

Chapter 233: Weaknesses

Alara span around aimlessly on her chair, her mind and body bored and frustrated from weeks of observation. There had only been a few assassination attempts, and, if anything, Alara had a sneaking suspicion they had occurred without the Sovereign's knowledge. Each one had been swiftly dispatched, a frustrating factor that had prevented Alara from learning their purpose. Were they probes, testing her defences and the defences around her? Or were they simply zealots of the Sovereign seeking revenge? It didn't really matter. There were only two categories of people who would be able to harm her. The Betrayers or the Sovereign, and so far they had left her alone.

"Sit up properly, you're not a child," scolded Cassandra Exarga, letting out a stretch as she finally looked up from her stacks of files organised chaotically across her colossal desk. Alara almost refused, saving her insubordination to a simple eyeroll as she straightened up. "It's not like anyone is going to see," Alara mumbled. "Doesn't matter, it's bad for your back, bad for your state of mind, and we also have a guest on their way." Alara ceased slouching, looking at Cassandra with confusion. "Didn't I tell you?" Cassandra questioned. "Oops." Alara glared at her, a faint smirk crossing Cassandra's lips as she stood up. "Come."

Alara was escorted to the main harbour, her eyes widening as she noticed a steady fleet of gold and blue ships sailing towards Final Bastion, the fleet all bearing the flags, banners and markings of the Brunxchume Navy. "You could have warned me," Alara muttered, glancing around at substantial welcoming party around her. The largest ship of the fleet, a beautiful vessel with four decks full of cannons, steadily pulled ahead of the fleet, eventually coming to a rest before Alara.

"Fleet Admiral," greeted Fleet Admiral Abdul Malik, extending a hand towards Cassandra as he came to a stop in front of Cassandra and Alara, a small squad of visored golden soldiers stood in escort, along with a familiar face behind them. Alara nodded to Irall, dressed in slightly more glorious attire than his previous outfit as Captain – no doubt due to a significant promotion. "Fleet Admiral," Cassandra returned shaking the hand firmly before turning and gesturing towards Final Bastion. "Please walk with me," she offered. He nodded but not before deliberately and distinctively approaching Alara. "Commodore Vanathur," Malik said loudly, bowing his head slightly in reverence. Several flashes of light crossed Alara's face, the small retinue of journalists and photographers ensuring to get every reaction from Alara as she was personally

greeted. "Fleet Admiral Malik, it is good to see you again," Alara returned, trying not to give too much of a reaction as she stood at attention. A faint smile crossed Malik's face as he stood up tall once again, this time nodding to her before turning back to Fleet Admiral Exarga. "I am glad to see your Marine Hero is well!" Malik proclaimed, before stepping closer to Cassandra and walking alongside her.

There was a somewhat formal yet brief tour of the Final Bastion and how it had grown and transitioned under the Republic, eventually finalising within a large meeting room. Fleet Admiral Malik sat on one side of the table with a soft retinue of officials and experienced Officers within his Navy, with Cassandra, Alara – personally requested, much to her ire – and the other Admirals on the other side. "Let us not beat about the bush, as they say," Malik began, clasping his hands and looking towards Cassandra. "My people wish to join your Republic, what is required for that to occur?"

Cassandra opened her mouth but an advisor of Malik's interrupted. "I do apologise, Fleet Admiral, but is there no one of a more... senior position? No non-military officials that we could speak to?" she questioned. Alara could feel the tension in room multiply. "It is not meant to offend," Fleet Admiral Malik inserted, sensing his people had offended Cassandra, and likely all of the other Admirals in the room. "Within my Navy, position often comes with experience, so it is... unusual to see such a high-ranking roster of relatively young people. Commodore Vanathur and I previously discussed this, but I am curious on your perspective on the qualities of leadership?"

