

### **Chapter 241: Protecting the Innocent**

Falconer knelt in the mud – rain dripping down his head, as he watched the city of Nolograd with the Dragons, Wren and Tempest waiting for his command. Already the plan seemed to have changed: the True Vampire was prowling the skies – the Dragons particularly eager to hunt it – and silence had fallen across the communicators. Jayce had trusted him; they all had trusted him – as they always did – to be their eyes, but he didn't know what he needed to be seeing.

A rumble echoed across the city, but not from the thunderstorm above it. Strigon's castle lurched and then broke apart, imploding as it was pulled into the ground as if falling into some large hole. "I would presume that to be a signal," Tempest uttered behind Falconer. Falconer glanced back, a soft grin spreading on his face. "I think you are correct." He stood up, his bow snapping outwards from his large wooden arm. "This should do," Tempest stated, handing him a large luminescent arrow. "Thank you." Falconer set the ballista-bolt sized arrow into his bow, pulling back with all his might as he took aim towards the centre of the city. "Dragons!" Falconer called out, letting the arrow fly. "Engage!"

Red looked up from the river as a glowing green line arched through the sky and towards the city. "About time!" he yelled beneath the water, darting forwards beneath the surface before leaping out of the river and throwing the backpack he had been given at the base of the city wall. "What's that?" yelled out a Null Legionnaire from atop the wall, a searchlight panning towards Red. In an act of mimicry, he put his hand to his fingers to his temple and nodded to the guards. "At the wall! It's-" A lightning-charged arrow struck the backpack, detonating the charges within in a colossal ball of fire. Red dove into the water, the flames rolling over him. He then turned his attention to the metal grates blocking the water before easily tearing them open and swimming into the city. "My turn."

A glowing green arrow flew over Ordo's head, the group grinning as their efforts were acknowledged. "Now's the hard part," Ordo stated turning to the others. "Doc, Marisha-" Matteo let out a scream of agony, dropping to his knees and holding his stomach. "Help me!" he cried, thrashing on the floor – his insides visibly moving as he lifted his shirt. "His touch, I can feel him!" Matteo screamed. "Kill me! Please!" No one moved, as he screamed and squirmed – their thoughts all uniform: he had helped them, and his kids were still waiting for him. "There must be something we can do!" Marisha cried. "Doc?" Yuthura looked at him with a mortified expression. "I-I... I don't know what I can do. This isn't... this isn't something I can fix."

"Please, I'm turning! Don't let me become one of them! Please!" Matteo begged. Ordo stepped forward, raised his greatclub and struck once. The thrashing stopped, and a steady stream of Matteo's blood flowed down the slope towards the river. Ordo then stuck his weapon into the concrete before rubbing his face with both hands. "Fuck this!" he yelled into his hands, before lowering them and pointing up at the swarm of bats surrounding the True Vampire. "Fuck you!" His hairs stood on end and he turned, pointing his finger to a crouched animal sat on a broken street lantern hidden in the shadow of the night. "And fuck you!" he yelled at Alberta Armin, her jaw unhinged and unnaturally wide, her thin dripping strands of hair hanging down from her raw scalp and her eyes almost entirely pupil as she watched the group.

Everyone other than Yuthura and Marisha both froze in place, their eyes wide in terror as the Cannibal Betrayer stared down at them with utter hatred and ferocity. "What have you done?" came a high-pitched screech from the monster above them. "Go to hell!" Ordo yelled, grabbing his greatclub. In a flash of lightning she vanished, standing unnervingly tall behind Ordo. She was taller than all of them, her hunchback gone and her entire form stretched. Her skin was bluish-grey, pale, slimy – and almost see-through, her entire musculature tauged against her skin and a dark spiderweb of veins across her gangly body. Her mouth gaped open ready to chomp cleanly into the back of Ordo's head, but Thalia swung fast and swung hard with her fist – sending the Betrayer flying across the river before crashing into the stone on the other side. "Wake up!" Thalia yelled. "Doc, Marisha – get out of here!" Marisha grabbed Yuthura and ran fast.

