

Chapter 242: The One Who Comes After

The winds swirled around Tim Kane as he looked up at a lone black tower on a tiny island near the edge of the Scourge. "Are you sure about this?" Mirabelle questioned, standing just behind him with her hands clasped around his wrist. Her golden hair whipped around her, her brown, almond-shaped eyes full of worry, glancing from Tim's face to the tower behind him with distinct fear. Tim nodded, grasping his new dark-blue grimoire. "I have to. Jayce is counting on me, he has to be preparing for a battle – he and Alara wouldn't have killed those Betrayers without reason, and we cannot win if Myrddin fights with the Sovereign. I'm the only one who can do this."

Mirabelle took a fearful step forward, forcing Tim to turn and face her. She placed her pale fingers onto his light-brown skin, slowly sliding her hands down to his dark goatee which she gently tugged to force him to lower his head. They locked lips, the moment brief but eternal in both their minds. She slid her hands up across the shaved sides of his head before grasping the small top-knot behind his head. "If you're going to go into battle," she stated, taking a quill out of her robes and sliding it into his hair. "Then know that I'm with you, everyone else at the Scholar's Fort is too – Archmage Timothy Kane. Do not die on me – or else I will be forced to explore Necromancy until I can bring you back to me. Am I clear?" "Of course, babe. You know me, you think I intend to let the greatest Wizard of this age beat me?" he returned with a grin. Mirabelle rolled her eyes, only for both of them to flinch and swiftly turn to face the tower as a boom of thunder erupted across the skies.

Myrddin stood on a balcony near the top of his tower. His skin was tanned and wrinkled, the grey hair on his head and chin long and flowing around him. He wore battle-robos, the ornate red and blue clothes covered in pieces of metal and glowing faintly against the black tower he stood in. A huge staff stood in one hand – the handle made of black metal topped with a large red crystal wrapped in the embrace of a visage of a gold dragon. "Go," Tim told Mirabelle. She fled faster than the wind as he stepped forwards towards the tower.

Myrddin remained in his tower, watching Tim as he approached. There was no entrance, no obvious way inside, and a moment before there hadn't even been a balcony. It was the Betrayer's domain: his bastion, and by all accounts even the strongest army wouldn't have been able to leave a scratch upon it. But the stone folded apart, opening up for Tim as Myrddin stepped back into his tower. With little reason not to – other than the ominous feeling that he would never see

daylight again, a feeling he had only recently shrugged off after completing the Dungeon in Brunxchume – he stepped inside, the stone closing behind him.

The tower was far larger inside than it ever should have been. It was like he had entered into a colossal cavern – one large enough to hold a city – with the rooftop above him muddled with a starlike appearance that, only through Focus, could he recognise as a ceiling of countless colossal diamonds. Ahead of him in the twilight sat a white tower with a colossal staircase wrapped around it, leading upwards towards the ceiling far, far above him. The ground felt cold, a fog laying across the floor. Tim tapped his heels together, his body sparking with purple energy as he began to float – just enough to hover above the fog as he moved forwards towards the tower. He scanned his environment as he moved: buried beneath the fog was an endless minefield of arcane glyphs – traps for any who didn't watch their step.

As he made it halfway towards the tower, he noticed a faint patch of darkness crossing the twinkling above him. Something was up there, something that his Focus didn't help him to see or to sense. But it then came to him, crashing down to the ground where he had been as he darted to the side to avoid it. It was a two-headed Dragon, the body split straight down the middle into a left half that was a bold blue and the right that was a brilliant red. It seemed fused together, the patchy line through the middle not quite perfect, and covered in scarring.

"Fascinating," Tim stated, his eyes scanning the monster ahead of him for every detail. "My Grandfather would have loved you," he then added, reaching into his bottomless bag and retrieving a magic stone the size of his hand. Both heads snarled before a loud whining built up from the blue side as the red side inhaled a vast amount of air. The Dragon unleashed a large beam of fire and lightning towards him as he took off into the air. The Dragon flapped its wings out of sync and took off after him. Even uncoordinated, the colossal beast was hot on his heels, spewing lightning and fire in periodic bursts as he analysed his surroundings. The entire area he was within was designed on the off-chance an intruder managed to break in – it was a death maze for those on the ground and a warzone for any in the air. Tim glanced up as two more Dragons descended from above: one split into green and white, the other black and gold. He looked down at the rock in his hands. There were undoubtedly more beasts around, and Dragons had a natural resistance to most magic. "So be it," he muttered, stopping in the air and twisting to the side as the original Dragon flew at him.

