

Chapter 232: Guilt

Xarga looked out at the setting sun from one of the few comfortable benches he had found on Final Bastion. The orange glow was soft and warm, and nestling comfortably into the ocean on the horizon. He was alone, apart from Adeline – his personally assigned bodyguard. She stood leaning in the shadows nearby, her Killers' veil disguising her face as always. Even without seeing her he knew what expression covered her hidden face: pain. She knew as well as he did that he didn't have much longer left, perhaps only half a year, maybe a few months more. To be the bodyguard to a dying man was not an easy task.

A soft magical swirl shimmered somewhere nearby, Adeline immediately tensing as she prepared for battle, but with a simple gesture Xarga stood her down, his gaze still outwards on the horizon. "I'm glad it's you," Xarga said softly, as Jayce nervously stepped towards the giant legend. "I was worried I wouldn't ever see you again," the old man stated, inviting Jayce to sit down next to him. Jayce faltered before doing so. "I..." Jayce began, his body trembling. "I know why you're here, my boy, and I'm glad it's me."

Jayce shook his head, his eyes watering as Xarga's large hand gripped his shoulder. "Once I heard you were taken, I figured she would make you prove yourself. I was worried that your mother, or your father, would be her target." "I refused, I said I would take myself out before that," Jayce answered. Xarga sat in silence for a few moments. "I... understand," he stated, a tiny hint of hurt in his voice as it dawned on him the same thought wasn't extended towards him. "You made the right choice, Jayce."

Xarga turned and looked at him, a genuine smile of reassurance on his face. "You've grown far greater than I could have ever imagined, I'm proud of you." Tears dripped down Jayce's face. "I will always be proud of you, as any grandfather should be." Jayce looked down, his body trembling as he shook his head. "I can't do it," he said quietly. Xarga stood up with a groan, stepping forwards before turning and looking towards Adeline. "You may leave," he told her. She shook her head, refusing to look away. "No," she said quietly, her own tears falling.

Xarga shook his head and looked down at Jayce. "Do you have a plan?" he asked. Jayce nodded. "And does this moment matter to it?" Xarga asked. Jayce nodded again. A smile crossed Xarga's face, and he spread his arm and stump wide. "Then make it count, for the future I wouldn't have seen anyway and the future

you will create for your own descendants." Jayce stood up and stepped into the embrace, the arm grasping his body tightly.

A soft gasp escaped Xarga as Jayce drove Sola into his ribs, cutting deep and precisely through his heart before swiftly retracting the blade. Xarga fell limp onto Jayce and slowly he lowered him to the floor, Adeline rushing forwards to help. They both knelt over the Captain of the Old Dogs. "Tell them it was me," Jayce told her. "I was never not going to. Get out of here before I cut you down," she threatened, closing Xarga's eyes. Jayce stepped back, looking back at the family member he had just murdered before conjuring a portal with Luna and stepping through. "It's done," he told Scáthach, his vision tinted red as he looked up at her with disgust and loathing. "Good. Sleep well, there is much to do." A pair of Null Legionnaires stepped forwards, gesturing for Jayce to follow.

Alarms rang out across Final Bastion, and in any other situation Alara would be rushing around finding out what had happened and giving orders, but instead she found herself sealed within Cassandra's office – the pair of them expecting the worst. The world seemed to turn grey as a Lieutenant came in to the room and explained what had happened. His words faded away, falling silently on both Cassandra's and Alara's ears as the sole words shut out anything else: Jayce had murdered Old Dog Xarga. "What?" Alara questioned first, Fleet Admiral Exarga's face pale with shock. "It appears to have been targeted, Commodore. Old Dog Xarga was assassinated."

Alara dismissed the Lieutenant with a simple gesture before slowly turning to face Cassandra. "But why?" Cassandra asked quietly, shutting her eyes to hold back tears. Alara had an answer but she wasn't quite brave enough to say it out loud. A knock drew their attention to the door and both Adeline and Philip Exarga entered. "Explain," commanded Fleet Admiral Exarga coldly. Adeline simply looked at the floor, but she raised her head when Philip placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "It was a test of proof," Admiral Exarga confirmed. Both Alara and Cassandra looked at him with waning belief. "Why didn't you intervene, get Xarga to safety?" Cassandra questioned.