Alara glanced towards Cassandra. "Our Republic currently operates under the control of the Navy, so I apologise but we do not really have any civilian officials to bring to the table, especially not in such a militaristic time such as now," Philip answered. "As to how I am qualified to lead," Cassandra directly challenged, "we recently went through a purge of a lot of... rot within our Navy. I, alongside others," she stated, gesturing to the Admirals around her, "led that charge. In the New World, actions earn recognition, not time or length of service, and you can see the results of that mantra."

Alara felt Cassandra's firm hand on her shoulder. The officials on the other side of the table didn't appear to like that answer, but Malik nodded, cutting their mutters off with a simple gesture. "Then I hope we can find a balance between the two in our communion, in the same way that I am aware that your role, Fleet Admiral, is one half of a greater whole?" he probed, seeking to clarify the

rumours he had heard. "Indeed, Fleet Admiral Truth governs the New World, whilst I am in charge of our expedition into the Old World. I would be welcome to learn from an experienced Admiral such as yourself and I have no doubt you and your people have much you can offer on how to rule these seas."

"We are far from ruling these days, but the notion is appreciated and acknowledged. On the note of your two halves, I am presuming that any integration would solely be within your fleet and not the greater Republic?"

"That is correct, but once the Sovereign is defeated then we would be more than willing to discuss full membership." The advisors really did not like hearing that.

"You honestly believe the Warhorse can be defeated?" questioned an advisor to Admiral Malik's left. "Warhorse?" questioned Admiral Yashiro.

"Their name for the Sovereign," Alara answered. "She rode in from afar, her mane fiery and eyes fierce. Untempered and unstable, the mighty beast trampled all in her path. Through the unbroken gates she galloped, through the walls of their deepest sanctum she rode – into the heart of their world, into the hearts of their people. And she tore it out for the world to see," Alara recited. Malik smiled warmly, his eyes lighting up slightly from her remembrance of his words. "The Warhorse, the Sea Sovereign, the titles are all the same," he stated. "But I ask: do you truly believe she is beatable?"

"Yes," Alara answered, turning red as the whole room looked at her. "The foolishness of youth," stated an advisor, but Admiral Malik held up a hand to silence them. "The boldness to dream is a young person's power," Malik stated, looking at the younger people on the other side of the table. "But the experience of age helps guide it to reality. You have killed one Betrayer, but another more... brutal replacement has taken his place. Can he be killed too?"

Jayce let out a sigh as he stepped through his swirling red portal, appearing back once again in the Sovereign's throne room. Almost immediately a Null Legionnaire approached him, an expectant hand waiting as always. Jayce glowered at the mask, taking off his gloves and dropping them to the floor with a wet and sickening slap. He then reached into his bottomless bag, pulling out a sparkling gemstone and handing it to the soldier. "Well done," came the Sovereign's high-pitched and piercing voice from her throne.

Jayce turned towards her, following her singular gesture to approach. His boots slippy on the stone floor. He reached up and unclasped his cloak, letting it fall quickly to the floor in a wet heap. Scáthach's grin infuriated him. It tore him apart at how she had been using him the last few weeks: a consequence for him

reaching out to Wam, but he knew if it wasn't him going on her missions then it would be someone else. "Another kingdom to your Empire, Sovereign," Jayce stated sarcastically, wiping the blood that wasn't his from his face.

"Careful now, my cleaners may end up assassinating you at this rate," she jeered, gesturing past Jayce to the blood-soaked garments he had discarded and the trail of bloody footsteps he was leaving behind. "If only..." Jayce muttered. Scáthach pouted. "Oh you poor baby. You need to remember this as much for your own good as it is the world's... mine." Jayce rolled his eyes and turned away. She descended upon him in an instant, resting both hands on his shoulder and nestling her head into his bloody neck whilst using Focus to lay on the air behind him like a haunting ghost or spectre. "Your lady is stirring up trouble again," she whispered, the words piercing Jayce's body like a blade made of ice.

"Oh relax, I'm not going to do anything over a simple burgeoning alliance. But she does deserve a personal visit. Anything you wish for me to tell her?" Scáthach goaded. Jayce pulled away from her. "If you-" Scáthach's cold eyes tore through him in an instant, her threat very real. "Please don't harm her," he pleaded, kneeling. "We'll see," Scáthach stated, drawing a large sword from a rift in the air before cutting a portal before her and stepping through.