"You-you shouldn't have-have done that" came Alberta's screeching voice, as she peeled herself free from the broken stone, each word like metal on glass. Thalia grabbed her anchor, Ordo and Mai Lu took defensive stances. "We need to move," Mai Lu stated, a loud roar coming from above – before a colossal lightning-bolt-fuelled Dragon crashed straight through the swarm of bats above them, followed by bright streams of fire. "Agreed," stated Ordo, taking out RK's orb. Alberta dove towards them and Ordo slammed the orb down. She crashed straight into the RK, the trio taking the briefest moment to leap away – Thalia and Ordo using Focus and Mai Lu launching herself upwards aboard a pillar of blood-crystal. Alberta screamed, pushing off RK in pursuit of the meat after biting a chunk out of the roken.

"Jayce, Matteo is dead!" Marisha yelled into her communicator, as she and Yuthura ran through the streets of the city, following the glowing green line in

the sky towards Falconer and the exit. "The Grandfather is down!" she swiftly added. "I repeat, the Grandfather is down! Ordo and the others have engaged Alberta Armin. Once more, the Grandfather is down, Ordo has engaged the Cannibal Betrayer!"

Astris stared wide-eyed at Jayce. "Matteo is dead?" she questioned. "Strigon knows about the family!" she quickly remembered. "Is anyone with the girls?" "Go!" Jayce told her, cutting a bloody swath across the rooftops as Vampires and bats descended upon him and his group. Astris dashed away into the night. "Bjorn, status?" Jayce questioned, as the rooftop he was stood on came alive with huge thorny branches and began to eviscerate the Vampire Spawn around him.

Bjorn snapped the Null Legionnaire in his grip across his knee. Body armour didn't matter – the Vampire inside died almost instantly, disintegrating into dust. "The path is nearly clear! We're leading the survivors out!" Bjorn returned into his communicator. "I take it the castle was your doing?" he questioned. A chuckle came back. "Nope, all Ordo's team. I have to assume it's why we have comms back." Bjorn didn't care who had restored communications, he was just glad to have them back. "Send Caelie and Gaea to us!" Bjorn requested. A few moments later a glowing portal appeared on a nearby rooftop. "Jeanne! Go!" he then commanded. "Sending the Elder, smite them, Captain! Send these bastards back to hell!"

"Orianna? Lucinia?" Astris questioned, slowly creeping into the home of the family that helped them – the front door ajar. "It's Astris! Come out, I'm getting you out of here!" she called out, both pistols in her hands as she edged forwards and cleared the kitchen. It was quiet, the noise outside overwhelming in comparison to the emptiness within. Astris approached the stairs, sharply turning and aiming her guns upwards as she slowly and steadily began to climb. Astris held her tongue, something was wrong. Very wrong.

The floorboards creaked as she slowly stepped onto the landing before gently nudged open Matteo's bedroom door. She stepped inside, scanning the corners and ceiling. It was empty other than a lone portrait laid out on the left side of the bed: it showed a painted image of Alina. Astris stepped out of the room, heading forwards past the bathroom towards the girls' bedroom. "Girls?" she questioned, pushing open the door. Her eyes landed on a blood splatter on the floor, before another on the walls. She pushed the door open fully, raising her pistols – her heart hammered in her chest as she spotted two figures on the floor: both of the girls.

"Gods, no," she muttered, stepping forwards only for someone to tackle her from behind. She went down, a woman in a bloody wedding dress on top of her. "Alina?" Astris realised, pushing back Alina's torso with her legs and holding back the woman's long nails by gripping her wrists. She snarled, snapping at Astris, her skin pale – eyes bright red. "Wake up! Snap out of it!" Astris yelled at her. "They're your girls! Your children! They need you; Matteo is gone! Don't make me do it!"

