

Chapter 237: Following Footsteps

“That is... really fricking creepy,” Sabine stated, watching the wax copies of their group approach the main gates of the wall surrounding the Myst’s Dungeon. Raido knelt next to her, his hand slightly outstretched as he concentrated on using his Demon’s power. Before the copy of Wicke could even let out a word, they were immediately gunned down – falling apart into wax chunks. A guard cautiously approached the pieces before they erupted into large pillars of blue flame. “It appears that we are not welcome,” Raido stated matter-of-factly to Wicke. “So, it would seem...”

Their faces suddenly illuminated as a searchlight locked onto them, murdering their shadow in an instant and exposing them. “Time to go!” Morgause yelled, grabbing Wicke and Cinderlee by the scruffs of their clothes and leaping from the rooftop they were crouched upon. Sabine, Damian, Enki and Raido all dove after her as the spot they had been in erupted in gunfire and a howling alarm rang out across the city.

“They’ve been waiting for us!” Wicke yelled out, as the streets emptied before swiftly becoming repopulated by armed soldiers in gold and green, and numerous mercenaries clad in personal armour and colours. “Morgause!” she swiftly commanded. The Paladin stepped forwards with her greatsword in hand, as Sabine stood by her side with a large tower shield, blocking the gunfire as they pushed forwards together. Enki warped the space around them, conjuring temporary brick walls to seal off side-passageways and add cover for the vanguard and their followers.

Wicke chanted quickly, analysing their surroundings for any quick ambushes whilst Damian stood by her side as an immediate protector. Cinderlee tossed vial after vial over the conjured walls, green fire erupting outwards on the other sides as the glass shattered against their would-be-attackers. Raido guarded the rear, managing the wax copies of Sabine aiding Morgause’s one-woman assault forwards through the tight alleyways as they made their way away from the Dungeon and towards the harbour.

Wicke finished her chant, the group retracting to her before they all teleported away in a bolt of purple lightning, landing back into their accommodation within the city. “Well, that was a disaster,” Sabine stated, her eyes glancing towards Morgause as she wiped blood off her greatsword before landing on the few wounds she had taken on her own shoulder from scattered bullets – they popped out on their own as the wounds healed shut. “Did anyone see any markings?

Anything to identify whose army that was? That was more than just a stationed garrison," Wicke prompted. The group shook their heads, only for a soft cough to draw their attention towards the window. "You might want to look at this," Raido said nervously.

They crowded around him, all peering up in a mixture of shock, horror, nervousness, and Cinderlee's giddy grin as a huge crimson airship hovered over the city of Kraken's Grave bearing the markings of the city's namesake. A huge voice boomed down from above, shaking the window in front of them. "I know you're down there, little rats! You cannot hide from me, not now – not after all you have done to interfere in my business!" came a deep rumbling growl, as searchlights lit up the city from above. "You have one hour to show yourselves, or I shall begin to burn down this city! And just to make certain you are aware that this is legitimate..."

A bay opened on the underbelly of the colossal airship and it began to rain explosive rockets down upon the harbour, painting the city in orange flame and shattering the window they had been stood by, as ships detonated one after another, their passengers and the dockworkers diving pointlessly into the waters to avoid certain and inevitable death. The explosions didn't stop for several minutes, leaving nothing behind but an eerie silence broken by screams and burning. No one dared say anything, they all stood frozen by the shattered window watching the city burn because of them, but eventually Cinderlee scratched her head and picked glass out of her hair. "Seems a bit dramatic, I could have blown up the harbour with a single bomb. Maybe he's hiring...?"

Slowly the others looked at her, some shaking their heads, others just shutting their eyes and letting out a long exhale... except for Wicke and Damian, who both met each other's gaze and then Cinderlee's sadistic grin, as the flames reflected off her sickly green and bloody eyes. "Get to work then," Wicke commanded, cutting through Damian's hesitation. "It may take longer than an hour," Cinderlee stated, before giggling as she skipped away with excitement to her room and slammed the door shut.

"What have you just commanded?" Enki questioned cautiously, his hands over his head as he tried to block out the screams across the city. "This isn't my first war," Wicke stated, looking to Morgause for confirmation on her decision. "I don't know enough about the Kraken to negotiate with him, and quite honestly – if we were in his position, where we have wiped out probably half his income

and influence within the Guild – I don't think I would negotiate. The best equivalent I can think of is if my grimoires were destroyed-"

"-Or if we were killed?" Sabine inserted, somewhat fearful of Wicke's answer. But Wicke nodded, giving a soft and genuine smile to her friend. "The Kraken governs trade of magic crystals and controls the Guild's influence within the Dungeons," Wicke informed. It wasn't new information, and Damian was more than aware of it, but it did remind him just how big of an enemy they had inevitably been pushing into a corner. This was bound to happen, and although there was nothing to stop them from just leaving to target the southern Dungeon, he couldn't help but feel guilty – guilty of what influence he had had on the people of Kraken's Grave. This was their fault and, come the end of the day, the people were just collateral to the Kraken's message: mess with the Guild and there are consequences.