With Scáthach gone, Jayce didn't hesitate. Alara was in danger, but he couldn't do anything to stop it – and if Scáthach did decide to kill her than he needed to ensure that he acted now. Jayce commanded Sola into a large copy of an ornated curved golden sword, swiping through the air in a similar fashion to Scáthach but instead vanishing in a bolt of red lightning. He landed firmly in front of a pair of Null Legionnaires, both stood guard in front of a set of stairs leading down, further within the huge mansion. "Hey, you can't-"

They dropped with a firm and precise blast of panic, unable to stand against him. The bodies tumbled backwards down the stairs and Jayce hurried past them. The stairs twisted as Jayce followed them deeper and deeper, the pristine white fading into a worn and cracked grey as the walls and rock got older and older. Eventually they levelled out, opening up into a large square of interlinked corridors, each corridor lined with rows of dark metal bars. It was a prison, nearly as big as the mansion above it and most likely far older than it.

There were no guards, they weren't needed. Most of the cells were empty, or contained the faint remains of a corpse long decayed. "What are you hiding?" Jayce questioned aloud, slowly walking along the quadrant. There was silence for the most part, a faint wind rolling through and a gentle humming. He

frowned as he turned inwards to the centre of the prison, following the humming. The cells there were newer, the insides more modern with nicer interiors, but also with strange contraptions mounted to the walls and ceiling near the entrance. They looked almost spider-like, with large webbing of thin metal wire blocking the path towards the main cell bars, all met with a large metal door and a droppable hatch to send things inside.

Jayce passed one cell; several of the metal wires were stained with dried blood. and a rotten mess of bones and hair lay strewn across the stone floor. He gagged, pushing forwards quickly in pursuit of the unusual and eerily familiar humming. It grew louder and louder, Jayce accidentally walking past the cell it was coming from, only to take two slow steps back as he looked inside through the open hatch as a figure hunched over on the floor against the far wall. A large and preposterous hat obscured almost his entire body, a huge white feather dangling off it.

“More torture, oh wonderful,” said the man inside sarcastically, ceasing his humming and not even looking up. “Your games are cruel, Scáthach, by my count everyone other than me and him are dead. And from that defiant scream a few... I don’t know... days, weeks, months – whichever – ago I’m the only one left. Isn’t that right, you stubborn bitch?” Dick Valentine questioned, looking up from underneath his stupid hat directly at Jayce. Jayce stared at him in horror, completely frozen and unable to even breath. “You’re not that ugly cow. Who in the abyss are you?” Valentine questioned.

“Dick?” Jayce questioned in disbelief. Ex-Pirate Lord Captain Valentine was almost unrecognisable. His silver goatee was buried amongst a patchy and long wiry beard, his hair had grown out, long enough to fall down past his visible collarbone. His brown eyes were dull as if the spirit behind them had died. His body was frail, bony and decrepit. He wore nothing but a vest, his red hat and a not-so-clean set of - what might have once been - white underwear with hearts on it. “Richard to you,” Valentine stated, standing up with a groan.

There was nothing standing between him and the cell door, the hatch of which had been left open and was more than large enough for even Jayce to crawl inside of, but as the old Pirate Lord stood up and stepped forwards a soft metallic chitter let out a warning from above, a red light marking out a line to not cross. Jayce glanced up, the same spider-like device he had seen earlier was inside the cell, except this one proudly displayed glowing magical runes, showing that it was active. “Dick... it’s Jayce.”

Valentine chuckled, shaking his head. "Ah, of course. I'm going insane. It took long enough." Valentine shook his head and paced back and forth. "You know, it took longer than I thought for you to show, but I thought I would have seen the meek little boy I found stubbornly trying to cross the ocean all that time ago. You look, quite frankly, my imaginary friend like you've been through hell and back. The boy I know wouldn't have ended up like that. No, he's a proud sailor following the rules, making Mummy and Daddy proud."

