

### **Chapter 238: Shattering Foundations**

With the addition of two new hyper-lethal companions, it took far less time than Wicke had been expecting to clear the Mysts' Dungeon – but for once she decided it would be better to take their time at the end. “Is it normally like this?” Wam questioned, as he sat on the rooftop of an ancient dwelling with Morgause and Damian. “The city – yes. Wicke – no,” Damian answered, the bored trio watching Wicke wander throughout the city with a notebook. “What is she doing?” Wam asked. Damian shrugged but Morgause leant forwards to meet Wam's gaze.

“She's trying to figure out if there is a way to free the Wizard and the Demon in the control chamber without killing them both,” Morgause stated. Wam folded his arms, a small mouth appearing amongst his fur. “Could the chamber not just be broken apart and the pair inside forcibly extracted?” Asmodeus questioned, making an unnerving and rare appearance. “Gods, I hate it when you do that,” Morgause muttered. “No, this entire place functions off their life-force, channelling them as living batteries. Forcibly remove them and there's no chance they'll survive, or that we will get out in time before this place collapses.” “If you're done chattering away, I have jobs for you!” Wicke yelled up to them. The trio looked at each other. “Boss is calling,” Wam stated, he and Morgause standing up before dropping off the rooftop. “Hey, I'm the boss!” Damian called after them, letting out a sigh as Wicke pointed at him and then pointed down at the floor.

“Ready?” Wicke questioned to Cinderlee and Enki, the three of them spaced around the Dungeon control room with numerous arcane circles drawn onto the floor. “Anything we should look out for?” Wam questioned to Damian as Wicke approached the control panel. “Just be ready to leap through a portal, and be ready for whatever is out there waiting for us – I doubt the Guild is going to forgive me for killing the Kraken.” Wicke froze in place, her eyes held open as she gripped the terminal.

“I think I have the means to get you out of here, alive,” Wicke said quickly and firmly as she looked at an elderly silver-haired woman in white robes. The Archmages' brown eyes were sad and slightly disappointed but for reasons Wicke couldn't quite understand. “So, the time for the Dungeons to end has come, I can see in that amalgamation of a grimoire that you carry that you have already met my fellows. What is your name, dear?” asked the Archmage. “Wicke.”

"It is not possible by my knowledge to uncouple me or my partner from this system, I am too spent – we both are. I would advise against trying as it may make it so that I am unable to assist you or your companions in leaving this ancient tomb." Wicke opened her mouth to speak but the ancient Mage held up her hand to stop her, slowly approaching her instead so that they stood face-to-face. "Wicke, your purpose here is to rescue the past – my knowledge, my grimoire – so that you can take it back out and use it as is necessary. Let an old woman reminisce."

"My name is Selene, the Archmage of the skies. My fellows and I once governed this world, teaching magic to those worthy of it. We raised cities into the skies, built palaces far beneath the ocean, and put magical technology into the hands of all. But that invited challenge, it brought us great danger from a prehistoric age. The world is there to be reclaimed and redesigned by scholars such as yourself, not by warriors or merchants. Please take what I have dedicated my life to and find a purpose for it. Free the rest of my fellows from their bindings, grant them peace. That is all I ask of you."

Wicke stumbled backwards with a white grimoire in her hands, the glass tube in front of her shattered ending the life of the Mage and Demon inside. "No!" she cried, but a hand grabbed her shoulder and pulled her quickly through a swirling silver portal. She dropped to her knees as rain drummed across her face. "Fuck!" she screamed, punching the mud beneath her to little effect as the Dungeon disintegrated behind her, enveloping her and her group in a wave of dust. A familiar voice then cleared her throat.

"Throw down your weapons," stated Corina Liu, a sizeable army stationed in all directions around the ruins of the Dungeon. Wicke's eyes widened, her hands desperately lunging for the grimoire she had dropped which she then hugged tightly to her chest as Damian stepped in front of her. "Corina?" Damian questioned, slowly edging forwards in front of his group. "Gryphon is how I go by these days," Corina said firmly, Ottar stood behind her in a large green coat holding a shiny umbrella over her head. "Of course," Damian muttered under his breath.

