

Chapter 235: Blood for Blood

Xerxes struck first, and he struck hard, tearing four sharp claws upwards through Bjorn's shirt and the body armour underneath, drawing blood. Bjorn shattered the ice on his left fist, catching the other strike and throwing a mean right hook deep into Xerxes' face. The pair of them staggered backwards from each other before immediately rushing forwards at each other. Frozen mist flowed off Bjorn's icy body whilst invisible flames of Focus wreathed Xerxes' body.

Bjorn took a firm blow from Xerxes', accepting the claws in exchange for a firm grip on Xerxes' left arm, which Bjorn immediately wrenched, twisted and snapped – piercing bone out through Xerxes' flesh. The lion therian roared in anguish, closing his right fist and delivering a critical uppercut to Bjorn's jaw. Blood filled his mouth as they parted once again, Xerxes' fur melting away in a soft green glow to reveal a human arm – that almost immediately vanished as the now healed therian arm returned.

"This crusade of yours is foolish," Xerxes grunted, as Bjorn spat blood onto the floor and wiped his mouth. "A hypocrite too?" Bjorn returned. "Your arrogance and stupidity knows no bounds. The Empire is gone, the Blood Wars finished! Had you realised that then our kind wouldn't need to continue suffering. Suffering that you have unleashed upon us!" Bjorn roared, charging forwards and slamming an ice-encased fist into Xerxes' chest.

The lion leapt upwards, driving his knee towards Bjorn's head, but Bjorn grabbed him, slamming him down hard before lifting up his own huge leg and stomping down. The lion rolled to the side, the ground cracking where his head had been. "Suffering? Our people are stronger than they have ever been before. I have brought in more tribes from the Old and New World than any King before!" "For what end? There is no war other than one you're making. The Blood Wars are over!"

"Not for me!" Xerxes ducked under Bjorn's heavy swings, his claws attempting to rake through the ice armour Bjorn kept building across his body. Instead Xerxes formed fists, throwing heavy impact after heavy impact, the blows shattering the ice and rippling Bjorn's flesh. His body screamed in agony, agony that instead funnelled into his rage. Bjorn grabbed the lion, lifting him up and smashing him down hard onto his knee.

Xerxes groaned in pain, the fur across his back vanishing before reappearing as he once again transformed in order to heal himself. "This war will not end until

"I slaughter all who took away my life!" he roared, pouncing forwards away from Bjorn before leaping back at him and raking his claws across Bjorn's left cheek. "Crach is dead - you killed him! You could have had your father! I could have had mine, but you took him from me too! This crusade is hurting us more than anyone else."

"It is all I have!" Xerxes screamed, the pair of them locked into a flurry of swipes, slashes, fists and kicks. "You have your daughter, Thalia!" Bjorn countered, lifting his head back and slamming it hard into Xerxes' face. The lion staggered backwards, his nose broken and left eye damaged. For a moment the lion's head disappeared, replaced instead by the face of man with an expression Bjorn had seen all-too-commonly within his own mirror. The mane returned along with a snarl and Xerxes tackled Bjorn, knocking him to the floor before tearing into him with a savage rampage of slashes. Bjorn blocked with his arms, ignoring the pain and blood to instead slam a firm elbow into Xerxes' jaw, knocking him off him.

Bjorn flicked away the large volume of blood on his arms and hands as he stood up, ice encasing his wounds to temporarily seal them closed. Xerxes was on the floor, leaning on his elbow and panting as he regained his breath. "She would still accept you," Bjorn offered, the grizzled image of the man he could become in front of him. "The child?" Xerxes questioned with a chuckle, shaking his head and getting back up. "She's nothing more than a possession I gave away, a broken toy that the stubborn old fool attempted to replace me with. Crach, Magnus, all of the other old beasts from the past - they all hung on far longer than nature ever would have allowed. The old die and the young replace them - that is the rule of the wild, the rule of the beasts that we are!"

"Yet more young have died than old! The Blood Wars harmed far more children like yourself, like me, than any of the elders. Your war killed my boys! They were innocent, and could have been so much more!" Bjorn cried, his hands down by his side as he implored Xerxes to think, to throw away his old grudges. But the lion laughed, each cold and cruel chuckle rumbling around the throne room. "Then they must have been weak. Have more; women are plentiful and I will happily find you the best if you join me? Men like us should have our pick and only the strongest that we sire should even be recognised. Join me, Bjorn, let's kill Exarga together."

