

Chapter 240: Kicking a God in the Teeth

Astris leapt backwards, drawing her pistols and immediately opening fire as Jayce merged Sola and Luna into a heavy tower shield. All five Vampires raked their claws against his shield before recoiling as they impacted silver, Jayce took this moment to charge forwards, slamming into Strigon and sending him stumbling backwards. Sola and Luna melted apart before reforming into a pair of silver longswords. A silver-haired Vampire General took an explosive silver bullet to the ankle, her leg detonating in an instant before her life was ended with a flourish from Jayce as he decapitated her. Her head sailed off her body before burning away into ash.

Jayce rolled to the side as the Ogre Vampire slashed downwards with its claws towards him, the impact hitting the floor and cracking the ground. It then burst apart into a swarm of bats, apparating next to Jayce and striking again before repeating the process half a dozen times over as Jayce continuing to dash and roll to avoid the colossal strikes. The other two Vampire Generals rushed towards Astris, the trio vanishing and reappearing across the colossal throne room in splashes of red mist and swarms of black bats as they tried to clear the distance between them and Astris whilst she tried to blow them apart with her hand cannons.

Strigon backed off, the True Vampire continuing to hang off the ceiling as it watched the combat between the Generals and Astris and Jayce. "You were given courtesy, Exarga!" Strigon yelled, watching the Ogre General hound Jayce across the room as it kept up a relentless assault and forced him onto his backfoot to avoid it. "That family your people befriended were spared, my bride-to-be given clemency for her betrayal of her own nation! And still you came back, ever-willing to throw the lives of those beneath us to your causes!"

"Astris, come back to us!" commanded the True Vampire, the creature's screeching and gargling voice piercing into Astris' head. A claw dug into her body armour, raking down the middle of her chest and drawing blood. Astris fired off a shot – the bullet impacting the Ogre in the rear of his shoulder before detonating. The pain and hole left behind in the General's flesh gave Jayce a chance to dart towards it. He twisted, slicing in a whirlwind of rapid strikes upwards across the large creature's legs, waist, and then arm, but missing the final blow on its head as it guarded its head, roaring in pain from his counter-attacks. "Switch!" Jayce yelled, leaping towards Astris' vague direction.

"You'll find no help here, not anymore!" Strigon gloated. "She's mine! My bride! My beauty!" Astris apparated next to Jayce, the two Generals on her following her but backing off as Jayce swung through where Astris was with a silver greatsword. She vaulted over it, twisting in the air and firing her pistols until they ran out of bullets into the confused Ogre. Large holes decorated his body before the back of his head was blown out with a finishing shot. "And you!" Strigon growled, appearing in front of Astris in an instant – his red eyes staring wildly with fury into hers.

He swung, severing her flesh down the bone on her left arm as she blocked the impact before being sent flying into Jayce – the pair of them tumbling across the floor. Strigon stood ahead of them as they looked up towards him, his nails unnerving long and glinting with blood. Astris tried to stand, only to collapse back down as blood spurted from her stomach. The wounds would heal, but not immediately. With a room shaking crash, the True Vampire dropped to the ground, raising up to its full height behind Strigon as his two surviving Generals apparated next to him, both now wearing fanged metal helmets that exposed their mouths. Their clothes looked different, their waistcoats covering dark body armour and long coats likely hiding more armour underneath. They had taken the reprieve to gear up, and Jayce had no doubt this fight was not something he or Astris could win on their own. "Ammo count?" Jayce questioned, getting in front of Astris. "In abundance, but not on my body," she answered – the various ammo clips across her clothing now or almost empty. "Clear the way out, I'll follow and play defence."

Astris did not need a second command. She would die by Jayce; she would die by her Captain, and she was, and would always be, his soldier. Astris groaned as she rolled to her feet, keeping her injured arm to her stomach to keep the insides from falling out as the skin and muscle knitted back together. She tucked her other pistol into its holster, releasing a grenade from a concealed pocket in her coat and tossing it at the door. There was no timer, it detonated on impact – blowing open the door blocking their way. "End them! End them now!" screeched the True Vampire, flapping its wings and lifting into the air with several heavy waves of wind. Strigon and the two Vampires descended upon Jayce, but he transformed Sola into a small metal shield and Luna into a silver spear. With a flurry of rapid strikes and thrusts he held them back just long enough to catch the sound of gunfire behind him as Astris cleared the way out. He then let out a roar, unleashing a blast of concentrated Panic that dropped both Vampire Generals to their knees – their eyes rolling back and jaws slack. Strigon

staggered, but rather than go for a strike, Jayce darted away – the True Vampire diving at him before crashing through what remained of the throne room doors.