Astris' grip on Alina's wrist slipped, a clawed hand scratching Astris' face. Alina lunged, but Astris grabbed her pistol and fired – the woman erupting into dust. "Godsdammit!" Astris yelled, spitting dust and rolling to her feet. "Why?" she cried, gripping her scalp and pulling her hair. Astris looked at her hands, blood covered them – blood from Alina. She looked at the girls – they both had bite marks on their necks, but neither of them bore any distinct injuries – their lips were slick with blood. Astris' eyes widened. "Fuck-fuck-fuck! She's turning them!" she realised, noticing that both girls were still breathing, but their heartbeats were unusually slow. "No-no-no!" she yelled, the girls turning pale and their ears turning pointy. Astris drew her pistol, pointing it at Orianna before freezing. Both their parents were gone – they had no one, and now they didn't even have their humanity, they would become mindless Spawn. Astris sat back on her knees, her mind racing. "I'm sorry," she told them, taking out her knife and cutting her arms before feeding them her blood.

The True Vampire screeched as it plummeted from the sky, its fur burning and body charred from several bolts of lightning. "Feast! Feast! Feast!" roared Zhurong, the crimson Dragon scooping up swarms of bats and Vampires into his mouth as he thrashed through the swarm desperately defending the True Vampire. "Stop being so reckless!" cried out Soteria, the smaller Dragon doing her best to protect her companions from the endless swarms. Taranis bellowed with laughter as he flew up into the storm above, channelling the lightning once again into his body before unleashing a fury of lightning bolts to his foes. "Idiots!" Soteria mumbled, a swarm coming towards her before getting caught in a large bubble of her shields. The bubble swiftly contracted, the countless bodies inside thrashing in a panic before bursting as they were crushed. The mass then fell down towards the city beneath.

A sickening squelch landed ahead of Ordo as he darted through the streets, avoiding the maw of Alberta Armin as she bit through everything in her way – whether fleeing civilian, lost Vampire, streetlamp or even surviving Cannibal. The battle felt too one-sided: she was immensely quick and even attempting to

block her blows felt too dangerous with her willingness to scratch, kick and bite. They needed to slow her down, or to accept that this fight was going to hurt – and hurt bad. A bellowing laughter came from above, lightning bolts raining down on the ground around him. “Taranis!” Ordo yelled, leaping upwards and dashing through the air towards his Dragon with Alberta still on his heels.

The Dragon dove down as Ordo rose up. He slammed into Alberta, his contact causing every hair across her body to stand up. “I’ve never eaten Dragon!” Alberta cackled, biting, and biting hard, into the Dragon. He thrashed in the air, roaring in pain as he attempted to throw her off. “By the thunder of the heavens, bring down the strike of divinity upon my enemies!” Thalia chanted, dropping down from the clouds with a funnel of lightning coursing through her. She struck Alberta, knocking her loose from Taranis. “Nasty creature!” Taranis complained, flapping away from her and taking a somewhat defensive position behind Thalia and Ordo as they stood in the air using their Focus.

Ordo glanced down; the streets full of blood were flowing towards a singular house. “We hold her here, now!” Ordo told Thalia and Taranis. Thalia grinned. “I’m not going anywhere!” she roared, lightning sparking off her and Taranis. “I will shit you out, and turn your bones into a broth!” Alberta screamed, surging forwards. Blue-black scales rippled across Ordo’s arms and legs, a pair of large wings emerging from his back as his eyes turned reptilian blue. “For Matteo!” he yelled.

“Exarga!” screamed Strigon, storming through the streets with a small army of Vampires dressed in opulent clothes either side of him. More and more Vampires seemed to emerging from seemingly nowhere, some wearing clothes he didn’t recognise and bearing insignia that clearly belonged to other cities and maybe even nations. “He’s bringing in everyone, from everywhere!” Jayce yelled out, Jeanne and the two sisters fighting around him. “This is our stand!” he declared, watching Soteria and Zhurong continue to harass the True Vampire above, whilst Thalia, Ordo and Taranis engaged with, what he guessed had to be, Alberta Armin.

