

Chapter 239: Heroes to the Rescue

It felt good to have the crew back together, especially once the Gambit looped around the ship before docking with the Stacked Hand. "We've heard that the Guild's influence has all but fallen in the New World," Jayce said, hugging Marisha tightly as she walked into the living quarters. "Your doing?" he questioned. "Hardly – you can thank Wicke for that. Oh, and Myra and Holli of course," Marisha returned, embracing Bjorn and then leaning into him as she addressed the others in the room. "You should speak to Wicke, I'm sure she'd be happy to hear from you." Jayce thumbed his communicator but took his hand away. "We're in the wrong time zone, and they've got jobs to do – the same as us."

Jayce knew that the reveal of Wam's survival would distract his crew, he also knew it was inevitable given the ease of contact with their communicators. For the moment they needed to focus, and there was also the added worry that the Sovereign would turn her attention to Wicke and the others – a far easier method of inflicting mental duress on Jayce and the others than attempting to target the constantly guarded Alara. "Speaking of," Jayce stated, turning his attention to his crew.

"We arrive tomorrow at the coast of Arcastalum, and without question we're going to face our biggest challenge yet." Everyone focused their attention on him, apart from a few glances towards Astris. Jayce's own gaze lay upon her as she sat hunched forwards on a chair, her fingers interlinked and leg bouncing nervously. "We have four distinct targets – none of whom can be allowed to escape. Our targets fall into two camps: God and Betrayer."

A soft tension tightened in the air. "Equally, we have the Vampires and we have Cannibals – two distinctive groups with their own threats and dangers. Until we have more information, we are somewhat limited on how our assault will occur but thanks to the efforts of Zeta, Mai Lu, Taranis and Ordo from their time within Arcastalum we know vaguely what to expect." Jayce reached for the display board, pulling off its cover and displaying the information that Astris had put together. A neat divide sat between the two sides.

"Let's start with the Cannibals," Jayce stated, stepping back and sitting down. Ordo stepped forwards, cracking his neck and knuckles before disconnecting a pointing stick from the board and whipping the air with it. "Nasty fuckers, the name says enough about them," he immediately clarified. "They're a real mystery, but from what we do know is that they operate in a very similar manner

to how the Vampires do. They have a God: the Grandfather. Some sort of monstrosity that has warped people like us into the monsters we see before us," he stated, gesturing to a photo of a hunchbacked boulder-like creature with a gaping maw and bulging eyes too big for its round skull. "They were present in the New World, had a real nasty cabal that was exterminated some years ago. It's hard to tell whether this faction here is connected to them but the similarities in physical features and organisation appears too coincidental for my liking."

"We know nothing about the Grandfather, or its abilities, or how it connects to the other Cannibals. Unfortunately, they may be the more difficult faction to eradicate. There is no evidence that they operate in a hive-like manner, even if we take out the leaders it is unlikely that the others will fall. For this reason, we have to strike hard and fast and with extreme prejudice. Each pack of Cannibals is led by a Mage, they look more human but their grey pallid features are a giveaway. Take out the leader first, the others are strong and fast but ultimately should pose no real issue to anyone here. Any bites – and I mean *any* bites, or scratches – are to be immediately reported for cleansing by either our Paladins or Yuthura. Samples have shown some nasty diseases and no one wants a bleach scrub, especially since our old Doc will make you clean out any abscesses with a toothbrush."

There were shared shudders from those foolish enough not to report wounds in the past. "At the peak of all of them is our main target: Betrayer Alberta Armin. There is nothing to say, no past experiences or information that is available on how she fights or who she is. By all accounts, she's a ghost – a mystery that the Sovereign dug up or freed from somewhere vile. She leaves nothing behind but torn clothing. If you encounter her and you are alone, you are to immediately retreat – regardless of circumstances. If there are civilians, or anything else that is relying on you, you are to abandon them and get help. You will die alone and with them. Am I clear?"