"By the untold heavens and their descendants beneath them, risen from the oceans and divined by the fire and ice of the skies, twist and weave, collapse and expand, become the greatest storm – Maelstrom of the skies!" Tim chanted, the stone disintegrating in his hands and a swirl of dark storm clouds forming around him. A tornado erupted beneath him, sucking up the fog beneath before crackling with dark blue lightning. Tim hovered in the centre of it, the Dragons screeching as they were sucked in by the winds. The storm then flung them away – their bodies sparking with lightning. The Dragons hit the ground hard, still sparking. A thin electric blue line swirled on the inside of the twister, growing larger and wider as the maelstrom of storm spun faster and faster before discharging colossal arcs of lightning towards the injured Dragons. The lightning didn't end, the Dragons writhing as the electricity was channelled through them. Their scales popped off their flesh as they wailed in pain, their bodies charring and then igniting before they disintegrated to black ash. The storm ceased, and all three Dragons were dead, any others watching from the darkness all too hesitant to approach. A beam of white light descended down from the rooftop as a passageway was opened up for him. Tim didn't wait around.

He found himself in a far more comfortable abode. It was a library of sorts, with large walls mounted with countless books and a central fireplace with a bear-skin rug and two large comfortable chairs. Myrddin sat within one of them, stroking his beard as he watched Tim analyse the room. There were likely numerous concealed passageways within the bookshelves, as there was no indication of a bed of sorts, or any personal chambers. "Sit," commanded the Betrayer, gesturing to the chair in front of him. Tim simply nodded, hovering over to the chair before sitting into it.

"You have sought me out, you have found me, and now you have met me. For what purpose?" Myrddin questioned. A floating metal tray approached them laden with two mugs, a teapot, a small milk jug and a cup containing several sugar cubes. Tim helped himself, Myrddin's gaze upon him the entire time. "I'm here to either turn you against the Sovereign, or to kill you," Tim said matter-of-factly, sipping the mug. The old Wizard stared at him with cold blue eyes. "I have beaten armies, slaughtered Mages in their thousands, sunk fleets, tamed Dragons."

"I saw, although I wouldn't call those chimeras tamed as such. More... left loose in the garden and told to eat any intruders," Tim interrupted, resting the tea in his lap. The Wizard continued to stare at him. "And yet... you resorted to a tenth-tier spell to best them." Tim shrugged, looking around the room as he took in the

tower. "Lady Scáthach is not best pleased at the moment with the demise and betrayal of her Betrayers. Those that have fallen, I assure you, were the weakest of us. So, I have to question to what end could you, boy, possibly perceive that you stand a chance against me?"

It was a fair question; one Tim didn't have a proper answer for. "Because it's what Jayce would do," he answered, giving the best answer he had. Myrddin continued to glare. "We don't have to fight," Tim told him. "There will be a battle soon, I'm almost certain of it – and I just need you to not be there." Myrddin shook his head and stood up with a groan. "Lady Scáthach will not be beaten, not by the likes of you and the other Pirate Lords. And if I fail her, then I'm good as dead anyway."

He extended his finger towards Tim and a bolt of green energy shot out of the fingertip. Tim only just avoided it, the chair he was sat upon turning grey before crumbling to dust. There hadn't been a chant, or any indication the old man was preparing a spell – it had just happened. Tim darted backwards as a ball of flame manifested itself in Myrddin's hand. The Betrayer threw it at him, the ball swiftly swelling in size as it flew through the air. "You will not leave this place," Myrddin declared, "not whilst I still draw breath!"

Tim drew his sword, his new spellbook hovering beside him as he darted around the room avoiding bolts of lightning, balls of fire and spears of ice. If he could let the Wizard wear himself down then finishing the fight would be simple. The only issue was that the library was lacking cover and a Mage who had cast spells for a lifetime would have far larger mana reserves than he could hope to outlast. Tim stood and swung his blade, cutting through a large spear of ice, before darting forwards towards the Betrayer.

The entire room then twisted, physically rotating onto its side and taking Tim's legs out from under him. Myrddin floated in the air, gripping his wrist with his hand and aiming an outstretched finger as Tim tumbled. Tim tapped his heels together, taking into the air as the green disintegration ray soared past his body and hit a bookshelf. The wood fell apart into dust, leaving a hole into another room behind it. Tim tapped his heels again and fell like a rock through the passageway.