Bjorn stepped forwards toward the extended hand. His eyes slowly looked down at it and the desperate lion in front of him stalling for his body to recover. "You're not a therian. You're barely even a man. There's no saving you." Bjorn struck fast

and hard, a firm blow straight to Xerxes' throat before a heavy blow to his knees. The lion coughed and gasped but countered with a series of fast and wild slashes aiming for Bjorn's neck. Bjorn felt his body pause for a moment, refusing to listen to him as blood loss and exhaustion began to overwhelm him. There was no telling how long they had been fighting for but he could still hear battles occurring across the island.

Xerxes' seemed to realise the same thing, he was no longer transforming parts of his body to repair himself and his eyes glanced towards the axe that Bjorn had discarded when he had entered the room. "You're waning, weakening. You will die, Xerxes. But will you die a therian or as just a man," Bjorn goaded, stepping forwards. Xerxes lunged for the axe but Bjorn grabbed his tail and yanked him backwards, his claws leaving deep scratches in the floor. Xerxes pushed himself up, turning on Bjorn in desperation and biting hard into his shoulder.

Bjorn let out a scream of pain before gritting his teeth and growling as he grabbed Xerxes' arms and pinned them to his side. Xerxes continued to bite so Bjorn pulled his head back and then slammed it into the lion with as much force as he could muster. Xerxes lifted his legs up and pressed against Bjorn, breaking free in a somersault before diving towards Bjorn with both claws ready and his mouth wide open as he roared.

Bjorn stomped, a large icicle piercing upwards into Xerxes' stomach, slowing him just enough for Bjorn to throw the heaviest punch of his life into the lion's open lower jaw. Flesh tore and bone shattered, Xerxes' lower jaw flying free. The ice crumbled beneath him as he fell to his knees, his tongue flapping loose and mouth spurting blood. His golden eyes were mixed with blood and rage as he looked up at Bjorn whilst on death's door.

A guttural growl escaped the Therian King as he made one final lunge and thrust his clawed hand into Bjorn's side. Bjorn held him in place as he felt Xerxes' desperately push his hand deeper and deeper into his wound, and instinctively, with little else left, Bjorn bit down, hard onto Xerxes' throat. He crunched through skin, sinew and muscle until he felt cartilage, before he pulled back and spit out the flesh and blood in his mouth. Xerxes hung on in the last moments of his life, questioning if he could survive as a man, but Bjorn finished it without mercy – pushing his hand into the wound and ripping upwards.

Xerxes' severed head was heavy in his hand, the headless corpse flopping to the floor by his feet with its arm still outstretched into Bjorn's side. With a pained grunt, Bjorn pulled it free with his spare arm, immediately hugging the spurting

SEIZE THE SEAS

wound as he raised up the severed head of Xerxes and looked into his eyes. They were full of rage, a snarl held even in death. Bjorn let it drop, reaching for his bottomless bag for a healing potion before applying it to the wound – a nasty scar replaced the hole but there were dozens of less grievous wounds still on him. With a steady grunt of pain, Bjorn glanced towards the therian throne. It sat empty, calling to him, but he turned away, picking up Xerxes' head and departing the throne room.

The golden doors opened and Tanare immediately turned towards it, taking his eyes off the beaten and bloody form of Jayce on the floor. Where he had been expecting a black lion, instead he found a white and red polar bear striding through with a bloody head in his right hand. Bjorn paused as he looked at Tanare, a large red and feathered hat on his head and the body of Jayce on the floor. "King," Tanare greeted with a simple nod, but the severed head landed at his feet and Bjorn shook his head.

"I want nothing to do with this," Bjorn stated, gesturing around him. "Any of this," he added, gesturing towards Jayce. Tanare nodded, looking down at Xerxes' jawless head. "Bjorn..." came Jayce's weak voice, but the polar bear therian ignored him, instead maintaining his gaze on Tanare. "I'm sure he deserved it," Bjorn stated, "but he is my Captain, and unfortunately he's normally good at reading people. Jayce was desperate to get you back, and it seems in some way he has. I killed Xerxes for my sons, not for the throne. You know as well as I that these people need a leader, a King, and someone needs to take Xerxes' place as Pirate Lord and King. I don't want it, I'm guessing you don't either?"