Not everyone agreed, but no one outwardly disagreed. They all knew the dangers of the Betrayers.

"Our first goal is to locate the Grandfather. We will link up with Matteo and his family, and get information on what we have missed. He said he would try to aid us, so he may have something that can point us in the right direction. There's no guarantee so we may need to capture some Cannibals for interrogation. Once the Grandfather is located, we will launch a timed assault to exterminate it, whilst

another team handles Alberta.” Ordo glanced towards Astris, who stood up and took his talking stick.

“Luckily for us, on the Vampire side you have a local expert,” she began. A few chuckles crossed the room. “Unfortunately, we also know what that means. The Vampires operate on a bloodline structure. The True Vampire made Strigon, Strigon made the rest and as such he has ultimate control over them and the ability to destroy them on a whim by controlling his blood within them. Last time, the True Vampire destroyed the cells within me and nearly killed me... I don’t know if it can do that again. As Strigon panics, he will throw his Vampires at us with little care for them. He will sacrifice them to heal himself whilst he buys time for the True Vampire to escape. The more pressure we apply at the top, the easier it is for the bottom to be thinned out.”

“This time Strigon has taken care to create a more defined structure to his forces. He has several Generals beneath him, all of whom are more independent than before and will not be push overs. We need to take them out first. Once the Generals are dead, we are going to target the True Vampire. At least half of us will be involved. It is theorised that if we kill the True Vampire, its death signal will kill off the rest. It is our main target and even if Strigon escapes – as long as it is dead then we will have permanently crippled the Sovereign’s forces.”

“If its death will kill off the other Vampires then what will happen to you?” Marisha questioned. Astris looked down. “I... I don’t know. But it’s irrelevant. With the number of Vampires only continuing to grow, if the Sovereign decides to let them leave then it will be chaos. The suffering needs to end, and if I go with it then I’m okay with that.” Marisha shook her head and met Jayce’s grey expression. “The squads will be these...”

The air was cold and slightly damp as Jayce dashed through the skies. The others in his crew were scattered amongst the Dragons, Morgana’s broomstick, Wren and the Gambit, or similarly using their own Focus to leap through the air like he was. There was a quiet nervousness to them all as they stayed close together, utilising Soteria’s barrier to conceal themselves from the ground below them. “Jayce,” came Astris through his communicator. “Regardless of what happens...”

He didn’t want to think about it. The chance of losing her was very real, the chance of losing any of them was very real. “I will do everything I can to ensure it doesn’t come to it,” Jayce returned to her, glancing to the side and locking eyes with her as she sat on Zhurong’s giant back, leaning into one of his spikes. The

moonlight lay upon her, her white and black hair cut into tomboyish side-tails. Her odd-coloured eyes lay in shadow, other than a faint red glow to them. "I know you will. You've already fought the world for me, and... I don't want to lose you too – you or Alara. I love you both, but don't sacrifice the future for me. Promise me you'll let me go if it comes to it." Jayce didn't answer, and she apparated in front of him in a splatter of red mist, her hands on his cheeks and lips placed firmly on his forehead. She vanished as he reached out to grab her and when he glanced back to Zhurong he found her sat turned away from him – her tears glinting in the moonlight as the wind snatched them away.

"Zhurong, Soteria and Taranis – you're to stay out of sight, and at a distance until you're called in," Jayce commanded, as the city of Nolograd came into sight. "And why should I obey you?" growled Zhurong, pulling slightly ahead with an eager gleam to his eyes. "Because you'll get a far better chance to enjoy some prey if you're not on the receiving end of their air defences," Jayce returned. A sigh escaped the Dragon and he fell back into line.

Jayce analysed the city – Ordo and Mai Lu had given him some basic information but it was wholly different to see it in person. Nolograd was divided by a central river and split into three districts of ringed walls: the Royalcity – holding the dark palace, the Uppercity – containing the nicer buildings, and the Lowercity – the slums of the medieval city. His eyes glanced across the manned walls, the searchlights and cannons, and then up to the swarms of bats circling like dark clouds. "Let's assemble down there," Jayce commanded, pointing to a small clearing within a larger nearby forest.