"Wicke, dear, I am disappointed by your wanton destruction. These Dungeons are both historical legacies of my family and also rich resources for not just the Emp... Republic, but also the Guild. You've cost a lot of people far more than you could ever hope to pay back, but I know you – and you, Damian – so I have to believe that there is purpose to this. What have you found? What is that in your

arms that you are cradling so desperately? Bring it here, show it to me," Corina Liu commanded.

"Boss," Wam said quietly, stepping up behind Damian but aiming his words to the whole group. "We're in an antimagic field," he warned. "She's got us good – I'm not sure-" A loud tutting came from Corina and she immediately wagged a finger. "I gave a command, do it or there shall be consequences. Come along Damian, I raised you better than this. I will not harm you as long as there is a reason to let you go. That is as far as my personal touch will allow, the rest is just business – you know this better than anyone."

A flash of the Kraken's interrogation and death flowed into and out of Damian's mind. "The Kraken said something similar, but his words were more personal than business – that's why I killed him," Damian said coldly, stepping forwards away from the others. The countless rifles all angled towards him and Ottar stepped forwards. "Don't be foolish, kid," he warned. Damian nodded, turning back and looking at Wicke. "You should give over what we found. It's not mine to hand over, this is up to you," he told her – knowing that he couldn't sell what wasn't his to give, and the last time he had tried, it had resulted in failure.

Wicke got to her feet, tucking the grimoire away and wiping the rain out of her eyes as she strode forwards past Damian stopping a metre in front of Corina. "I want to trade what we have, what we've learnt, in exchange for our lives and freedom. I need your word that these terms will stick and that it won't become anything more than business," Wicke said firmly, standing with her hands on her hips and meeting Corina's cold eyes. "I am always happy to negotiate on business terms only, but understand that you will have to have something particularly special in order to make up for this."

"The Kraken is dead, I'm sure that has already been confirmed, but I offer you his entire business. You don't need the Dungeons anymore, and he was unable to see beyond them – that's why Damian was forced to kill him. We know how to make magic stones, we also know how and where the Dungeons make their enchanted items, paired together and you have the means to eliminate any need for the Dungeons. I don't care about them personally, but I care about the knowledge at the bottom – the chance to speak to the Mages of old and ask them a few questions," Wicke laid out. Corina could barely hide a twitch of excitement, her eyes practically shone.

"I'm guessing you have no interest in the words of a few old Mages?" Wicke ascertained. "I'm sure there is value to it... but the effort involved seems..."

overzealous. The source of the magic items and the means to create magic stones however... that is worthy of negotiating for," Corina stated firmly. "I'll need a demonstration." Wicke nodded, looking back at her defensive group all plotting their own means of escape. "In exchange for access to the Dungeons and the permission of their destruction, I will give the location of the Anvil of Agron. In exchange for our lives and freedom – I will show you how anyone can make magic stones. Do we have a deal?" Wicke questioned, extending a hand to shake. Corina looked down at Wicke's muddy hand. Cautiously she shook it.

Rather curiously, Ottar stepped forwards and took out a silver disk from his pocket. He pressed a button on it and it began to hover before spinning so fast that it looked like a floating sphere. "The antimagic field is disrupted within two metres of the disk," he confirmed. Wicke's eyes widened, the disk suddenly more valuable than any of their lives. "Go on," Corina commanded. Wicke extended a hand out, forming a small magic stone in her grasp. Corina's eyes widened. "It's very simple. Anyone who can channel mana can do so. Visualise a concentration of your magic essence, squeeze it, compress it, and manifest it. The more precise your vision, the more precise your result," Wicke explained. A Mage stepped forwards from Corina's army, and within mere moments she could replicate Wicke's process. "My Gods," Corina muttered, a huge grin on her face. "And this Anvil, this Great Forge?" she immediately questioned, looking from Wicke to Ottar. "The Scourge, the south pole of this world. Jayce has already visited it and confirmed its existence."