"You cannot escape me in my own home, boy! You have no understanding of what can be done here!" Myrddin gloated. He wasn't wrong, in his own abode Myrddin had a definitive advantage. He also seemingly possessed the ability to silently chant, each spell sent had come at a definitive six-second interval – and

that wasn't coincidental. It also meant his spells couldn't be countered unless with near perfect timing and a little bit of foresight to understand the level of spell coming.

Tim swore under his breath as he flew through the corridor he had fallen into, countless doors lay to his right, the stone wall to his left deliberately blank. The corridor seemed endless, and Myrddin was simply floated along behind him with both hands clasped behind his back and an expression of cold malice. "Screw it," Tim muttered, slamming into a door and entering the room beyond it. He came into a herb garden of sorts, the air filled with a fine mist and hanging rows of plants swinging vigorously as he bounced between them. "There is no escape!" boomed the Wizard's voice, the very ceiling above him warping into a stony visage of the Betrayer's face before its cheeks puffed and then spewed out fire.

Tim slid under a hanging row, pushing through a nearby door as the room erupted into flame. "I need a new plan. I can't run forever," he muttered to himself, as he entered a walk-in closet filled with robes. "Think! What would Jayce do?" Tim's eyes widened: he was always going to be on the backfoot in Myrddin's domain, but all magic had rules. "Let the thunder roar, shake apart that which lays before me!" he chanted, shattered the floor beneath him and exposing several huge squares of black rock with ritual circles carved into them. His eyes scanned the circles, reading the arcane writing upon it. "Right, so... gotcha."

The stone ahead of him shifted apart, Myrddin floating through the new gap. Tim charged forwards, counting the seconds in his head. He thrust with his blade towards Myrddin's throat, but a shimmering shield caught the blade and sent him stumbling backwards. Myrddin was covered in various defensive magic items, as well as magic items that allowed him to control his tower. The ritual circles had shown that the stone acted as if part of a larger singular object – twisting and rotating together – and that meant there had to be an element of predictability to it. It wasn't infinite.

Tim struck again with his sword, the same shield striking up again to block the blow. "Persistent, aren't you!" stated Myrddin, holding up a palm – a vibrating, donut-shaped, ring of air facing Tim. Tim ducked underneath it, using his free hand to grab Myrddin's wrist as a heavy shockwave blasted past him. It was a one-in, one-out system, he had guessed, grateful to be correct: Myrddin couldn't actively send out spells and block blows. Tim grabbed the rings on Myrddin's

hand and wrenched, the fingers straining before breaking. The old man roared in pain as Tim flew free, throwing the rings into his bottomless bag. "You want to play games, then let's play!" Myrddin roared.

Tim felt something invisible wrap around his waist, and almost immediately he was tossed into a nearby wall, cracking the stone. Through Focus he could see the telekinesis and the giant hand wrapped around him, but more significantly he could also see the flow of magic through Myrddin. It had changed, his body had ignited. An invisible flow of technicolour energy was pouring into his back before erupting out through his eyes, nose, mouth and extremities. Tim activated his emergency rune, teleporting to the other side of the room as a beam of golden energy melted the stone he had been pinned to. Almost immediately the broken fragments of stone were elevated, sharpened into large daggers and then flung at Tim. He rolled to the side in the small room. "Let chaos flow, disrupt--"

Tim grimaced as his spell was countered almost immediately. He flung his sword at Myrddin in response, the Wizard growling as it grazed him. "Bring about--" The spell was countered once more, a wall of wind slamming into him and sending him tumbling through a door. He rolled to his feet as three spears of ice impaled the floor where he had been. "Shit!" Tim swore, turning on his feet and dashing through a doorway as a beam of golden light turned the stone behind him into liquid. "Take me to--"

Countered.

"See unto me a divine--"

Countered.

"Just go fu--"

A trio of large fireballs detonated behind him, the last of which sent him flying forwards into a new room. It was laboratory of sorts, with large tables covered in vials, pieces of machinery, and an unusual number of jars containing human parts – mainly belonging to men. A large bed lay upright, the beginnings of some sort of person strapped to it. They were half-finished, the flesh pale and grey with their internal organs absent. The features looked young, the body a late teen at most. "A flesh golem?" Tim questioned to himself as he fumbled inside his bottomless bag for the rings he had stolen. "Or a something else?"