A loud cry pierced the sky, a glowing arrow impaling the ground next to Strigon before erupting into huge spiky vines that grabbed the nearest Vampires and tore them apart. A figure slid next to Jayce, held aloft by his headtails. “This is a mighty battle that shall be told for generations!” laughed Red, a large silver trident in his hands. “Captain, it would be advisable not to stand in anything conductive,” came Tempest’s voice through his communicator. Jayce shook his

head as Strigon charged at him with an untempered hatred. The world seemed to slow as his crew fought around him, desperate to bring an end to the monsters that had laid claim to this land for so long.

Jayce dashed forwards, channelling the flow of the world's mana through him. He struck hard and struck fast as he engaged Strigon, unleashing waves upon waves of his emotions into every strike of his two silver swords. Electricity danced across the streets as Tempest acted like a living plasma ball. Jeanne slammed her banner down, her golden light disintegrating every Vampire Spawn that came close whilst blinding all but Strigon and his Generals, both the two survivors and the ones that had been summoned from across Arcastalum. Arthuria drew Caliburn, a golden halo swirling above her helmet and a pair of divine angelic wings spreading out across her back. Like light itself she struck hard and fast, moving impossible fast as she took on Strigon's remaining Generals – cutting swathes of golden flame with her flaming sword and unleashing bright and intense bursts of radiance as she chanted rapidly and precisely. Red swam through the wet streets, engaging in close combat as if he fighting underwater. It seemed as if gravity itself didn't affect him as he twisted and manoeuvred through the air, striking with his tipped headtails in rapid strikes before delivering final blows with his trident.

In the midst of it all, Strigon and Jayce battled one another – the Vampire deflecting Jayce's silver swords with his nails, the claws regenerating just in time to defend against the following blow. Any Vampire that rushed forward to aid its master ended up eviscerated, caught within the maelstrom of the two Betrayers battling with pure intension to kill. Strigon roared, unleashing a detonation of blood as he yanked a General towards him before turning him into a living bomb that forced Jayce back.

Jayce groaned as he lay on the floor, but in an instant an arm scooped him up as Morgana flew by him. She force-fed him a healing potion before releasing him back down towards the streets as Strigon ran scared. "He's broken!" she yelled. "Get him, Captain!" Jayce shook himself off as he landed, a splattering of red mist appearing next to him as Astris apparated onto the battlefield, but - most curiously – two more splatterings of red mist followed her. "I'll explain later," she answered quickly, as Orianna and Lucinia both stood behind her – their ears pointy, and irises blood-red, each of them held a pistol in their hands. "Remember what I said," Astris told them, the girls immediately apparating away to a rooftop and beginning to provide supporting fire. Jayce met Astris'

gaze, raising an eyebrow. "Later!" she protested. "We can't let Strigon and the True Vampire get away!"

She was certainly not wrong on that. "Change target! All Vampire killers, target the True Vampire!" Jayce commanded, all Rising Aces within the vicinity looking up to the giant bat with intention to kill. Astris took out her backup pistols and nodded to Jayce, before she, Jeanne, Arthuria and Jayce propelled themselves up into the air. "Leave me be, beast!" cried the True Vampire, as it wrestled with Zhurong in the sky, clawing his scales and biting into him – only to receive a heavy burst of flame to the face. The True Vampire screeched as it launched off Zhurong, sending him plummeting back down towards the ground. But its large, blank, red eyes widened as Astris floated in front of it, her pistols aimed towards its head with the Rising Aces beside her. "Bye!"

The creature dove, fleeing desperately in a panic, but Jayce dashed above it – combining Sola and Luna into a huge hammer. He leapt forwards, somersaulting downwards before slamming the weapon with all the Focus and strength he could muster into the True Vampire's wing. It screeched in agony, spiralling down before crashing through a house and landing in an open courtyard laden with impaled corpses. "To me! To your master!" cried out the True Vampire, wriggling to its feet and hobbling backwards as its wing began to regenerate. "Make it count!" Jayce yelled. "This is our moment!"