“Exarga!” Strigon screamed, hounding after Jayce as they dashed through the remains of Astris’ escape. “You destroyed everything I had! Took my home away from me!” Strigon cried after him, flying through the air with his black clothes turning into wings as he flew with his mouth snapping at Jayce’s back. “Jayce!” Astris yelled, waiting for him on the other side of the main entrance with her gun aimed upwards, heavy rain pouring down upon her. “Next time, don’t mess with the Marines!” Jayce returned, dropping into a slide as his feet hit stone. Astris fired, breaking the chain holding up the portcullis and dropping it down just behind Jayce’s head as he slid underneath it. Strigon slammed hard into it, bending the metal. “Kai!” he roared, apparating through it as he transformed into a cloud of bats that squirmed through the metal – but the impact had given Jayce and Astris a gap, one he couldn’t make up as he helplessly watched them dart away into Nolograd.

“Ordo come in,” Jayce attempted, as he and Astris got their breath back in an alleyway. Static came back. “That’s a problem,” Astris stated obviously. Jayce glanced towards her pained and wet face before matching her forced smile. He stepped towards her and gently pulled her head into his chest in a one-armed hug. “You fought well,” he reassured her, before releasing her and looking at the rainclouds and setting sun. “They’re blocking us somehow, and Strigon knew we were coming and who we were going to meet. This all stinks,” she stated, grimacing as her final wounds closed. “That it does, but I don’t think Matteo has betrayed us. He’s got too much to lose to not help us. His wife is gone – Strigon practically boasted it to us. But he still has his kids and they have no future if this continues.”

The air rumbled above them, Astris darting into Jayce and pressing him flat against the wall as a huge creature flew over them – following by an endless chorus of chirps, squeaks and trills as the colossal swarms of bats patrolling the skies dropped down and flew overhead. Jayce looked down as Astris pressed herself into him, her ear to his chest. He could feel her breathing as she pinned him, her own heart thumping against him. She eventually pulled back, turning away and drawing her pistols. “We need to get inside and hunker down; we’ll have to find a way to alert the others that the plan has gone wrong. Falconer will know things have changed – that will show him,” she stated, gesturing upwards to the True Vampire circling above the city. “It’s up to you, Jayce – we know where Ordo and the others are going. What’s our plan?” she asked. Jayce looked

at the blood being washed off her by the rain and the determined expression on her face. "Let's regroup with our team. We'll go from there," he stated. She nodded. "Aye, Captain."

Bjorn's stomach churned inside him as he peered out of the window of the abandoned house he and his team were hiding in. The skies had opened up, but the darkness of the night had snuffed out what few pieces of daylight had slipped through the artificial cloud cover. Rain fell and it fell hard, the shadow broken briefly by the roars of thunder from the approaching storm. Screams pierced the early night as ghoulish Vampire Spawn tore apart boarded windows and barricaded doors, surging inside before dragging out the occupants into the streets. A more refined Vampire led each mob, walking like an executioner amongst the rows of civilians that had been torn from their homes. "Exarga!" screamed the lead Vampire. "This is on you! You did this! Come out! Come out!"

Bjorn twitched as he watched, knowing there was nothing he could do – even if he and his team gave themselves up. The Vampire leader nodded, the Spawn diving upon the people like animals and tearing them apart. He knew this was occurring all over the city. The roof rumbled above them, the True Vampire flying low over them – its swarms trailing after it. "No sighting on any Cannibals yet," Zeta muttered, sitting on the floor with her face on her knees.

"No, they're here," Jeanne said with quiet fury, glancing through the cracks of a different window. The squad of Vampires had departed, leaving their kills behind, but emerging from sewer grates and dark alleyways hobbled the white-grey hunchback Cannibals to drag away the carcasses. Both Zeta and Jeanne turned to Bjorn, his entire body tensed and his teeth grinding inside his clenched jaw. His form flashed green and the bear emerged. "Ordo and the others have their job," he stated, glancing up to the swarm of bats surrounding the True Vampire. "We have ours."