Wicke stood tapping her foot in thought, her mind working up plans and back-ups. It was far from Damian's specialty; he had never been good at thinking before acting and as anger bubbled within him, he didn't want to wait for whatever she was planning. "Raido, do you mind having a talk with me for a moment?" Damian questioned. Eyes glanced towards him before falling inevitably back on Wicke. "Of course," the older man stated, following Damian away from the group outside of their accommodation. Damian watched Raido's back as he stepped away from the corridor outside of their apartment and went back inside. A pair of feet went with him, but they weren't as heavy as Damian's, despite wearing his shoes. He turned and walked away. Jayce had told him to protect Wicke. This was the best way he could.

Damian didn't know what to think of the flyer that had landed in front of him; his arms were bound behind him – anti-magic chains of course – and the armoured guards around him had their weapons trained on him at all times. It had a large propeller above it, and spewed out dark smoke like most other flyers, but this one seemed more focused on going up and down rather than forwards. "Get in," commanded a Guild soldier almost a foot taller than him. Damian obliged, his eyes still on the burning harbour as the flyer took him up and into the belly of the Kraken's airship.

He was marched through metal corridors, passing more guards than he could count as he headed through rooms packed with crates of magic stones and weaponry. It seemed like the Kraken was stockpiling for something, preparing for something bad. Eventually Damian was pushed through a large pair of

golden doors and he stumbled before falling to his knees on a large red carpet. He looked up with a growl at a large oak desk, a huge circular window behind it and a similarly round man looking down at him. His numerous necks were covered in gemstone-adorned jewellery, and various rings laden with magic stones covered his swollen fingers. His nails were manicured, his huge shirt pressed but with the sleeves rolled up – displaying black tentacle-like tattoos against his dark skin - and a gentle waft of some sweet scent flowed off him. He was clean-shaven, a huge ball of dark curly hair covering his head. A pair of red sunglasses covered his eyes, despite it being nighttime.

“Where are the rest of your friends?” he rumbled, his chair creaking as he sat forwards and locked his fingers. Damian tried to stand up, only for the butt of a halberd to knock him back down. “Busy,” Damian lied, trying not to show off how much the impact had hurt. “They’ve left the city, heading for the south Dungeon.” The Kraken growled, his teeth bright and shiny – and made of a silver metal. His chair groaned as he stood up, and with a large and firm hand he grabbed the edge of his desk before sliding it aside in a swift movement that widened Damian’s eyes. The Kraken grabbed Damian by the neck with his meaty hand, lifting him off the ground and dangling him in his grip: he was almost two feet taller than Damian, a real mountain of man.

“Then for what reason do you have any value to me?” questioned the Kraken. “I’m the only... one who can... call them back,” Damian gasped, writhing in the Kraken’s grip. “And for what reason would I want that? I’ve already spent the funds required for my fellow to be waiting for your friends. They’re doomed one way or another, regardless of if it’s by my hands or theirs. The issues that you and your group have caused to me ends tonight, one way or another!”

The grip lessened and Damian dropped to the floor, the various guards in the room stepping forwards once more to ensure that he had little chance of rebellion as the Kraken loosened his cuffs and rolled up his sleeves. “Wait!” Damian yelled out, holding up his hands as the Kraken picked up a studded metal pole. “I’ve come to bargain,” Damian spoke quickly, his eyes counting the guards and their positions by him. “And what could I possibly want from you? You’ve decimated my operations, kid, this is beyond business now.”

“Magic stones. You can make them without the Dungeon! Take these cuffs off me and I can show you!” Damian offered. The metal rod was pointed at his chin, the spiked tip gently pressing into his skin. “Explain,” came a firm command. “We learnt that they are extractable from magicians, that it’s a simple process that

anyone can do to produce stones relevant to their capabilities. I'm hardly a Mage but even I can make them. No more Dungeons, no more expeditions," Damian answered, extending out his cuffed hands.

