

Chapter 234: Heavy is the Crown

Jayce sat in his usual seat within the living quarters of the Stacked Hand, alone, with the eyes of almost his entire crew upon him. His new hat sat on Marisha's empty seat, her absence noticeable from the mess that the kitchen had become without its queen. The many eyes met him with judgement, all equally curious as to just how compromised he had become in the two months of his absence. They had all heard of Xarga's death, they had all seen his massacres across the Old and New World as he brought rebellions to heel, and he as sat there holding the famous hat of Pirate Lord Dick Valentine, they all knew how he had likely obtained it.

"Valentine was kept a prisoner beneath the Sovereign's mansion. He was the lease that she used on Tanare. And I'm guessing the others had similar situations," Jayce told them. "He was kept in a death trap, and he took his own life in order to free Tanare after seeing me. This hat will either get Tanare on our side, or turn him permanently against us." Arthuria and Bjorn glanced at each other. Bjorn shook his head but Arthuria stepped forwards. "Once this is over, people will be coming for you after what you did for her," she warned. "There won't be a happy ending." Jayce nodded, looking down at his hands, a few flecks on blood still present beneath his nails. "That was always the case," he returned, looking up at her. "Tanare has been kept within Belluabella, keeping Xerxes to heel and preventing him from making another attack against the Republic. This is the best chance to turn Tanare--"

"And kill Xerxes," Bjorn concluded. Jayce glanced towards him and nodded, but Bjorn looked away, stepping forwards. "We're going to need allies. We'll make landfall and we'll approach the Lords, we'll do what we need to in order to obtain their support. No doubt there will be some resistance, so we may need to offer bribes, positions of power. Whatever is required we will do. We will strike tomorrow, and we'll take out Xerxes and his War Hounds, whilst Jayce handles Tanare. Any questions?" Bjorn asked. There were none.

The room slowly filtered out, eventually leaving only a few behind: Caelie, Ordo, Astris, Thalia, Mai Lu, Jeanne, Tempest and Morgana. Jayce looked at them, waiting for their questions. "You did what you had to," Ordo stated first. The words digging deep and surgically cutting right into Jayce's heart. "Xarga and Valentine are both dead because of me..." Jayce returned. Caelie placed a gentle hand on his head, before pulling him into a hug.

“There’s no one on this ship with clean hands,” Astris stated. “Least of all within this room. Marisha would agree that you did what you had to. The others will in time. For what it’s worth, you’re still my Captain,” Astris told him. He gave her a weak smile. “Our Captain,” Thalia reassured. Jayce nodded to her, she nodded back and then left the room. “This is going to get rough, I have to warn you all. There’s no telling how a confrontation with Xerxes will go, or Tanare, and even if we kill Xerxes and turn Tanare then there will be a huge power vacuum that we will have to find a way to fill. Least of all the consequence of potentially freeing a Betrayer.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time we get in somewhere, fuck it up, and then piss off,” Ordo stated with a chuckle. Jayce tried not to smile, shaking his head instead. “Let see what allies we can scrounge up first,” Ordo quickly added. “If there’s no one to help us then we’re probably not going to be able to take on Xerxes anyway.” Jayce nodded in simple agreement; he had ideas, some semblance of a strategy, but there wasn’t a plan that could, or would, functionally work. “Some things never change.”

The eyes throughout Lord Solan’s great hall were almost entirely locked upon Jayce as he and Bjorn were led to sit at the sun bear therian’s colossal table. They were glances and stares of fear and unnerve, but Bjorn couldn’t care less – his eyes instead looked throughout the hall in search of familiar faces: survivors of his tribe that had been taken in by the great Lord. To his relief there were a few, blending in amongst the other bear therians, but they bore no mutual expressions, only longing looks of despair, grief and shame.

“Bjorn!” roared Lord Solan with a large and booming chuckle, getting to his feet and gesturing for him to sit nearby. “You are here, I do not believe it. I had feared that you would never return,” he stated, sitting as Jayce and Bjorn did, the rest of the huge table empty other than various charts and maps. Lord Solan’s eyes faintly glanced towards Jayce, a nervous gulp following. “Lord Exarga... should I be worried?” he asked coyly.