"He stood me down. I think... Evandril knew what Betrayal Exarga was there to do."

Betrayal Exarga was not a title Alara, Cassandra or Philip liked to hear, all three of them physically recoiling at its naming. "Give me every detail," Cassandra ordered. Slowly the other Admirals entered the room, all equally looking for answers and sharing in their own grief. "So what then?" eventually questioned

Silas Vanathur. "We just let this go and trust in whatever plan your son has?" The eyes in the room shifted to Cassandra. "No," answered Philip. "This was the Sovereign's punishment for Barca Khalid and is also a provocation in order to open us up. This was to show that we are vulnerable, and that we are still under her, and also to give a warning that she could target any one of us. Jayce will have changed his target specifically because he was aware of Xarga's illness. Otherwise..." Philip stated, looking directly at Alara. "Jayce would have killed one of your parents."

The words rang cold across the room but the point was made. "This will have bought Jayce some leeway and grace to do whatever it is that he is planning. We shouldn't count on him to achieve it." Philip looked towards Cassandra. "Fleet Admiral Xarga's death needs to be publicised, and also the name of its perpetrator. It cannot be hidden. It won't protect him." She sighed and nodded. "We will hold a funeral here, and then his body shall be sent north for a more official funeral at home. Send word home."

Jayce's room was far more comfortable than he would have liked. He had been expecting a bed of nails, rather than quilted pillows and an ultrasoft duvet. He would have preferred it after what he had done. Sleep avoided him, his mind too busy and also surprisingly lonely without Paimon, and eventually he gave up on it, stepping outside of his room and back out into the Sovereign's mansion. The Null Legionnaires standing guard along the colossal corridor all looked towards him, silently warning him not to cause trouble. "Am I permitted to wander?" Jayce questioned aloud. "You are in command, sir," came a response from the nearest soldier.

The mansion took a long time to simply navigate. It had three floors, each of them roughly ten metres in height. Lengthways it was around a hundred metres and only a third less in depth. All across the giant building were long corridors connecting into each other like an endless labyrinth. An innumerable number of Null Legion stood guard like statues. The bottom floor was filled with colossal ballrooms, all connecting into each other before finally concluding with the Sovereign's throne room. The rooms made no sense: each of them contained four pairs of colossal wooden doors that automatically closed behind him and somewhat randomly leading towards another room. On his travels Jayce encountered one room containing a colossal black metal vault door - unsurprisingly it was locked. It was only after entering the same room for the fourth time that Jayce noticed the doors were actually portals and that there was probably a deliberate pathway through.

The Sovereign's throne room held three sets of doors, two opposing doors leading back to the ballrooms, with a forwards door opposing the throne that led forwards towards an entrance hall. This metal door didn't have the same enchantments; it wasn't a portal but Jayce got the feeling that if it was sealed, it would remain sealed regardless of how much force was used against it. The entrance hall held the main entrance into the mansion, a huge pair of ornate green doors. A corridor cut through the entranceway, leading onwards towards several doors connecting to the ballrooms before flicking around the western side like a sideways 't'.

A pair of staircases led upwards, either side of the throne room main doors, but Jayce followed the corridor around instead, eventually setting his gaze on a lone set of stairs leading down. A pair of guards surprisingly stopped him from going further. The middle floor held a colossal library, as well as a large kitchen, forge, armoury, sparring room, and communal baths. Legionnaires were utilising it somewhat casually, paying him little attention. The top floor held innumerable bedrooms, most of them structured like barracks for the army stationed on the island, with a few spare rooms designated for the Betrayers and likely key Null Legion Commanders.

After his long walk it was dawn, the sun slowly rising across the island. Jayce returned to his room, awaiting instruction. But nothing came. He was left alone, and eventually he departed it once more, this time making his way precisely and purposefully towards the throne room. Scáthach sat waiting for him. "I didn't call for you," she stated smugly, laying across her throne whilst snacking on some green grapes. "You said there is much to do, I was expecting to be summoned."