The Kraken nodded to his guards, stepping back and folding his arms as Damian rubbed his wrists. Slowly and cautiously, he formed a tiny stone in his palm before showing it off. A chuckle escaped the Kraken before broadening into a bellow. "Tell me how," he commanded to Damian, revelling moments later at the far larger stone in his own palm. "Preposterous... it's almost unbelievable that that is all it took. All this time... all this effort... for something so simple." "You don't need the Dungeons anymore," Damian said quickly, slowly standing up. "In exchange for the destruction of the previous two and the other two – this method is yours," Damian offered. "Let us go, we'll be in and out- "

Damian hit the floor hard as his jaw was smashed by the metal rod in the Kraken's grip. He spat tooth and blood onto the floor as his head span. "No, I don't think so," growled the Kraken coldly. Damian stayed down as the Kraken stepped towards him and placed a heavy boot on his back before pressing him to the floor. "You've given me the means to print money, you think I'm so stupid as to let you leave with it. No, this clears a debt, but it doesn't ease my anger. Besides, you and your friends were never going to leave. Kraken's Grave is a seat of power that should have always been mine, but its name is disgusting – it needs changing, redefining."

He stepped back and approached his tossed aside desk, reaching into one of the drawers and pulling out a small device. "Captain, you may resume bombardment. Level this place and order for construction to commence once the rubble has settled." The Kraken then turned back towards Damian. "I would say I will make this quick for you, but I doubt I'll ever get the chance to kill another Exarga, and there isn't anyone in your family who hasn't had it coming. You and your retched blood have been long overdue a reckoning."

The entire ship lurched and then tilted to the side as a huge explosion rang out somewhere on the portside. "What the hell was that?" the Kraken questioned, as an alarm began to blare and the window indicated that the airship was drifting to the side. Damian didn't speak, he lunged for the nearest guard and grabbed their halberd, placing them in between him and the two riflemen in the room. Their bullets killed the guard and Damian immediately threw the glaive like a javelin at one of the riflemen. He slid under a pair of heavy slashes and tackled

the last gunner, taking away the rifle and kicking the other rifle on the floor towards the doorway.

Another detonation rang out, the room tilting even further and sending the group tumbling across the floor as Damian jammed the spare rifle in between the handles. He hung off the door as the still-living guards and Kraken regained their footing and turned to him. "That was your one chance to leave, boy!" the Kraken growled. "You shouldn't have mentioned my family," Damian returned, his eyes cold and mouth bloody. He let go off the door.

Wicke strode through melted doorway after melted doorway, following the orange animalistic footsteps across the metal. She could only wonder what Damian had done. She and the others had only realised Damian and Raido's deception when one of the external propellers on the gigantic airship had exploded. His one-man assault seemed suicidal, but it seemed to have been working and utilising methods she only vaguely recognised. Either he had been paying far more attention to her magic during their time together or something else was going on altogether.

"What is that?" Morgause questioned, her voice trembling slightly as she pointed ahead to a figure walking through a closed metal door, a scream and gunshots followed from the other side a moment later. "That's not Damian!" Sabine answered, pointing to the orange glow coming off the lava-creature's fur. Wicke darted forwards, leaping across a melted gap in the walkway they were heading down, the waters of the harbour far beneath her. "Wicke, this thing is going down!" Sabine called after her. Wicke turned and looked back at the group, Raido and Morgause leaping across to join her whilst the others hesitated. "Go, get out of here! We'll teleport out once we've found him!" she called back to them, the airship groaning and shaking around them. "Go! It's an order!" she added, turning away from them and running after the lava creature ahead of them.

Damian pulled out the rifle sealing the doors to the Kraken's office. It slipped out of his hands as he tried to hold it, the handles similarly slippery as blood that wasn't his slicked his fingers. With a groaned pain, the door flung open as the airship tilted once again. He desperately hung on, pulling himself through as the corpses behind him tumbled down into a corner before falling free through the shattered window along with the wooden desk, now accompanied with the Kraken impaled to it by a studded metal pole.

He froze as a scarred figure stood ahead of him in the darkness, his orange and black fur dripping magma and glowing against the darkness. His right hand and

forearm looked liquid, held together in the faint shape of a limb. Scars covered the badger therian's head. Damian took a defensive stance, but a figure stepped out from behind the badger, her orange hair flowing around her, a hand on her large hat and her eyes muddled with relief and fear. "Damian," Wam stated, "Your brother sent me. Come on, we're getting you out of here." Damian's eyes rolled into the back of his head, his vision fading to darkness as he slumped to the floor.

It was a different day when Damian finally awoke. He knew that much from the daylight coming in through a cracked window in his room. The sounds of the people around him also told him that Kraken's Grave must have survived the crashing of the Kraken's airship. A pained groan escaped him as he peeled away his covers, his torso was covered in bandages, some stained with patches of blood. Cautiously his hand reached up to his jaw. He felt a firm but fresh scar, and his tongue prodded a hole where a tooth had been.