Strigon tackled Jayce, the pair of them tumbling across the courtyard and wrestling with one another before kicking free of each other. "You caused me so much pain! So much misery! Me and so many others!" Astris screamed, firing off bullets into the monster in front of her as every remaining Vampire in the city descended upon the Rising Aces in an attempt to rescue their progenitor. "You stole my life from me!" she screamed, the giant bat screeching in agony.

"No!" Strigon cried, surging towards Astris only for Jayce to grab him from behind and pin him to the floor – throwing fist after fist into his maw. "Get off me!" Strigon screeched, kicking Jayce off and descending upon him. Jayce blocked the assault, yelling out in pain as his bracers were torn off and Strigon's nails tore into his skin. Jayce pushed back, bringing his hands together and commanding Sola and Luna. They launched forwards, forming into a silver spear through Strigon. "Argh!" he yelled, staggering backwards and pulling out the weapon, even as his palms sizzled.

"You took their mother, their father!" Astris cried, as she, Orianna and Lucinia fired at the True Vampire with their guns – the girls pulling the triggers even as

their guns clicked empty. "You'll die, you'll perish if you kill me!" the True Vampire bargained. "I don't care! I've never cared! You killed me, you made me into this!" she cried, tears streaming down her face. The creature buckled, falling down onto its front and looking up at Astris through blood. "Take Strigon! Spare me!" it whimpered, as she stepped closer and reloaded.

"Astris!" Jayce yelled, pinning Strigon to the floor as he desperately clawed at the ground to drag himself forwards. "No!" Strigon screamed. "No!" Astris levelled her pistols at the True Vampires flat face. "I don't want to die," the True Vampire cried, and Astris thought. "Astris!" Jayce cried, releasing Strigon. She pulled the triggers, and Strigon fell apart into ash. Orianna and Lucinia slumped to the floor as Astris staggered backwards, her pistols falling free from her grip as her knees wobbled.

Thunder rumbled as Taranis slammed into Alberta and sent her towards Ordo. He was waiting and struck downwards sending the bloody and charred Cannibal Lord tumbling out of the sky towards the ground. "You'll never-urgh," Alberta grunted, a colossal spire of blood-crystal bursting out of a house and impaling her torso from behind. She hung there; her eyes wide in disbelief as she slowly tried to pull herself free. Thalia dropped from the sky trailing lightning with her anchor, slamming the weapon down as hard as she could through the Betrayer's skull. Her face exploded outwards – the corpse decapitated atop the spire. Ordo and Thalia then fell towards the ground, Taranis snatching Ordo whilst Morgana did the same for the Thalia before they hit the floor.

Jayce held Astris in his arms. "I feel cold," she mumbled, looking up at him. The left side of her head caving away as it crumbled to dust. "No-no-no!" Jayce cried, "Astris, don't go! Hold on! Doc! Yuthura!" he screamed, her hand on his face as she smiled up at him. "It's okay," she told him. He shook his head, leaning into her cold hand. "I... I've wanted this, I think. I'm... free. It's over," she cried, tears falling out of her remaining eye. He held her as her skull slowly regenerated. "I..." she whispered. He leant closer, placing his forehead to hers as he held her. "I love you," she whispered, before kissing him. He initially pulled away – an immediate flash of both Zoya and Rosalynn bursting into mind before being pushed aside by Alara – but then he kissed back.