Ordo looked at Mai Lu, his caution obvious but emotions concealed, as he and the rest of his team approached the sewer drain by the river. It had taken them longer than they would have liked, and hadn't been clean as they assassinated their way through the city and avoided the patrolling colossal bat, but they had made it and Matteo was nowhere to be seen. "We're late, but..." Marisha muttered, glancing nervously around. The grate rattled and then fell open, causing all of them to jump. "I was getting worried," Matteo said quietly, holding up a lantern as he stood slightly hunched over. "This way, quickly," he told them,

turning and hurrying forwards. Ordo stepped in first, with Thalia close behind him. Marisha put the grate back behind them.

He led them through the sewers, the tunnel dark and filthy, but it wasn't long until he pointed to a more natural formation – a smaller side passageway that had been carved, or perhaps had already existed. "Stay close, and stay quiet – it's easy to get lost here," Matteo warned. Marisha faltered, but Mai Lu pulled her along – giving a silent glance that told her she felt the same way. Marisha reached for her communicator, attempting to make contact with the others once more. "Still nothing," she told Ordo. He simply nodded and kept marching forwards.

Marisha eyed the walls of the tunnel, fingernails and scratch marks lay mixed within the stone – either from prisoners attempting to resist their fates, or from Cannibals digging the route, she wasn't sure. But eventually the tunnel widened up into a low but open room, lit by torches made from human bones and oil-covered skulls. The stench was immediate and unbearable. "Ugh," Marisha groaned, but she didn't have time to stop.

"The tunnels go deep, but rise back up. The Grandfather is far within," Matteo warned, the group passing by empty cells made of bones. "We'll have to cut across the ravines in order to avoid the main dens, but from there it should be a straight pass through the larder to the monster's home." Marisha stopped, the others also doing so once they realised she had. "How do you know all of this?" she questioned, looking towards Yuthura for another voice of reason. "I... I've done unspeakable things in order to get this information... I did what I had to for you, and for my girls. For Alina. Your Captain and Astris will get her back. They will be fine without me. Please, follow me – let us not waste this chance."

They darted through passageway after passageway, sometimes pausing to allow a group of the hunchbacked monsters to hobble past, sometimes letting Ordo and Thalia crush them in an instant with their large weapons. Matteo hobbled onwards, his hunch a bit more noticeable with each step, but Ordo did not falter – his gaze locked firmly ahead. "Oh gods," muttered Yuthura, as they entered a large open cavern, a crisscross of thin stone paths laden atop huge stalagmites marking their path onwards. "Over there leads to the larder," Matteo informed, pointing to a passageway on the other side of the large ravine lit by more human torches. Yuthura glanced towards Ordo. "I can carry you," he offered. She shook her head, instead prodding Mai Lu with her cane. "Fine," Mai Lu stated, slitting her wrist with her nails and creating a more stable path for them.

“Traitor!” gargled a voice from a passageway to the side. The creature then let out a loud warbling cry and almost immediately drums began to echo throughout the tunnels. “Run!” Matteo yelled, darting forwards onto Mai Lu’s pathway with the others following after him. Ordo grabbed Yuthura and carried her, a swarm of the creatures bubbling out of the smaller passageways all around them and beginning to bound across the paths using their hands and feet.

Yuthura aimed her crossbow over Ordo’s shoulder and impaled a Cannibal between the eyes. It screeched as it scrabbled for the syringe, before, in a rather gruesome display, its skin began to melt away – the others around it all recoiling in horror as its organs fell loose from its body. Mai Lu threw shard after shard of blood-crystal at the monsters, impaling multiple at a time before detonating them from within in chain reactions. Thalia surged ahead whilst Marisha impaled any of the monsters that drew close to the group as they continued forwards. Matteo landed next to Thalia, beckoning the others forwards as the swarm continued after them. “Hurry!” he cried. Mai Lu glanced backwards to see Cannibals using her path. “Oh no you don’t!” she yelled, the pathway shattering behind her and the creatures falling screeching into the void.

She leapt free of her path to stable ground. “Thalia!” Marisha quickly yelled. “Go back to the hell you came from!” Thalia yelled, slamming her anchor into the nearest stalagmite. It toppled, crashing into another which fell into another and another in a wave of dominoes. The pathways shattered and the swarm fell gargling down into the ravine. “Move!” Ordo commanded, putting Yuthura down and surging forwards into the nearest passageway.