"Not particularly," Tanare stated, "but I don't have a choice. It's what my Captain would have wanted for me." Bjorn nodded and stepped towards Jayce before somewhat roughly picking him up and slinging him over his shoulder. "The Sovereign won't like any of this and I'm needed by my crew to prevent Jayce from replacing her. Can I trust you to lead these people better than the two that came before? To protect them, and not drag them into meaningless acts of revenge?" Bjorn asked. Tanare shrugged and Bjorn couldn't help but admire the honesty. "I don't know who or what I am anymore. I don't have anyone left." "You have him," Bjorn stated, tilting his head towards Jayce. "And, with a push, me. Go, the people won't care who, as long there is a story they will follow you as King."

Tanare picked up the severed head and, with a sigh, stepped forwards towards the broken pillars marking the entrance to the viewing chamber. He stopped as he smelt fresh air, the bright light blinding him for a moment before giving way to two armies fighting one another on the long road of stairs leading down before him. With little care he threw the head forwards. It bounced, and kept bouncing, before eventually rolling down the stairs. With each group it passed they froze and looked up towards him, eyes wide in surprise and shock. The head kept rolling, leaving marks of blood and fur and eventually bone behind before it came to a final stop in a mushy pile. All eyes looked up towards Tanare. "Kneel," he commanded as Therian King.

"What happened to him?" Yuthura questioned in mild panic, as Bjorn dropped Jayce like a bloody sack of potatoes onto the Stacked Hand's deck. He himself then slumped over onto a sunbed, holding his freshly scarred side as the final drops of adrenaline left his system. "He deserved it," Bjorn made sure to add before passing out. Yuthura scoffed, shaking her head at the pair of them before getting to work.

The Rising Aces didn't stick around. Tanare watched as the crew fell back to their ship, their role in the war over and the majority of Xerxes' loyalists having already surrendered. A few pockets of resistance were still present but Tanare held little concern over them. Instead he sat in his deliberately emptied throne room, looking down at the headless corpse of Xerxes as he waited. A burning portal tore open the air and a not overtly tall red-headed woman stepped through, her brown and purple glowing eyes locked directly onto Tanare.

"Care to explain this mess?" Scáthach asked plainly, her voice surprisingly low and brimming with anger. Tanare stood up from his throne, stepping forwards but leaving a deliberate distance between them. "I don't answer to you, not anymore," he growled. She tilted her head, her lips pursing before spreading into a smirk as she shook her head and stepped towards him. "So you heard," she stated, glancing up to Valentine's hat as it sat on Tanare's head. Her eyes then glanced towards the blood covering his body and Xerxes' corpse. "I did," he returned, taking off the hat and setting it down on the throne behind him.

"But it wasn't me who killed Xerxes. This isn't even my blood," he growled, the hairs across his body glowing before erupting into an orange flame, that then turned blue as it boiled away Jayce's blood. Scáthach faltered as he took a flaming step forwards, scorch marks on the ground beneath him. Xerxes' body erupted into flame as the heat was channelled towards Scáthach, but she bathed within

it, her eyes cold and still locked onto Tanare. "I'm not afraid of you, Sovereign," he growled. The golden doors opened and Lord Solan stepped through, along with Mare – her right eye covered in an eyepatch. "King Tanare," Mare stated, her wounds from Tempest noticeable but a determination to prove herself visible in her remaining eye, "Belluabella is with you."

"So is this war then?" Scáthach questioned to Tanare. He shook his head. "No, but I'm no longer yours. I'm not a Betrayer anymore." Scáthach let out a loud and exaggerated sigh. "Good help is so hard to find these days," she stated, shaking her head and swiping through the air with a sword to form a portal. "Good luck, King. It's nice to see you finally doing something for yourself," she said, her voice laced with malice as she stepped through the portal and departed. Tanare extinguished his flames and turned back to his throne before putting his hat back on. "Does that mean we are safe from the Sovereign?" Lord Solan questioned, stepping forwards with a little glance to the charred remains of Xerxes. "No. That was a warning to pick a side and to think on our alliances. A war is coming, one way or another. We need to decide whether to fight with her, or against her."