Myrddin entered the room, stretching out his hands and unleashing purple lightning from his fingers. The tables ignited, the jars shattered and Tim threw

himself underneath the countertops. He glanced at the rings, dropping them until only one remained – a golden ring with a large black stone embedded within it. “This ends here!” Myrddin declared as Tim popped back up from cover. A shaky finger was extended towards him and Tim threw the ring at the Wizard, the bolt of green energy disintegrating the ring. “What was that?” Myrddin questioned before the entire room began to move and shift, folding outwards in rapid movement. “No!” Myrddin yelled as his tower shifted and unravelled, folding outwards into a huge platform. “Fool, do you understand how long that took to make?”

Curiously there was no furniture, or anything to fill the various rooms – it had all vanished. It reminded Tim of the rooms on the Stacked Hand, and a curious question as to where everything had gone did cross his mind – but a swirling disk of wind almost took his head off. Tim took off into the open air, his eyes watching the flow of mana in and out of the old Wizard. “One way,” Tim muttered, envisioning the flow of mana into his body in the same way.

His body burned from the inside out, a searing, agonising pain erupting from every pore, but he held on – resisting the pain and concentrating on pushing it out of him. Something changed, the pain ceased – replaced with a rushing feeling as if he were standing in a river. “Damn,” he muttered, holding up his hand and conjuring a shield in front of him that dispersed the beam of energy sent at him. “Incredible,” Myrddin muttered. “Had you not started this foolish assault you would have been a fine apprentice!” he yelled out, only for his eyes to widen as the skies above swirled and warped in a manner he had never seen before.

Rain began to fall as the world rumbled and darkened, blue lightning crackling above. Myrddin desperately rushed forwards into the air. “Let the flow of mana cease!” he yelled, trying to counter the spell, only to recoil as his own counter was countered. The waves rose up into a colossal wall, folding together with a wall of clouds that created a mouth of lightning. Myrddin charged towards Tim as the largest spell he had ever seen moved towards him. His right hand glowed bright red, the glow fierce against the darkness of the storm, but as he reached to touch Tim’s face, Tim thrust with his blade, piercing the Wizard’s heart with his sword.

Myrddin froze in the air, his eyes wide and confused as he looked up at the storm and then at Tim before finally at the blade that had pierced him – his blood quickly spreading across his robes. “You... cheated,” Myrddin gasped, before falling off the blade and tumbling down towards the ocean. He hit the water and

didn't reappear above the waves. "It was fair," Tim stated, his storm vanishing without release. "Neither of us ran when we both could. Farewell, Archmage – I learnt much from you."

Seize the Seas Tales: Summons From Jayce Exarga

Word spread quickly of the demise of, not just two but, three Betrayers. The Guild did its best to keep the news off its front covers, but there was no hiding from the array of newspapers all being spread under the banner of the Syndicate, all of them raising similar questions about war between Jayce Exarga and the Sovereign. It was on everyone's mind, said on the streets and spoken about in every pub across both the Old and New World, but no one knew where the Rising Aces were and Tim Kane had sealed his magical fortress shut.

Tim sat in his throne room, his guards both mechanical and mortal. His body hurt from the battle with the Betrayer Myrddin, but his wounds hadn't been nearly as severe as they deserved to have been. The doors slammed opened, a young Mage dashing in along the long purple rug towards his throne. "My Lord! My Lord!" she cried, sliding to her knees only to faceplant as the rug stopped her movement. Tim's mechanical golems had stepped forwards and were brandishing their staves towards her, but they resumed their positions with a single gesture. "My Lord, a letter," she cried, holding up a sealed letter stamped with a skull bearing an eye socket in the shape of an ace of spades. "Finally," Tim stated.

"Boys, get ready to move!" yelled out Kitty Deliver, grinning wildly as she held Jayce's letter in her hands.

"King, are you sure about this?" questioned Mare, as she looked at Tanare. He looked at the old War Hound. "We both know what this means," Tanare told her. "He deserves a chance to beg for help, he's earned that much at the very least." Tanare glanced out towards his city as Mare moved away to make preparations. "I don't know, Dick, maybe Jayce can actually do what we never believed was possible."

Ningyo nursed his wounds in an ocean cavern, several deep cuts in his carapace from his failed attempt at killing Ura Soruk. "I'll go, but this better be worth it," he stated to himself.

"This better not be a trap," the Machinist told her lackeys.

“This may be the death of us both if we go,” stated Dragonlord Thákane to her Dragon Nanabolele. “Not going would be definitive,” returned the Dragon.