“No, we’re here on personal business and as of this moment I’m representing myself,” Jayce answered, figuring that his current status was better hidden at least for the moment. “Lord Solan, thank you for taking in my people. I owe you,” Bjorn interrupted, physically leaning forwards to block out Jayce. Solan shook his head. “No, I’m only sorry I couldn’t save more, but Bjorn – I must confess – why did you come back? Your presence here is... tricky, and King Xerxes’ patience is thin. I am afraid that there is little I could offer to help you, much of

my status, wealth and domain have been stripped from me and my head will be next to be taken. Just having you here-“

“I understand that,” Bjorn answered, “so let me be upfront. We intend to invade the main castle, tomorrow. I intend to take Xerxes’ head myself.” The sun bear froze, his eyes shutting as he took in a long inhale before letting it out. “I truly wish I had not heard that, but now that I have, I am inclined to aid you. The consequence for not reporting this is death, and the consequence of hosting you is likely the same, so – since I have little future either way – I will fight with you. Who else have you recruited?”

“Just you.”

“Oh. Well, I suppose that is a promising start in this revolution. I will extend out some contacts and will distribute my forces. Do you have a battle plan?” Solan questioned. Bjorn glanced towards Jayce. “Well, do we?” he questioned. Jayce smiled, leaning forwards in his oversized chair. “We either win or we all die. Our people will open up the bridge to the castle for you, then your forces will reinforce us.”

“Move your furry fucking behinds!” yelled Lord Solan, holding a large double-bladed axe above his head as an explosion shattered a stone house along the main cobblestone road that he and several of his personal warriors were charging through. Pieces of stone and fragments of metal rattled across the blades of his weapon, a heavy roar drawing his attention upwards through the spreading clouds of dust and debris to numerous large flyers scraping across the tops of the city, their engines spewing out heat and black smoke and their guns spraying streams of orange metal. The war had begun, somewhat prematurely – Solan thought.

The flyers curved and arced through the skies, twisting and tumbling in hot pursuit as they hunted the first wave of the Rising Aces: a small woman tucked tightly into her broomstick and wrapped in a thin transparent shell. “Coming in hot!” she yelled into her communicator, diving down and hanging onto her broomstick as she pulled up at the last second, her back mere inches to the ground as she flew upside down along a main road towards the central channel leading into Belluabella. She heard a crash behind her, a flyer failing to avoid the ground and erupting in a large blast of fire, but the hot bullets flying past her as she twisted back into an upright position indicated she was far from alone in the skies. Morgana’s eyes focused in on the metal gates lining the main channel: they

were all closed and the Stacked Hand was nowhere in sight. "Lined up," she warned.

Her shimmering shield flickered as bullets began to impact her, the gunners of Xerxes' air force finally locking onto her as she flew straight across the top of the channel, completely unaware that the gun towers lining the channel were not joining them in shooting her down – their insides stained red and silent. "Now." Eyes widened as a huge, dark and electric blue form rose up from behind one of the metal walls; Taranis pulled into the air in front of Morgana, her broomstick narrowly twisting to scrape past his huge body as sparks of lightning flashed off him. His mouth revved, opening wide as his spine illuminated and he unleashed a storm of lightning that ignited, overloaded, and detonated the squadron in his path. "First air wave clear," Morgana stated, peeling off into the skies with Taranis, and the camouflaged Soteria alongside her.

Something in Solan caused him to freeze, even with his axe mid-swing towards a loyalist's skull. "Hmph," he uttered, instead snatching outwards with his spare hand to the hyena's neck as a brilliant beam of shadow cleaved straight through the channel leading into the city, a heavy metallic whine - followed by a much larger sequential crunching sound – rang out into the air. Solan threw the hyena upwards, dropping down to a knee as a shockwave immediately followed, catching the foe in the air and reducing him to shreds. "The channel is clear," Bjorn stated. "We're in the city."