"Falconer, stay on the ground far out of sight. Try to maintain an eye on the city and keep us informed of what you see. The Dragons and Tempest will stay with you, you will engage in defensive support where you deem necessary. The rest of us will enter Nolograd in three groups. Bjorn, I'll need you in human form for this – sorry. Each group will find accommodation – there should be plenty of abandoned buildings in the Lowercity. Nolograd looks like it should have contained several hundred-thousand people at its peak - it looks a lot emptier now. The team leaders will then make their way to Matteo's."

"Leader A is Bjorn – his team's role will be getting civilians out when the fighting starts, we need to minimise collateral or it will be used against us by either group. Leader B is Astris – you're on Vampire hunting duties, your team will be on Strigon and the True Vampire with me. Leader C is Ordo – find the Grandfather, kill it, and then exterminate Alberta Armin. We'll only get one real shot at this

and the timing will be tight. If Strigon flees with the True Vampire then there's little chance we'll be able to get another chance at them. Caelie, you're up."

The crew organised themselves into their prearranged groups. Team A consisted of Bjorn, Jeanne, Falconer, Zeta, Red, Wren and the Dragons – with Bjorn, Jeanne and Zeta acting as a trio within the city, and Red waiting in the waters outside. Team B consisted of Astris, Morgana, Arthuria, Gaea and Caelie – with Caelie holding the Stacked Hand in its bottle, such that Gaea could remain in proximity to her, wherever they needed to be. Team C consisted of Ordo, Mai Lu, Thalia, Yuthura, RK and Marisha. Jayce was on his own – positioned to interfere wherever he felt he was needed, and also to give pressure where it was best suited. "Let's go," Jayce stated. Caelie opened up a pair of portals, her gaze locked far ahead towards an alleyway barely in sight. Bjorn and his partners stepped through. Caelie did the same twice more before stepping through with Jayce as a trio with Gaea. He looked up as he stepped through, the skies dark and a gentle rain falling down upon his face.

Subterfuge had never been the name of the game, that had been agreed amongst the entire command crew of the Stacked Hand as they had planned out their assault. It would have been foolish to believe they could hide for long within the heart of Strigon and Armin's domains, so they hadn't truly bothered. Darkness covered the city, despite it being the middle of the day, but their greatest cover were the other people walking around. The grim-faced locals keeping their distance from everyone else out of uncertainty. The people sticking to their routines as they headed to shops past hanging corpses or impaled bodies, picked clean by crows or cannibals. Everyone avoided the shadows, so the Rising Aces did too.

All three groups found empty buildings plentiful, most bore past tragedies but there was no time to look too closely at the empty cots, bloodstained sheets or scratch marks on the floors and walls. Instead, they simply set up camp and checked their maps before sending out their leaders. Ordo arrived first with Mai Lu in tow, knocking firmly and quickly on the door that had once sheltered them some months before. There was no answer, so he knocked harder – cracking the wood. The door opened, a ghost of a man staring up at them in shock, closely followed by immediate relief that faded into a broken expression of grief. "Come in."

The sharp stench of booze wafted through the air as he led them into the kitchen, immediately picking up a variety of bottles and clearing them from the main

table. "You're too late," Matteo said quietly, sitting down and hugging his head. "What?" Ordo questioned immediately, looking around for any signs of Matteo's wife or children. "Alina... she... You took too long, time was running out so she tried to negotiate, to--"

The door opened and Jayce, Bjorn and Astris stepped inside. A shuddering gasp escaped Matteo as he stood up and knocked aside the chair he was sat on, his finger pointing shakily at Astris. "Settle down," Ordo stated immediately, stepping in front of Astris and holding his hands up. "She's with us. She's a good one," he reassured, but Matteo shook his head. Footsteps descended the stairs quickly, Matteo's two children: Orianna and Lucinia rushing into the kitchen only to skid to a stop and scream as they saw Astris. Astris flinched as the children ran to their father, bursting into tears. "Don't take him! Papa don't go! Go away, monster!"