The door swung open and Cinderlee stepped through with a tray covered in various syringes, vials, fresh bandages and grizzly apparatus. "No!" Damian protested as she approached, attempting to sit up only for a bolt of pain to cross his torso causing him to double up in fresh agony. "Don't be a baby," Cinderlee told him, as Raido entered into the room and took the tray from her before pressing Damian firmly back into his bed. The pain eased up as the older man injected him with something. "That is all, Cinderlee," Raido told her. She flashed Damian a toothy grin before bowing to Raido and then skipping out of the room, kicking it shut behind her. "You were fortunate," Raido said firmly, cutting away Damian's old bandages before taking a look at the injuries.

"I don't feel fortunate," Damian returned, trying not to fidget as Raido dabbed the areas with a very cold, stinging liquid. "Without the aid of your brother you probably wouldn't have made it. We wouldn't have made it in time – that is for certain," Raido explained. Damian shut his eyes and focused on steadying his breathing. "What did I miss?" he eventually asked, opening his eyes and looking up at the ceiling.

"Wam had been waiting for us within Kraken's Grave for some time. He had been expecting us to not be so... hasty with our visit to the Dungeon so he was asleep when we set out. The bombardment woke him up. He made his way aboard in pursuit of you after witnessing you being taken to the airship. Your absence was noticed when Wam destroyed one of the airship's propellers, forcing it to begin pulling away from the city. We got aboard with Wicke's magic and we

followed Wam's assault through the ship, they found you and got you out before the airship detonated over the ocean. That was a day and a half ago."

"Oh," Damian said softly. "How is everyone?" he asked, carefully sitting up as Raido finished tending to him. "Fine, other than Wicke. Wam has... news, that's not exactly pleasant to hear. But it's out of our hands. She's also furious with me, and more-so with you." Damian itched his head and looked away. "I would recommend rest, but I know better than to expect it from you. Cinderlee has some healing potions that we can probably afford to use up now, given we have an extra companion for this upcoming Dungeon crawl."

Damian dressed with Raido's help finding his crew waiting for him in the main room. "Damian!" Sabine stated immediately, getting to her feet and darting over to him before cautiously and awkwardly placing a hand on his shoulder. "I'm glad you're okay," she stated, holding back a hug as she glanced at his visible bandages. "Thanks," he told her, his eyes locked on Wicke as she sat turned away from him with her arms folded and a pout on her face. She let out an audible huff so he instead looked towards the unfamiliar man sat on their sofa.

Wam wore several scars in both his human and therian form, most notably on his face. His skin was very dark, with a few mottled burn marks across his arms and right cheek. Even in human form, his right forearm was made of magma. His curly hair had been braided backwards, and his eyes glowed orange and brown. He wore simple summer shorts, sandals and a black floral buttoned t-shirt. Even though Damian had met Wam before, his human form surprised him – and that was without the Demonlord powers or scars.

"Good to see you up and about," Wam said genuinely, getting to his feet and towering over Damian. He extended the magma hand to shake before pulling it back and swapping arms. "Sorry, still getting used to it myself." Damian cautiously shook the hand. "Thanks. Raido informed me that Jayce sent you?" "Aye, Cap' did indeed, but... well, it's all a bit of a mess down south. Nothing we can do for the moment though, so," Wam stated, before turning and looking towards Wicke before approaching her and sitting down next to her. His muscled mass tipped her towards him as the sofa bent a little, her body resting against his. Immediately, she pushed back away from him, as he laughed, her face flashing red. "You can be mad at him later, boss, what's the plan?" Wam questioned on a more serious note, remaining sat close to her but with his eyes towards Damian. Wicke glared at Wam before transferring the glare to Damian. "We all know the plan by this point."

Seize the Seas Tales: Fall of Influence

Marisha shook her head gently as she flicked through the reports scattered across her desk: the death of Xerxes, Kraken's murder, the Syndicate... Slowly but surely the influence of the Guild was waning. Already companies and organisations across the world were starting to ask for new contracts or were even preparing to request membership with the Guild's latest rivals. Her hands slid over to a request for services: funding for assassination of Holli and Myra. A small smirk crossed Marisha's face as she denied it. "Ladies," she said to her personal communicator.

"The Red Quarter want you eliminated." A few moments passed. "Understood, I'm on it, writing the dispatch now," came Myra Yashiro's response. "Funding authorised," followed Holli's voice. Marisha sat back in her chair, her eyes glancing towards her calendar on the wall. Wicke's name filled a date not too far ahead. "Give us the push I know you can," Marisha muttered to herself, only to immediately sit upright as a knock came from her office's door and her mother stepped in. "Everything okay, Mar?" asked the Serpent. Marisha smiled. "Just perfect. I think I'm really settling in here."