"Oh there is, but not just yet. I am glad to see you've taken an interest in everything, I hope your tour was fruitful?" she questioned, uselessly blowing a few strands of her dark orange hair out of her eyes. "This place is... a fortress in disguise," he stated, trying not to show too much enthusiasm for the genuinely impressive structure. "Oh yeah. Practically unconquerable if I want it to be, and that's without thought towards your comrades who could be summoned with a simple request at a moment's notice."

"Comrades?"

"The other Betrayers," Scáthach clarified. Jayce didn't like it one bit, but he had no defence. "Right. And where are they? Where's Vexx?" Jayce questioned. Scáthach sat up, leaning forwards and setting down her grapes on her throne's armrest. "A good question. He's asked to not see you, and since he's your senior,

I thought I would honour his request. You know, loyalty and all. He's probably out with Elaine somewhere, fighting or drinking. Who knows."

Jayce did his best not to react but from her smug grin he knew he had given away more than he should have. "You know, he once told me that you were his Captain, before you two parted on less than kind terms. I've heard his side, I'm curious as to yours?" she goaded, leaning back and crossing her arms and legs. "That's none of your business." She raised a singular eyebrow and Jayce felt a cold shiver cross his body. Jayce looked down and away. "I let him down," he answered. "I didn't see what he was going through and when he needed me..." "You turned away from him," she completed. "Hmph, close enough to what he said, if a little the wrong way round."

"What?"

"And Elaine? Morgana and Arthuria are both her sisters, correct?" she probed. Jayce felt compelled to answer, Xarga's corpse scarred into his mind, and the likely possibility she could dispatch him to create another but of a different person he was close to. "Yes," he said begrudgingly. Scáthach nodded, looking up at the ceiling high above her. "Elaine was quite resistant to talking about them and even more resistant to me trying to reunite her with them, quite a story behind it all I'm sure. Broken families are hard to control, and she's a real mess. Would you like me to bring them back together?"

"No," Jayce stated firmly.

"Not the answer I'd have expected but fine. Leave Vexx and Elaine alone, for me, they have enough on their minds as is without you interfering. You're free to go. I'll call you back when you're needed. They're doing a funeral for Xarga in an hour or so. You should probably go and watch but I wouldn't get too close if I was you – the Republic might have some reservations about your involvement." "How will you contact me?" She touched her collarbone and Jayce felt for his necklace. It was gone, replaced with a cord attached to a metal medallion of a skull embedded with a sword. "See you soon. And stay away from your crew."

"Death of the Republic Hero."

"Betrayed Exarga."

"Traitor to his Blood: Ex-Xarga."

The reaction around the world was one of complete and utter shock. For days it was all anyone would talk about, the newspapers printing the same story over

and over again. Why did he do it? The same questions rolled across the world, Jayce's own allies swiftly beginning to wonder the same thing. "Can we still trust him?" Somme Ankor asked, looking towards Kitty as they stood on a beach looking out towards the Frontier. "I don't know," she answered softly.

"We must do something," Tim Kane told Mirabelle Delyth, the newspaper floating in the air in front of him as he sat in his throne room with her straddled across his lap, her arms across his neck. "What can we possibly do?" she questioned, her eyes sharing his worry. "There must be something?" he returned. "We could send a tribute to Pirate Lord Bjorn? Our sympathies, a token of our continued friendship," Mirabelle suggested. Tim let out a long sigh. Eventually nodding. "I just hope he and his crew are able to survive without Jayce."

"Pirate Lord Bjorn?" Bjorn questioned, looking at the newspaper in front of him. "It should be your name," he stated, looking over towards Astris, "not mine." She shook her head. "No. You were First Mate of this crew. You are currently the longest running active member of the Rising Aces and as such it is you who is Captain. And with Jayce's title being... upgraded to Betrayer, you are the best person to take his place. So, Pirate Lord Bjorn, since Jayce is... compromised, what are your orders?" Bjorn shook his head. He didn't know, it felt like they were balancing on a knife's edge and a wrong move would send them tumbling into the abyss. "What should we do?" he questioned back to her. "First Mate," he added. She smiled. "It's time to get Morgana back, and then we're going to prepare for war."