"No, I'm--"

"Fuck off you hallucination! Screw you witch! I'm not falling for your taunts and trickery again! First Sara... my crew... now even the boy! Do one!" he yelled, causing Jayce to flinch. "Captain," Jayce said softly. "Sara's dead." Valentine faltered, spinning on his heel and facing Jayce. "Hallucinations don't say those sorts of things. They try to keep their tricks safe, like a demented magician: a pigeon in a pocket for another day. I know she's dead... Tanare told me last time he was allowed to visit."

The eyes darkened before a faint flicker of life re-emerged inside them. "No..." Valentine realised stepped forwards, to just in front of the red line. "Jayce? It can't be! What the hell have you been doing? Please tell me you didn't follow me and become a bloody pirate? How are you here? Why are you here? Has she got you too, turned you against your Captain like she did Tanare to me?" he rattled off in disbelief. "Tanare turned against you?" Jayce questioned in similar shock, shaking his head. "Well, to an extent. It was that or we all died. She offered my life for his service and the moron took it. Why are you here?"

"It's a long story..." Valentine gestured around him. "Once you left we ended up going to the Capital, but on the way we found wreckage of a fleet and a survivor – a Mage named Wicke. I tried to help her, and Alara joined the Marines. I ended up getting a crew, exploring a Dungeon to the north, and then becoming a Pirate Lord under the sponsor of Kitty Deliver. We continued travelling and I wiped out the Church. Scáthach then invaded so I came here seeking an old crewmate that had joined her: Vexx, as well as the sibling of a crewmate, and also to finish off Strigon once and for all. I have another Vampire Lord that was created to rival him on my crew but she broke free. I became a Pirate Lord once again in the Old World but rushed off to save Alara who was trying to rescue her parents from the Sovereign. Scáthach didn't like that so she sent her Dragon after us, but our teleportation spell went awry so I was sent to the Scourge. I met an ancient necromancer there and stayed with her for a while before finding an ancient forge

which sent me back north, and I met up with my crew; Alara killed a Betrayer, and then came and stayed on my ship. Scáthach tracked us down, realised we're together and used that to get me to join her. I've been trying to figure out what she has on the Betrayers to keep them in line so I could break them free. She's left the mansion so I came to the one spot I couldn't go and that's how I found you."

"Damn."

"There's a lot more and I skipped a lot of it, but you get the point and I need to get you out of here. Hang on."

"Woah, don't do anything. This thing is calibrated to detect fluctuations in mana. If either of us use Focus to the extent we need to get me out of here then this thing goes off and I'm dead. Anything crosses the line and I'm dead. Scáthach is the only one who knows how to disable this thing. She killed its creator so no one could make any more. The door will only open with the right key and Scáthach keeps it on her in her personal vault." Jayce looked at the hatch and shrugged, reaching forwards to crawl inside. "No don't!" Valentine yelled and Jayce faltered. "It will close behind you and you'll be trapped in here with me. Except it'll work both ways and one of us will die if we trigger the machine. Will... he tried to get me out. Just... just go. Don't worry about me, I'll be fine. Scáthach needs me as a prisoner. It's keeping Tanare in check and it's not like there's anyone... to..." he trailed off as he looked at Jayce, the light in his eyes growing as a small smile spread across his face.

"I don't like that look, Captain. Don't do anything reckless, I'll find a way to get the key and get you out," Jayce begged. Valentine took off his hat and brushed the feather. "You love Alara, don't you?" Valentine questioned. Jayce looked at him with confusion. "That's got nothing to do with..." Jayce trailed off. "Yes," he answered firmly. "Sara was my Alara, but the world got in our way. I got in our way. Don't do the same as me. Finish this and get out. There is always someone else who will pick up the fight. It doesn't have to be yours."

"Dick... please don't."

"Sorry Jayce. Tell Tanare that he was my brother, and that I'm sorry I got myself and all of his friends killed. We should have run like he told me to. I love you my boy, and I'm damn proud of who you've become!"