"Very well, you've held up your side of the bargain so it is natural that I do the same. You may leave. Do not return to this place. The south Dungeon will be vacant by the time you arrive – it's a waste of resources now," Corina stated. Wicke didn't need to be told twice. She turned and tilted her head, the group breaking into a sprint as they departed the area. "The field is down," Wam confirmed once they were far enough away. "Gather up, we're heading to the Capital for a resupply and then taking on the last Dungeon," Wicke commanded. They did so, and after a quick chant they found themselves within their apartment in the Capital.

"That was close," Wam eventually stated, laying down on the floor and looking up at the ceiling as he recovered from the teleportation. "Too close," Morgause agreed. "There is also no chance that this Gryphon will keep her word is there?" she then asked. "Corina has no need for the Dungeon anymore, she won't waste resources there, not whilst she can concentrate on absorbing the Kraken's operations," Damian answered. "But we still have bounties on our heads."

“Those bounties aren’t going to be a problem,” Wicke stated, “not for much longer.”

Marisha grinned as she read the report on her desk: the collapse of another Dungeon, the knowledge of Jayce’s Great Forge, and the method of making magic stones. All of them had been submitted by the new Gryphon in a bid for the Kraken’s duties, and all of them conveniently also happened to have been publicised to the world by the Syndicate almost simultaneously. The value of magic stones had collapsed, and attempts to make it through the Scourge to this mysterious forge had also resulted in pointless casualties due to the local fauna, and supposedly some kind of undead army.

Magic stones had been the crutch of almost all of the Guild’s business. Marisha had also been slowly weaning her mother of her more untasteful trades and practices, and conveniently all attempts to tackle the swiftly growing Syndicate had also failed due to internal issues and also the surprise presence of ex-Bounty Hunters offering protection. And that wasn’t even including the graceful protection of the Delivery Kats.

The door to Marisha’s office opened, but this time there wasn’t a knock or any sense of friendliness from the woman who walked in. “What have you done?” questioned the Serpent coldly. Marisha slowly stood up and walked around her desk – the time to leave had been coming anyway, the Rising Aces would need her in their fight against Strigon and Alberta, but she knew that now was her last chance to do what she had been working on for the last few years.

“It’s over, mother,” Marisha said gently. “The Guild is falling, and it won’t stop falling without definitive leadership that can override the infighting. That’s not you, that’s not me, and it may not even be the Sovereign. I know that you gave her what she needed to conquer the Guild, to turn it under her control – I don’t know why, I can have a guess, but I still don’t think I understand this side of you: the Serpent. I don’t want to, it’s not the you that I care about.”

“What have you done?”

“The Syndicate will continue to grow because it doesn’t expect control, or a neutralised and central market. It doesn’t need power, or status, or titles – it just wants people to trade and to respect the rules of commerce. It doesn’t need Guildmasters, it doesn’t need you, and it doesn’t rely on the Sovereign to force control. I’m leaving this place; I have no doubt that others will have pieced

together what I have done to mess with the Guild's attempts at hindering the Syndicate, to help Wicke in destroying the trade of magic stones."

"Come with me, not as the Serpent, but as you – the real you – my mother. There is no legacy, not anymore, the Serpent will retire – either crushed under the weight of the collapsing Guild, or by your choice. It's too late to stop this, but it's not too late for you. Please," Marisha pleaded. Her mother stood frozen, her eyes glancing to the array of documents across Marisha's desk before slowly falling back on Marisha's eyepatch and scars. "I-I can't," said her mother quietly.

"You can."

"I can't! Everything I am is this: the Serpent – the creature I had to become in order to carve out a piece of this world. This is who I am, what I've become, and all I have!"

"Then what am I?" Marisha challenged, stepping forwards towards her mother. "You... you..." the words caught in her mother's mouth; her voice laced with pain. "I know I was a tool; I know I was born to entrap my father, but is that all I am to you, mother?" Marisha questioned. "Am I just... an accessory to you?" "No, no – Marisha you are far more than that. You're my child and all of this..." "It's not for me anymore," Marisha interrupted. "I'm never becoming the Serpent; I am never going to replace you. I can't – I have my crew, and we're taking the Guild and the Sovereign down."