Alara stood over the coffin of Xarga, tears streaming down her face as she took her moment to say goodbye. Eyes lay upon her. Those that knew of her connection to Jayce couldn't help but partially blame her, those that didn't knew instead that Xarga's death was punishment for the death of Khalid. Either way, the consequence was on her. "I'm sorry," she whimpered, shaking her head as she turned away from the man who had supported her from the beginning, the man that very much had been a grandparent to her as well as Jayce.

Jayce wanted to approach, he wanted to stand beside the coffin and say his final physical goodbyes. He had tried to find Xarga in the underworld but the stubborn old man had left for a new life with little thought. Instead he was forced to sit crouched on a rooftop, doing his best to hide his presence. He listened to the speech his mother gave, a story of how he had raised her and so many others to power. He listened to the stories of his father and the care and kindness that Xarga had given him. He listened to Yashiro's stories of valour and heroism. Silas

and Victoire stood silently to the side, unwilling or unable to stand up to the podium, Jayce didn't know. They looked as he remembered, but Alara's words on them painted them in a very different light in his eyes. The coffin was closed and it vanished alongside a mage as it made its journey north, back to the Republic. "Goodbye," Jayce muttered, using Sola to teleport away.

For weeks Jayce was left to his own accord, and during that time he set out with a few different purposes. He kept out of the light, sticking to the shadows of obscurity as he relied on his crew to make the preparations he needed. Periodically he would return to the mansion, Scáthach would make a passing comment or threat, and he in turn would question the whereabouts of Vexx, Elaine, and Tanare – his questions going unanswered. Equally, with each visit he would map out the mansion just a little bit more, until the only places unvisited were the Betrayer's and the Sovereign's personal quarters and the stairs leading down.

Rain fell heavily upon his head as he trudged through the mud of an island not too far from Belluabella. It rattled against his thick cloak, the darkness of the night broken only by the light of several hanging lanterns and the periodic flash of lightning. Laughter broke through the rain, a heavy orange glow emerging through the windows of the tavern he was approaching. An accordion was playing inside, briefly being smothered by the thunder. Jayce's eyes glanced up towards the sign above: 'Last Pint' was the name of tavern, the sign showing a prisoner heading to the gallows with a tankard in hand. Jayce shook his head, stepping forwards onto the cobblestones and pushing open the heavy wooden door. The wet floorboard creaked under his feet, a few brief glances from the drunken patrons inside passing his way, but Jayce ignored them just as they eventually did him.

He passed by the bar, gesturing quietly to one of the kegs and placing down a pearl for it. A copper tankard was given to him and he sauntered away, not waiting for the change as he approached a gambler's den towards the back. His eyes glanced across the packs of cards, piles of pearl and coral, and the few varieties of games being played across the five tables. A large figure sat to the side under a similar cloak to his, his pile of coin by far the largest, but only consisting of small denominations.

Jayce approached his empty table and sat down opposite him. A fur-covered left arm emerged from the cloak, the white and black fur marked with a faint orange glow. The hood lifted up, a pair of glowing orange and red eyes staring directly

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at Jayce with surprise and confusion. "Captain?" questioned Wam in gentle disbelief. "Not quite anymore," Jayce returned, placing a singular pearl onto the table that was roughly of equal value to Wam's entire pile. "I heard, didn't really believe it until now, but given you're in a hellhole like this talking to me... well, what can I say?"

"It's good to see you alive, Wam," Jayce said honestly. The cloak pulled back a little, the right-side of Wam's badger head was badly scarred and he was missing his right hand and forearm. "You mean what's left of me?" Jayce looked down as Wam dealt out the cards. "I don't blame you Captain. Really, I don't. We made our choice, did what we needed to. I'm sorry we didn't come back to you in one piece, or... any pieces at all."