Astris looked down and turned to leave the room but Jayce grabbed her wrist, forcing her to stay and face the terrified family. "It's okay," she said as Jayce gently guided her forwards. "I'm- we're here to help you. To kill the monsters," she reassured gently, crouching down and locking eyes with the children. "Why do you have... that with you?" Matteo questioned to Ordo and Mai Lu. Ordo shook his head. "This one is worse, trust me," he stated, slapping Mai Lu's back. She glared at him. "Probably true. Astris is one of us, you must treat her as such," Mai Lu commanded before stepping aside for Jayce.

The family in front of him all looked up at him with wide eyes as he extended a hand towards Matteo. "I'm sorry we're late, but we're here now and we're going to end this, once and for all. Matteo, was it?" Jayce questioned. "Orianna, Lucinia?" he then added, as he nodded before the girls did the same. "Tell us what happened." Matteo straightened up, his young daughters still hanging off him. Mai Lu gestured for them to come to her as she reached into her bottomless bag and pulled out various snacks. Their eyes widened and they darted to her side. A gentle smile emerged from their father but it quickly fell away.

"Alina knew time was running out. She... went to ask for more time and to... save our girls. She managed to escape and make it home, but he came for her himself. Strigon – the Demon." Mai Lu scoffed quietly, but only the Rising Aces caught it. Astris cautiously approached the children as Jayce nudged her. They hid behind the somewhat less scary woman with red and pink eyes but soon peered around her as Astris offered her own collections of sweet snacks. Food swiftly won them over, but Matteo's eyes could hardly leave her.

"I failed to protect her. She's been gone... three weeks." Jayce glanced towards Ordo, their expressions grim and not hopeful. "I..." Matteo burst into heavy sobs before falling to his knees. Ordo rushed forwards, and quickly glanced back to Mai Lu and Astris before tilting his head up. "Come along girls, let's go upstairs – I think I have some more sweets," Astris guided, the girls hesitant but swiftly willing as Mai Lu scooped up the younger Lucinia and carried her quickly away. Jayce nodded appreciatively before turning his attention to the man before him.

"Did you manage to find anything out about the Grandfather whilst I was gone?" Ordo questioned. Matteo rocked slightly on the floor, holding his ears and shuddering. "The-the Grandfather? Yes-yes!" he stated, his eyes widening as looked up at Bjorn, Jayce and Ordo. "I asked around and I managed to get a contact: a C-cannibal in disguise, masquerading as a man. I'm certain he is – there's no doubt." Jayce met Bjorn's cautious expression.

"Are you sure?" Ordo asked gently. Matteo nodded, standing up and rushing to grab his coat. "Could you give us an introduction?" Jayce questioned. "No!" snapped Matteo. "I-I mean, no. I need to be certain. There is a sewer drain connected to the river, not far from here. Meet me there at nightfall. These creatures have been using the tunnels beneath the city – I'm sure of it. It's a maze but I know a way of getting you a map."

"Matteo, it's too dangerous – we can't ask you to do this for us," Jayce stated. Matteo turned and looked at Jayce. "Mr Exarga... I'm no fool, and I can see the expressions you and your crewmates hold in relation to Alina. She's lost... I know it. I will never find rest knowing that she has been turned or is currently food for that monster, please – find her – and put her to peace. I can't do anything for her, but I can do this for you – for my girls. The Vampires will be lethargic during this time. You may stand the best chance of locating her within that castle. I will prepare the entrance to the tunnels for you and your group and I will wait for you come nightfall. Please, do this for me." Jayce nodded, and Matteo departed without a further word.

