That could be you."

“Why? To what end?” Jayce questioned. Scáthach smiled, spinning the crown on her fingers. “Because, for once it gives the world a reason to fight together again. I’ve seen so much pointless death, so many wasteful wars due to kings so far removed from their battlefields, that I wanted to create something that mattered. Every time a Sovereign falls, and their replacement is selected, a new generation of Pirates and miscreants will set forwards out onto the seas to seize the title for themselves. They will seek out a chance to seize the seas for themselves. An endless battle and endless adventure for freedom – one that doesn’t require nations to wage pointless wars.”

“But won’t nations just seek the crown for themselves?” Jayce questioned. Scáthach shrugged. “Not my problem at that point. I’ll be dead, killed by someone stronger. If a nation can rise to deal with that person then so be it.” Jayce shook his head. “You don’t need to agree, or understand, that’s not the point. Strive to outdo me, find a way to betray and succeed me, and this crown will be yours. The world will be yours. Thoughts, Jayce?”

She looked at him for a reaction, but instead he turned and began to walk away. “Disappointing,” she called after him, appearing in front of him in the blink of an eye. “That was your one chance to woo me, to make me one of your many allies,” she warned. “Instead I’ll treat you like any other of my Betrayers. You’ve upset me and now there is a consequence. Pick one of your crew, it doesn’t matter who. Kill them for me.”

“I’ll die before I harm any of my crew,” Jayce stated. Scáthach raised an eyebrow, shaking her head. Jayce flicked out Sola into a long knife, immediately pressing his own blade to his neck. Scáthach lunged forwards, grabbing the blade with her fingers and yanking Sola away. A thin line of blood sat on Jayce’s throat, his warning clear. “I respect your resolve, annoying but commendable. You’re going to have to pick an ally, someone you care about. Or else it will be Alara. So who are you going to pick? One of your parents? Your brother? Who is someone that you idolise?”

Jayce turned away, shaking his head. He couldn’t. A forceful hand turned him back to face Scáthach. “Don’t make me, please,” he begged. She smiled, a smile of pity. “Your father?” she suggested, looking into his eyes. “Your mother?” “Xarga,” Jayce said in defeat. “My grandfather.” Scáthach raised an eyebrow. “Please don’t make me, he’s... my hero.” She nodded, stepping back. “You have until sunset,” she told him. “If night falls and he’s not dead then Alara will be.”