"For years I resented you, hated you for treating me like a pet rather than your child, but I know why you did, and I don't blame you for that – I can't anymore. Not after being with you and spending time with you. I don't want to lose you, or for you to be caught up within the collapse of the Guild. So please, come with me – let's leave this place behind. You could retire of your own will before it all goes wrong, take whatever you can and disappear, and when the dust settles – we could be together: mother and daughter, not the Serpent and Marisha. Please."

The Serpent stepped back, turning away and shaking her head, but Marisha stepped towards her and placed her hands on her shoulders before resting her head into her mother's back. "Please, for once – choose me." Gently, a sigh escaped her mother. "Okay," she said quietly. "I'll do this for you. The Serpent will retire today." Marisha hugged her mother tightly, eventually receiving the hug back as her mother kissed her head. "I've heard the Frontier Archipelago has

some nice beaches, maybe I could afford a villa on a quiet island somewhere, whilst I wait for you to finish what your Captain started."

Marisha looked out of the cockpit of the Gambit, her gaze landing on her mother watching her from afar. "Good luck," her mother mouthed. Marisha returned the phrase, engaging the thrusters and diving out of the hangar into open air. The controls fought against her for a moment as the aircraft adapted to the sudden changes in wind, but they quickly came to rest in her grip as she left the Guild's headquarters behind for the last time. "Don't do anything stupid, Mother," Marisha said quietly to herself, steering the Gambit east.

"We're in so much trouble," Sabine muttered, as she looked at her own bounty poster and the insane prices on her and the rest of her groups' heads. "Nah," Damian returned, proudly holding up his own poster before tucking it away in his bottomless bag. "This, this is nothing yet. Besides," he stated, unfurling the latest Syndicate newspaper, "I'd say we have some pretty strong backers." The front cover showed his face and Wicke's, both of them proudly shaking Myra and Holli's hands as they handed over the trade secret on how to forge magic stones.

"Heroes of the new age," Damian read aloud. "Damian Exarga and Wicke of the Rising Aces, along with aid from their crewmates, have discovered the long-lost secret to forging mana stones... These brave explorers are under threat from the Guild for bravely coming forward, both the Republic and the Syndicate have deemed these assassination bounties as illegal and a threat to the betterment of humanity. Any Bounty Hunters who seek to claim the Guild's illegal bounties shall find themselves unwelcome within the New World, and with appropriate bounties on themselves. Sanctions have been placed upon the Guild, and operations within the New World have swiftly come to a close, leaving many confused and concerned for the future of commerce. The Syndicate and the Republic have arranged for talks to discuss the future of trade across the Old and New World."

"Sounds like Marisha and Jayce got what they wanted," Wicke stated, entering the room and kicking off her boots. "Do you think this was always his plan?" Damian questioned, as she sat down next to him. Wicke shrugged, glancing over towards the half-asleep Wam. "Most definitely," he mumbled, Morgause snoring loudly as she lay against his warm fur. "The Guild was a big worry for them both, and now that the Serpent has resigned there's a power vacuum that the

remaining Guildmasters are fighting over. The Guild will eat itself with time," Wam confirmed, letting out a yawn and shutting his eyes.

"Then next comes the Sovereign," Wicke stated. Damian shook his head, the Guild was a tool of hers, but he doubted its collapse would weaken her so significantly. "There's still a way to go before Jayce and the others can deal with her." Wicke smiled softly as she looked at Damian and the others in their apartment. "You're wrong. By the time we clear this last Dungeon, I think it will all be over. And then we'll go find my sisters."

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Our Only Hope**

Matteo held his head in his hands as he sat in his kitchen, the lights off apart from a lone flickering candle. His daughters, Orianna and Lucinia, were asleep safely in their beds – their windows and doors barred until dawn. The same was meant to be true of his own room, and any other night it would have been – pointless as it all was. Tears dripped down his scraggy beard, his nails cracked and torn and fingertips bloody. He held his ears, shutting out the screams of his wife Alina as the beasts had broken into their room. "Why?" he cried. "Why didn't you take me too?" he asked, the dark visage of the Vampire at his doorway etched into his mind. The glowing red eyes didn't answer as it took away its bride. It didn't care. It didn't care enough to even kill him. Matteo looked up, his eyes cold and heart broken. Slowly he reached for the candle, snuffing out its light. "Where are you Rising Aces?"