Jayce stood on the bow of his ship, the Stacked Hand sailing through the shattered harbour and torn open metal walls as it headed straight towards the large castle within the middle of Belluabella's central lake. There was fighting in all directions, Lord Solan's forces and allies swiftly moving to seize the ruins of military targets as Morgana, Falconer and the Dragons targeted them from above, whilst drawing the attention of the airborne therians. Jayce glanced back towards Bjorn, his eyes cold and locked solely on Xerxes' castle. "Some help wouldn't go amiss," Morgana stated through her communicator, flying over the top of the Stacked Hand with a flock of winged therians in fast pursuit. Jayce turned and looked back towards Astris and Arthuria, both crouched and ready. "Go!" he commanded, the pair of them taking to the air, their weapons already marked with blood from clearing the channel's defences.

Jayce glanced to the side, fires and battles spreading across the city as Lord Solan encountered more loyalists rushing to defend Thunderclaw Fortress and its teleportation circles connecting to the Therian King's castle. "Ordo, Jeanne, Zeta,

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Mai Lu reinforce Lord Solan.” They nodded, leaping off into the city to follow Jayce’s command. Jayce then turned and faced Bjorn, their roster depleted but far from empty. “Ready?” Jayce questioned. Bjorn nodded plainly, a swirling blue portal appearing at the front of the Stacked Hand.

Xerxes roared in fury as he stood in the castle’s main viewpoint: a domed chamber with an open entranceway built from two large pillars that connected to a colossal extension of stairs cutting down and straight through the castle to the shore. It was open air and he could see his city on fire and Jayce Exarga’s ship sailing through it. “Do something!” he growled, his waiting defensive army and his remaining War Hounds lining the long stairs in front of him. A chuckle tormented his ears, the black lion turning sharply to face Tanare as he stood leaning against one of the pillars. “This isn’t my fight,” he stated plainly. “You have orders to-“

“I have orders to stop you from causing any more devastation. This time the devastation is being caused to you, but that doesn’t make it my problem,” Tanare warned. “You bastard! You will aid me, or so help me-“ Tanare stepped forwards towards the Therian King. His hands remained in his pockets, his orange eyes boring into Xerxes’ gold. “Fear? From a King?” Tanare questioned plainly. “Are you more afraid of them, or of me? Your city is burning but you haven’t extended the bridge – why is that I wonder?” Xerxes turned back to his city. A blue portal swirled into existence right at the bottom of the stairs leading up to him; a polar bear therian stepped through.

The countless mounted guns, armed guards, and Mages all unleashed their prepared arsenals directly towards Bjorn, Jayce, Thalia, Tempest and RK. The giant boulder let out a loud grumble as they tucked behind him, using his large mass and Tempest’s shields as a living siege tower as he began to move forwards. “This is the plan?” Thalia questioned in both bemusement and disbelief. Bjorn glanced towards Jayce with an expression of cold fury and subtle curiosity. “No,” Jayce stated, the stone beneath their feet beginning to glowing iridescently. “This is!” he declared as Caelie activated the bridge connecting the castle to the main island.

A loud screech drew their eyes upwards, chanting filling the air as Mare flew above them. “Tempest!” Jayce commanded, the djinn immediately snapping out a quick counterspell and floating upwards to engage the War Hound. The guns continued to pepper RK, the rokken letting out a sad rumble as fragments began to break off him. “Those guns will tear him apart!” warned Bjorn. Jayce looked

towards Thalia, who grinned before breaking into a chant and darting around RK. A heavy boom of thunder followed as she began to leap from weapon emplacement to weapon emplacement.

A loud trumpet sounded as heavy footsteps stomped down the stairs towards them. "RK, he's yours!" Jayce commanded, the rokken letting out a war grumble and charging into Pheldor the elephant War Hound, the two colossal creatures releasing loud booming shockwaves with each heavy impact. "There should be two more!" Bjorn warned as he broke into a dash and began the long charge up the stairs, the guns and guards around them faltering as Jayce unleashed blast after blast of concentrated Panic their way. "Bjorn, hold on!" Jayce called after him, dashing towards guards attempting to aim at Bjorn as he charged with little thought to his own safety.