"Dick, no!"

Valentine's hat hit Jayce square in the face with enough force to knock him over to the floor, a sickening slicing sound followed along with the thuds of countless pieces. Jayce didn't have to look. He could smell the blood and gore in the air and feel the sudden absence of the man who had been his hero for years. "Godsdammit!" Jayce yelled, extending Sola and Luna out into a greatsword and cleaving the cell open. He looked at the mess in front of him, shaking his head as fury tore itself through him. The blade ignited and sent a wave of fire at the remains, ensuring that nothing remained to be left to rot. Jayce stayed and ensured it was done before he ran through the prison, ensuring there was no one else. There wasn't and only then did he let out the scream that had been building up inside him as he dropped to his knees and howled over Valentine's death.

The walls shook around him as his emotions were released, the bars bending and warping, the stone cracking and crumbling. But as he regained himself a hollow feeling drained him from the inside out as he put Valentine's hat onto his head. "You'll die for this Scáthach. Screw your games, it's my turn now!"

Alara stared at Scáthach with a mixture of fear and worry. The Sovereign wasn't particularly tall or possessed an overwhelming figure, but there was no one that was as capable of bringing out fear as she was. But Cassandra wasn't afraid. "Stay behind me," she commanded to Alara, her greataxes held in each hand. "You'll have to go through me before you touch her." Scáthach tutted, shaking her head. "I did so once before. Who's to say I won't be able to again?" Scáthach questioned. "Last time you caught us at the end of a war. I've had nothing but time to train and wait for you," Cassandra growled, throwing her axe at an empty space of her office. There was a grunt as Scáthach caught the blade in her fingers, drawing a few droplets of blood and causing her to slide backwards just under a metre. But the sight of surprise on Scáthach's face met the grin on Cassandra's. "You will not lay a finger on her!" Fleet Admiral Exarga roared, summoning her axe back to her hand.

The door to the office burst open and Alara's father burst inside with Admiral Yashiro. "Witch!" Silas roared, a pistol in one hand and a sabre in the other as he rushed at Scáthach. She kicked him hard in the chest, sending him backwards across the floor. "Fine, I'll be seeing you soon – I'm sure," Scáthach stated, ensuring that she showed off the healed wound on her hand before she disappeared in a portal of flame. Cassandra dropped to her knees, her body shaking. "Cassandra!" Alara cried, kneeling next to her and looking her over for wounds that weren't there. A soft smile met her instead. "We held her off. We held off the Sovereign!"

Seize the Seas Tales: Return to Strength

Bjorn hugged himself as he looked out towards Belluabella far on the horizon. He knew what awaited him: either his death or Xerxes'. It was the only way it could or would end. But what followed was up in the air. By right, if Xerxes was killed by him, then the title of Therian King would be his. Bjorn scoffed. "Pirate Lord, Therian King... utterly stupid." He shook his head and turned away, but something on the warm wind caught his ears and he turned and looked upwards, a pair of shadows descending from the skies towards the Stacked Hand: a Witch and a Dragon.

"She's back! Morgana's back!" yelled Zeta from the main deck, several crew members darting out from below deck and within the living quarters. She faltered above the main deck, hovering on her broom as she scanned the faces of her crew for their current feelings on her, but to Morgana's distinct surprise, she saw only relief and joy. "Get down here!" commanded Arthuria, pointing a firm finger to the deck. Morgana obeyed her older sister, landing gently and dismounting before flinching as Arthuria grabbed her in a firm hug. "Welcome home," she said softly into Morgana's ear. Morgana buried herself into Arthuria's golden hair. "I saw her. I saw our sister," she whispered. Arthuria nodded. "We'll talk about all. But for now there's something we all need to do."

"Isn't that right, Captain?" Arthuria questioned, turning and looking up towards Bjorn by the helm. But he turned as well, looking further upwards to the figure crouched on the roof of the Captain's quarters. "Well?" Jayce questioned, looking down at Bjorn and adjusting the ridiculous hat on his head. "What's the plan Captain?"