Jayce let out a groan as he cracked his neck. His body was sore and bruised, but his bones and teeth were intact at the least. Bjorn stood waiting at the end of the infirmary bed, his arms folded and several new scars across his body. "Took you long enough," he stated. "Did you really need to let Tanare beat you that badly?" "Probably not, but I deserved it regardless," Jayce admitted, his mind wandering to all the people he had hurt for the Sovereign.

Bjorn turned away but paused at the doorway. "Fair enough... I can't forgive you for what happened, but... thanks for helping me put them to rest," he said quietly. "I know..." Jayce returned, before faltering as he thought about sharing Wam's status to Bjorn, but ultimately he shook his head. "Come on then, we have work to do," Bjorn stated, stepping forwards and leaving the infirmary. Jayce dressed quickly and followed after him.

"A message from King Tanare," Astris stated, handing Jayce a small note as he joined the rest of his crew in the living quarters. King Tanare was a title that was certainly going to take time for Jayce to get used to, but he gave the note a quick read before repeating it aloud. "My people want to say thank you, but we both know this wasn't for them. I hope Bjorn's vengeance was what he needed. The Sovereign visited, so watch your back and be ready. When the time comes to

fight, myself and my people will only join you if the winning side looks like it's going to be yours. As of this current moment, that is not the case."

"Well that's... rough," Zeta stated to the group. "What can we do to possibly change his feelings? If the Therians aren't willing to side with us then we don't stand a chance against the Sovereign, her Betrayers, and her Null Legion." Jayce glanced towards Ordo, who nodded in simple approval. "We're going on the hunt," Jayce declared. "We've killed a Pirate Lord, next on the list is not one, but two Betrayers."

Zeta shook her head. "No, not them. Please not them," she begged, but Jayce glanced towards Mai Lu and nodded to her. "We're taking down Strigon, and Alberta Armin the Cannibal Lord," she stated to the crew. A mixture of voices emerged, some expressing concerns about the consequences and the forces that Strigon possessed, whilst others were concerned with Scáthach's inevitable reaction if they succeeded, but Ordo stepped forwards. "We swore to aid the people under the rule of the Vampires and the Cannibals, regardless of the Sovereign. If we're not willing to help those people then no one will be. Would you rather face them now when they're alone or whilst they are defending the Sovereign? If we can take them both out then we have a definitive advantage against Scáthach and her forces. I am going, who else will?" Ordo questioned to the crew.

Astris stepped forwards immediately, Mai Lu begrudgingly stood up. Thalia cracked her knuckles and pointed at Bjorn. "You stole a kill from me, I call dibs on Alberta," she levied. Bjorn chuckled, nodding in agreement and stepping forwards. One by one the others all stood or acknowledged their next step, until only Zeta remained opposed. "The people will need their Blue Bard, and there will be no greater time to get your music known on the global stage," Jayce encouraged. She swore loudly before standing up with a stomp. "Fine. Let's kill some monsters."

Seize the Seas Tales: Unreliable

"Abandon ship!" Wicke yelled, as the Reliable began to sink - and sink fast. Neither Damian nor Morgause listened, or were able to listen as the others desperately grabbed anything they could before shoving it into their bottomless bags. They both stood locked in combat against the grey-haired man with two swords, who had carved a deep hole into their ship. He swung and thrust his twin rapiers, gracefully stepping atop the surface of the ocean as Morgause and Damian steadily lost more and more of their footing. His reach with his blades

SEIZE THE SEAS

kept Damian at more than an arm's reach, and, with each simple trust or deflection against Morgause's greatsword, he inevitably sent her toppling into the water.

"Wicke, this is a problem!" Damian yelled out, managing to grab hold of one of the blades only for it to burst into a firm blue flame that swiftly heated up his metal gauntlet to an excruciating degree. "He's not the only problem!" Wicke yelled back, her eyes towards the mercenary ship turning back towards their sinking vessel. "Wicke, get us out of here!" cried Sabine, swimming quickly towards Morgause as she bled quickly from several holes. Wicke began to chant, desperately backing up as water continued to move up along the main deck towards her. "Oh, I think not," stated the man with glowing eyes, dashing forwards towards Wicke, only for Damian to tackle him over the edge of the ship, the pair of them splashing into the ocean. Enki grabbed his ankle, swimming quickly down before yelling out in pain as a blade pierced his shoulder. With the man nearly twenty metres under the water, Enki propelled himself back up to his crew as they gathered together around Morgause. "Go!" he yelled, the group disappearing in a purple flash.