A loud snarl reached Bjorn's ears as the crocodile War Hound dashed towards him from above; axe met axe – the crocodile knocking Bjorn's left axe aside. "Move!" Bjorn roared, dropping his other weapon and picking up the crocodile before throwing him at Jayce. "Watch it!" Jayce yelled his way as the War Hound hit the ground hard and tumbled past him. "Bjorn!" he cried, watching his crewmate pick up a fallen axe and continue his suicide march forwards as a golden eagle descended towards him from the skies. "Godsdammit!" Jayce yelled, darting into the air and slamming into the eagle therian, the pair of them tumbling down the stairs in the wrong direction. Bjorn continued forwards alone.

Tanare raised an eyebrow as the large white bear entered the viewing room with an expression of utter wrath. "Bjorn, was it?" Tanare questioned, standing alone in the room. "If you stand in my way-" Bjorn growled, but Tanare held up his hands. "He's in the throne room, he's all yours, but it's not you he's waiting for. I doubt you're even on his mind. You should turn back." Bjorn roared at Tanare, storming past him towards a pair of golden doors. Tanare shook his head. "Stubborn fool."

His face then hardened as Jayce staggered into the room covered in blood and feathers. "This was stupid of you," Tanare stated immediately. "She will punish you for this, and Alara will be the one to suffer. Trust me on that, Jayce." Jayce shook his head, wiping the blood from his face and then his hands. "No, no she won't. Alara is protected. Scáthach has already tried and failed, and she has never been more vulnerable than she is now. The tide is turning-"

Tanare burst into a bellowing laughter, laughing so hard and for so long that he hugged his sides in pain and tears streamed from his orange eyes. "I never took

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you as a moron Jayce, perhaps I misjudged you. That woman is not human, not mortal, and she is anything but vulnerable. She will worm her way inside your head sooner rather than later, and when she does sink her claws into your mind you won't know what's real until she corrupts everything you knew. She will find a weakness--"

"Like Valentine?" Jayce interrupted. Tanare flinched, his face slowly twisting into a snarl. "That's how she got you, isn't it? Through him? She offered his life, and used you to take down him and his crew?" Tanare's silence said far more than any answer ever could. "What have you done?" Tanare asked almost silently but with far more threat than anything Jayce had ever seen before. Jayce looked down, slowly reaching into his bottomless bag and withdrawing a large, feathered, red hat. Jayce tossed it to Tanare who caught it like it was made of glass. "He's dead, he's freed you!"

"You bastard!" Tanare yelled, tackling Jayce to the floor before he could even react and then gripping his hands around Jayce's throat. "You killed him!" Tanare roared, raising a fist and throwing it hard into Jayce's face. Jayce's focus met the blow, reducing its impact, but he still felt it, especially as another came almost immediately. Jayce raised his hands to defend his face, but Tanare used his elbows and then knees to pin him to the floor, his fists hammering relentlessly on Jayce's face and body. "Tanare! Tanare, listen!" Jayce cried, using his legs to knock him loose before rolling free and springing backwards.

Tanare pounced at him, his claws erupting into blue flames and leaving large gashes in the stone floor as he slashed at Jayce with an intent to kill. "He made the choice! Not me!" Jayce attempted, but Tanare just snarled. A claw raked Jayce's chest, the flesh cauterizing as it was opened – the wound agonisingly painful. "Fuck you! He's gone, Tanare, gone! She killed him, not me, not you!" "Liar!"