Eventually Astris and Mai Lu descended the stairs, without the girls. "They're asleep. I get the feeling they haven't rested for quite some time. They had a lot of questions for me," Astris said, sitting down and rubbing her face. Jayce raised an eyebrow. "Such as?" he questioned, leaning forwards across the sink and peering out through the cracks between the planks boarding up the window. "They asked if someone who turned could be turned back. And... they asked if their mother could end up like me."

"Damn..." Ordo muttered, letting out a long sigh. "This is messy, Cap'. What's the plan?" he asked, looking towards Jayce. Jayce turned and looked towards Astris. "We have our roles, they haven't changed. Ordo – your group will go into the tunnels with Matteo. That thing must be down there somewhere. Astris and I will make our way to the Castle. We'll try to find Matteo's wife, maybe..." Jayce looked at Astris. "Maybe she can be saved – even if she has been turned." Astris hugged herself.

"Just the two of you?" Bjorn questioned. Jayce nodded, scratching the back of his head. "The Cannibals need to go first, and the people need to be led out of the city – otherwise it will be a slaughter. We'll put some pressure on Strigon to draw attention away from Ordo's group. The rest of that group need to be ready for the hell of a battle that will follow. Make your way back to your groups, hopefully we'll see each other on the other side."

Getting in was the easy part, but the castle turned out to be far larger than Jayce had initially perceived. Colossal corridors lined with red rugs and dark stone lay in dim lighting, broken up only by faint chandeliers creaking from chains on the high, gothic ceilings. Guards stood watch, mainly Null Legion – their eyes glowing red behind their gas masks, but Astris and Jayce found little issue darting along gargoyles watching over the hallways. "This is hopeless," Astris whispered, the pair of them observing guards below them. "How are we possibly going to find her without drawing attention to ourselves? She'll be in dungeons somewhere or maybe locked in a guest room and this palace is massive." Jayce couldn't help but agree, one wrong turn or glance and they would immediately be spotted. "Maybe sneaking isn't the right approach?" Jayce suggested. Astris looked at him with an expression of disapproval.

They dropped from the gargoyles with extreme prejudice, the pair of them splattering the guards beneath them before striking hard and fast with silver blades. The Null Legionnaires broke apart into the dust, leaving their uniforms behind. "Come on," Astris stated, as Jayce pondered putting one on, grabbing his arm and pulling towards a pair of giant red and gold doors. They creaked as they opened, slamming shut behind with a heavy bang. "Shit," Astris muttered, looking at a colossal and dark bat-like creature hanging upside down from the middle of the throne room ceiling. "Well, we've located the True Vampire," Jayce stated, as the creature began to unfurl itself before locking its huge eyes upon them. "That you have," came a low voice from the throne, some thirty metres ahead of them. Strigon glared at them, but bore a wide smile. A quartet of Vampires dressed in opulent clothes stood in pairs either side of him, the left-

most of which was an ogre. "Now, I have to question: why did you come back to my kingdom – after I so graciously let your people leave last time?"

"Dammit!" Jayce uttered, reaching for his communicator as all five Vampires apparated in front of him with intent to kill.

Seize the Seas Tales: Little Faith

Mai Lu and Ordo glanced towards the clouds as they walked. It was still a while to sundown and until they were due to meet Matteo, but both of them felt unusually impatient. "It's a trap, right?" Mai Lu eventually questioned. Ordo looked at her and raised an eyebrow. "His nails, and skin... he looked off," she reinforced. "I didn't notice. His wife's been taken and it's not exactly a safe environment for him or his kids. I doubt that he's going to betray us – he's not that kind of person." Mai Lu walked on in silence. "You doubt him that much?" Ordo eventually pressed. "No, but... in order to get in with a group of creatures that are willing and wanting to eat you... you see my point?" she questioned. Ordo did, as much as he didn't like that he did. "I hope that you're wrong, but I doubt it. If he's had to... indulge, maybe it's not too late to save him. We can try, that's the least we can do."