Jayce shook his head, meeting Wam's gaze. "Your brothers... they're waiting for you in the Underworld, and told me to tell you not to hurry to meet them, and to have some damn good stories for them when you do." Wam chuckled, pushing all of his money without even looking at his hand. Jayce met it with his own, glancing at his hand briefly: a six and a three of spades. "Stupid fools, even when dead." He flipped over a ten of spades, an ace of diamonds and a nine of spades.

Jayce flipped over his cards, showing that he was one off a flush. Wam did the same, his cards being a jack of clubs and an eight of hearts. He then flipped over the next card, a seven of diamonds. "So, I guess that you didn't decide to find me without a reason?" Wam questioned, his straight better than Jayce's nothing with a single card left to play. "Am I going back to the ship?" he asked. Jayce shook his head. "No, I need you to do something else," he stated, reaching towards the stack of cards and flipping over the card on top: an ace of spades.

"You and Asmodeus are going north and joining Wicke," he stated, reaching into his bottomless bag and pulling out a newspaper showing an image of Wicke, Damian and few others that they didn't recognise, all running away through snow from a collapsing Dungeon. Wam slid his pile of money towards Jayce, but Jayce placed his singular golden pearl into Wam's pile. "I owe you far more than that," Jayce clarified. "Help them, and we'll deal with Xerxes." Wam took the money, sliding it into his coin pouch before extending his hand to Jayce. With a flash of red lightning they vanished.

Seize the Seas Tales: Homeward Bound

Morgana was glad to be free of the snow at last; the journey north aboard the bathtub of splinters and rust known as the Reliable was nothing compared to the Stacked Hand, and it had not escaped the Guild without injury - but the Capital would soon, eventually, be in sight once again and she was looking forward to it, but not as much as Morgause was. Every day she spoke of somewhere different she wanted to go with Morgana, now that they were reunited. "There's a pancake shop that-"

"Morgana?" came Astris' voice through her communicator, Morgana lunging for it immediately and jolting to her feet. "Astris? Yes, I'm here," Morgana stated almost desperately into it, whilst holding up a hand to stop Morgause from interrupting. "It's time to come home, make your way to the Old World immediately. See you soon." Morgana stood frozen until her hands slowly lowered. "What's wrong?" Morgause questioned, Wicke glancing over to them. "I, um, I've been called back to the Stacked Hand. I'm sorry, but I need to leave."

"What? No. We're going to the Capital together. We're going shopping and..." Morgause trailed off. Wicke let out a sigh and nodded. "It was nice having you whilst we could. The next Dungeon will be even harder, especially since the Guild know who we are now. Damn..." Wicke shook her head and folded her arms. "You've seen what I've seen," Morgana stated to her. "I'm needed, there's a lot going on. I am sorry. Good luck, genuinely. I'll leave you some of my funds and supplies."

Wicke nodded appreciatively, turning to walk away. "Take me with you," Morgause pleaded. "I want nothing more than to stay with you, little sister, but I can't. I want us to be a family again, and we will be, but I am terrified but what I'm returning to. And I am terrified that we are going to lose. I couldn't in a million years risk my dear baby sister against the enemy I'm going back to. Besides, Wicke and the others need you," Morgana stated, placing her hand on Morgause's cheek. "Beat the Dungeons, we'll beat the Sovereign, and then we'll go and be a family again. I promise," Morgana told her. Morgause shook her head as Morgana fumbled around in her bottomless bag before handing her some money and a few spare potions. "Good luck, see you soon." Soteria let out a roar and pushed off into the air, Morgana following closely behind on her broomstick.

"Godsdammit!" Morgause yelled after her, stamping her foot and pacing back and forth. "Relax, you'll see her again - I'm certain of it. It sounds like they've got a bigger challenge than we do, so we just need to do our part," Wicke

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reassured. “Uh, guys,” came Damian’s voice from behind the ship’s wheel. “About bigger problems...” His voice trailed off, the shadow of a huge ship smothering the Reliable.