"Tanare!" A heavy blow rocked Jayce's head, his vision blurring as he staggered before a heavy kick sent him sliding across the floor into a pillar. Tanare was once again upon him before Jayce could stand up, another blow following immediately and filling Jayce's mouth with the taste of his own blood. "Tanare!" Jayce grunted, doubling over before Tanare locked his hands and slammed it down upon Jayce's back. A stomp followed before a knee pressed down on Jayce's cracked ribs, another fist following after another and another. "He said--"

The fists stopped as Jayce's vision darkened, Jayce's throat tightening as Tanare gripped it and pulled him slightly upwards. "--You were his brother." A blow

send Jayce's head into the floor, his vision dark, spotty and red, a claw extending across his neck. "You were... right..."

"He said... you were right, and that... he was sorry." The weight retracted off Jayce's chest as Tanare stood up, a soft sobbing slowly burning into a tortuous wail and then a roar as Tanare broke open a stone pillar with his claws. "You killed him!" he cried, as Jayce lay dazed and battered on the floor. Jayce didn't answer for a while, but eventually a wheeze escaped him. "I... did," he confessed. "I gave him hope. He wanted you to be free."

Tanare shook his head, pacing back and forth as his eyes glanced from Jayce's bloody body to the red feathered hat. "Why did you go there? Why couldn't you just leave things alone and stay away like I warned you?" Tanare yelled. "Because... because you were my hero, Tanare. You, Dick, all the other Valentinos. Everything I am, everything I have become... was because of you." Tanare looked at the bloody kid on the floor, shaking his head before letting out a groan as he looked up at the ceiling. "You don't idolise Pirates, Jayce." Jayce let out a wheezing chuckle. "Bit late now." Tanare shook his head, his eyes glancing towards the golden doors to the throne room. "Your friend is in there, do I need to rescue him?" Tanare questioned. Jayce gave a broken smile, shaking his head. "He'll be fine."

Bjorn slowly crept into the throne room, scanning the corners of opulent room. Only one person was inside, the black lion therian, Xerxes sat on his black and platinum throne, his face twisting from distinct fear to confusion. "You are not Betrayer Exarga," Xerxes said somewhat dismissively, standing up from his throne and breathing a sigh of relief. "And you think that will save you?" Bjorn growled, approaching the centre of the room with his axe in hand. "You, Bjorn, are not him. I do not have time to deal with you so use that axe wisely and kill yourself."

"I'm getting fed up of being compared to him. And you have every last second of your remaining life to deal with me," Bjorn stated, tossing aside the axe and raising his fists. Xerxes chuckled, shaking his head. "You seem to misunderstand me. You are not really a Pirate Lord. You are nothing compared to me, and the only reason I haven't killed you before now was because of your crew. Because of your Captain."

Ice slowly spread across the golden doors behind Bjorn, sealing the room shut. "That's not happening today," Bjorn stated, ice spreading across his hands to

form jagged gauntlets. Xerxes flexed his fingers, his claws glistening in the light as he leant forwards in preparation to leap at Bjorn. "So be it."

Seize the Seas Tales: Wanted Dead, Mostly Just Dead

Wicke stared up at the large ship that had seemingly appeared from nowhere. It bore bold red colours, the markings showing symbology of a kraken. "Move us out of it's way!" she cried out, Morgause desperately turning the Reliable's wheel. With little space to spare the two ships skirted past each other, but, as Wicke rushed to the stern of the Reliable to yell obscenities at the large ship that had almost crashed into them, she faltered. Her eyes locked onto a mob of soldiers dressed in red armour, all stood with their rifles and cannons aimed down towards the Reliable. "That's them! Sink them!" came a command, the crew and ship opening fire.

Morgause angled the Reliable to sail in the opposite direction of the mercenary ship, hoping somewhat desperately to put some distance between it and them. "Who the hell are they?" Morgause questioned towards Wicke as she chanted and channelled the wind into the sails. "I don't know, I don't recognise them, but there's no way they're going be able to catch us on their current approach and with this wind." The front of the Reliable broke apart, water quickly gushing onto the planks as a grey-haired man landed on the wood with a crunch. "I wouldn't be so certain," stated Raido Krast, his eyes glowing blue and red, and a pair of thin swords in his hands.