"Well, this is awkward," Arthuria stated, scratching her head as Jayce pulled back and both Astris realised that she was fine. Both of them flashed red and Astris immediately shoved Jayce away from her. "Uhm," he stammered, getting to his feet and wiping his mouth and eyes. "Well done team, we did it," he said



immediately attempting to salvage the situation, Astris shakily approaching Orianna and Lucinia before holding them tightly to her chest. Her eyes glanced towards Jayce, the tips of her pointed ears burning red before swiftly looked away. All of those present looked at Jayce with a variety of judging eyes. "What are you gonna tell Alara?" Arthuria questioned, approaching Jayce and elbowing him gently in the ribs. There was a loud and audible crack and he dropped to his knees as he barely held in a scream. "Oops, sorry," Arthuria said immediately dropping down next to him. He looked towards her. "Woah, don't kiss me too!" she stated holding her hands up before grinning. "You're dead!" he told her with a grimace.

"Bjorn, tell the civilians that their city is free!" Ordo stated into his communicator, looking out towards the rising sun – no longer kept prisoner by the Vampires or the Cannibals. The cheers on the hills were audible even from the centre of the city. Ordo then turned his attention towards his Captain. Jayce glanced back towards him. "This was only the warmup," Ordo reminded him. "We still have the Sovereign and eight more Betrayers – if we exclude Tanare." Jayce looked down. "Way to kill the mood, old man," Morgana protested. He shook his head, groaning as he held his side. "Just telling the truth."

### **Seize the Seas Tales: A New Role**

It took some time for the mess that was the city of Nolograd to be tidied up – the Rising Aces helped somewhat, but given the likely appearance of the Sea Sovereign they didn't stay long. Despite Jayce's best attempts to convince the crew otherwise, Bjorn laid down the law that the people of Arcastalum had suffered enough, and any treasures buried within Strigon's castle were theirs to salvage – not the Rising Aces. Dissappointed to have only made a loss on their venture – mostly Marisha's perspective – the crew gathered together aboard the Stacked Hand, setting it upon the river before teleporting away. But the matter of their departure raised one further question: Orianna and Lucinia – what to do with the two Vampire girls? Naturally, Astris brought them aboard.

"Are you sure about this?" Jayce questioned to her, as she settled the girls into a guest room of their own. "Person who I can't hear and won't look at," she answered, "what other option is there?" Jayce couldn't help but admit it – he wasn't sure an orphanage would take the girls and he doubted there were any relatives who would – even if they could be located. "Are you really going to pretend I don't exist?"

"Are you going to pretend that should have happened and wasn't just... the emotions of the moment? What would Alara say?" Astris questioned, turning to him. Jayce glanced at the girls: they both seemed out of it – as if there wasn't anything going on behind their eyes. "Is that... normal?" he questioned. Astris glared at him before turning away. "Avoiding the question..." she muttered. "Doc says that my control cells kept them alive – that their bodies hadn't really adapted yet so the bit that was destroyed when the True Vampire died was minimal. They're like Strigon's early Vampires – mainly drones, but if I keep feeding them my cells then they should regain their independence, like his Generals did."

"And your... death?"

"The last remainders of the True Vampire's cells kicking the bucket. The True Vampire destroyed most of them last time. All that's left is good old Vampire me. As far as I'm aware – I'm now the truest Vampire, last of my kind. A rare breed. How does it feel Exarga – you kissed one of the only Vampires left in the world?" she goaded. "Girls, sleep," Astris commanded – the two Vampires climbing into their double bed and shutting their eyes. "Gods that's creepy," Astris muttered, stepping towards Jayce and pushing him out of the door before closing it behind her. She looked up at him with a firm and challenging glare.

Jayce blushed and glanced away. "Have you spoken to her yet?" Astris questioned. Jayce cleared his throat and tried to walk away. Astris' hand hovered on his neck, her lips to his ears. He turned and faced her with wide eyes as she grinned at him. "She what?" Jayce questioned in disbelief. She began to walk away, glancing over her shoulder at him. "She said next time to ask, but cited something about an old deal you two had with Holli. You're a lucky man, Jayce Exarga. Our next kiss is permitted."

Jayce stood stunned as she walked away, his eyes glancing towards the door containing the two sleeping Vampire girls. "Does that make me a dad?" he questioned, only for Caelie to dropkick him from the nearby stairs. "Already are," she protested.