They ran through kitchens laden with slabs and cuts of meat, before passing by racks hung with skinned and beheaded humans. It was gruesome and nauseating, but they charged forwards - Ordo slamming aside anything in his way with his greatclub. “Help me!” cried a voice, the entire group faltering in their charge. Marisha turned to the side and threw up, unable to hold it in any longer. A row of wooden racks stood mounted to the walls. People were impaled to them – their bodies cut open and buckets beneath them as they slowly drained of blood. There were pens nearby, a small gaggle of children inside – their eyes glazed over and mouths slightly open with empty troughs and water inside with them. “Doc,” Marisha coughed, Yuthura immediately moving towards the children.

“No!” yelled Mai Lu, erecting a blood-crystal barrier in front of the pen. Yuthura turned towards her with a look more of curiosity than of anger. “We can’t,” Mai

Lu stated immediately. "We can't just leave them!" Marisha countered, slowly approaching the last survivor on the bleeding racks. Thalia swung fast and hard with her anchor, severing the survivors head. "She's right. Jayce gave orders for this exact situation," Thalia stated. "He was dead already and we wouldn't have been able to get him out. And those... pets..."

"They're children!" Marisha protested. Yuthura looked at the pen of kids, Mai Lu breaking apart the wall for her to look more properly. "Food," mumbled a child, his mouth opening as closing as if expecting feeding as he looked up towards Yuthura. "There's no telling how long they've been here. And we cannot protect them," Mai Lu stated adamantly. Marisha couldn't look away from the chubby children. "Marisha... Yuthura... they're right," Ordo stated firmly, looking away. "Doc... can you...?" he asked quietly.

Marisha turned away, as Yuthura let out a soft exhale. "I'm sorry," she said quietly, before tossing a vial into the chamber. "Close it," she asked Mai Lu – who erected another barrier and sealed the quickly spreading gas in. It was over almost immediately a cold silence passing through the group, broken only by the crackling of the flame torches nearby. "We end this, for them," Thalia said towards Marisha, a gentle and unusually caring hand landing on her shoulder. Marisha nodded, steeling herself as the group continued forwards.

They darted down a curved tunnel, the passageway opening up into a colossal chamber held up by five huge stone pillars. It was dark, the only light in the room stemming down from a huge metal grate above the chamber. A flash of lightning came from above – a steady flow of rain dropping down from above. Marisha tilted her head, the vague outline of a castle above them. "We're underneath Strigon's castle," she stated, before lowering her attention back to the room they were in. "Where is it?" Mai Lu questioned; the room otherwise empty apart from a huge mound of grey rock in the middle. Matteo shuddered, slowly backing up towards the passageway they had come from, his finger raising up towards the giant bolder.

The mound slowly rocked forwards, before a long pair of arms and legs extended from it. "Gods above..." Ordo muttered, as the creature reared up – its bumpy spine taugt against its skin. It was at least five times Thalia's height. "By me," muttered Baal, emerging from within Mai Lu. The creature turned, its skin slimy and grey and taugt against its bony body. Its body was almost entirely mouth, its eyes bulbous and bloodshot – both of them looking around independently before settling on the group before it. Tufts of fur extended down from its chin

and up from its protruding forehead, making it look almost mask-like. With a loud pop, its jaw unhinged releasing a vile stench of rotting flesh that could be smelt even from metres away. It then let out a warbling gargle that echoed throughout the countless passageways all around the chamber. "From behind!" Matteo cried, as more warbles came from the passageways as Cannibals came to aid their Grandfather.

There were no words, no goading or conversation – the monster bounded forwards before charging at the group. "RK!" Ordo yelled, tossing out the rokken. RK slammed into the far larger monster, knocking it aside into one of the stone pillars that promptly crumbled. "You handle that thing!" Marisha yelled, turning towards the tunnel they had come from as countless of the boulder-like monsters darted out into the Grandfather's lair. "We've got the little fuckers!" she yelled, darting forwards with her spear as Baal threw spears of blood.

Matteo cowered next to Yuthura, but as one of the small Cannibals slipped past Marisha towards her, he immediately stabbed a small kitchen blade into its eye. It screeched in pain as it backed away before a dart of blood-crystal finished it off. "Stay close, your daughters need you still!" Yuthura told him, firing off a dart toward a tunnel. The dart exploded in a ball of fire, sending the Cannibals caught within into a screaming panic.

"Mages!" Marisha warned, a ball of black fire flying past her. Baal nodded, flicking droplets of Mai Lu's blood onto the array of corpses in front of him before they erupted into red slurry. "They don't know what magic truly is!" Baal cackled, rivers of sharp blood consuming the Cannibal Mages – their cries ending swiftly as they were cut open from the inside out. Marisha thrust her spear through a neat line of Cannibals, her gaze glancing back and up towards the palace above them and the seemingly invulnerable Grandfather tanking strike after strike from Ordo, RK and even Thalia. "It's having no effect!" Marisha yelled their way. Another pillar collapsed, a heavy chunk of rock sending the Grandfather staggering backwards clutching its head. "We've noticed!" Ordo yelled back.

"The pillars!" Marisha yelled. "Bring the castle down on it!" RK let out a grumbling cry as he was picked up and thrown – the moving mountain not used to being thrown around. "What about us?" Yuthura questioned, firing a dart into the Grandfather – only for it to bounce harmlessly off its hide, unable to pierce its skin. "We can get out through the dens!" Matteo yelled out. "Probably everything that was in there is now in here!"

“Do it!” Ordo yelled, summoning RK back into his orb – the rokken letting out an angry grumble. “Matteo!” he then yelled, as he and Thalia slammed their weapons into two of the nearest pillars. “This way!” Matteo yelled, he and Yuthura running forwards towards one of the side tunnels. The Grandfather faltered as a rock bounced off its head, he looked towards the final pillar – his eyes widening before he let out a warble that sounded distinctively like a cry for help. “Bring it down! It’s calling for help!” Marisha yelled, as she and Baal dashed for the exit. Thalia threw her anchor, shattering the last pillar, before pulling it back to her hand and rushing to the exit. She and Ordo paused, shattering the skulls of the cannibals coming towards them as they looked up and watched as large cracks spread across the ceiling. The large grate fell down, the Grandfather letting out a screech as it splattered him to the floor. A black ooze flowed out of the cuts in its body, but the creature was still alive. It screeched, threatening to burst Thalia and Ordo’s ears, but then the ceiling gave way – the entire castle above lurching and beginning to topple down into the vast cavern beneath it.

The monster screamed as Strigon’s castle crumbled down on top of it, Thalia and Ordo not staying to get crushed with it as they raced through the tunnels after their group, cracks continuing to spread after them as the tunnels began to collapse too, squishing the Cannibals emerging from every hole and den in the walls. Dying warbles and screeches rang out around them as they ran, a wall of dust and debris lapping at their heels as they followed after Matteo and the others.

“There!” Matteo cried, another sewer grate ahead of them leading out towards a slope heading down towards the river. Marisha surged ahead of him and slammed her body into it with full force. The others dashed out after her, moving swiftly to the side as Thalia and Ordo dove through – a huge blast of dust and debris following them as they rolled and slide down the slope. They lay at the bottom for a moment, catching their breath before bumping knuckles. “We did it?” Marisha questioned to them, as Mai Lu reemerged. Ordo let out a groan as he stood up, slowly clambering back up the slope to look into the collapsed tunnel. A pale hand stuck out from the rubble, twitching slightly. “Too close,” he muttered, turning to the others with a grin.

Seize the Seas Tales: Mother and Daughters – reunited

Fighting was audible across the city of Nolograd, broken up only briefly by the torrential rain and the booms of thunder, but Orianna and Lucinia lay tucked up in their bed – cradling each other in isolation. “Where’s Papa?” Lucinia asked her older sister. “He’ll... he’ll be home soon. He’s with Mai Lu, and Astris! Keeping

them safe!" she told Lucinia. The younger girl held her sister tightly. "It'll be okay. They'll save us. Astris will save us, and Mama too."

A flash of lightning illuminated the dark room through the cracks in the boarded windows. It illuminated a woman stood in the doorway of the girl's bedroom. A woman dressed in blood-stained white, with two holes in her neck. Her pointed ears twitched slightly, her nails long and cracked, her fangs peering over her bottom lip. Her soulless red eyes lay on the girls beneath their sheets, their heartbeats thundering in her ears, and arteries glowing in her eyes.

Screams filled the air, but no one was there to hear them.