

Chapter 243: Hall of the Pirate Lords

It had been a unanimous decision of the Rising Aces to flee from Arcastalum as quickly as they could; as such they had returned to the seas and had set their sights on Final Bastion whilst ensuring that there was plenty of time for any and all their guests to make it there themselves. "It does mean that Scáthach is probably going to be there waiting," Bjorn said to Jayce, as they sat on the sofas in the living quarters. "I doubt it," Jayce returned, glancing to Arthuria as she sat leaning away from him with a romance novel in her hands – the title of which raised eyebrows from both Bjorn and Jayce. "With all the Pirate Lords there – hopefully – and the Republic in their second strongest position, she won't want to risk it. Not when she needs to focus on maintaining control of what she's got."

The door to the living quarters opened and Orianna stepped in, silently walking into the kitchen and grabbing a bowl from the cupboard before taking some fruit out from fridge, a block of milk from the freezer and some oats from the pantry. She put the milk in a pan and began to warm it up, before taking a blood pouch from Astris' fridge and pouring it into a tankard. She then sat down and stared blankly at the wall. Zeta walked into the room, took one look at the Vampire girl, and then immediately turned around and left.

"Creepy as hell," Arthuria muttered, going back to her book. Jayce folded his arms. Both the new Vampire girls had taken some considerable getting used to. They only seemed to wake up when around Astris, otherwise they seemed to go about the ship on autopilot – going to eat or remaining in their rooms. "Orianna?" Jayce called out to her. She turned her head and looked at him. Both she and her sister looked similar to each other - dark hair, pale but slightly tanned-skin, pointed ears - but the older sister, Orianna, had slightly sharper features and hazel-red eyes compared to Lucinia's green-red eyes and rounder face. She blinked blankly, but then her eyes seemed to focus on him and she smiled.

"Captain Exarga?" she questioned, both Bjorn and Arthuria sitting up with wide eyes. "Are you okay?" Jayce asked her. She nodded, sipping her blood like it was juice before tending to her milk in the pan and pouring in the oats. "I'm okay." "Uh, good, plans for the day?" he asked more casually, standing up and approaching the table before sitting down. The teenager sat in Astris' spot and stirred her bowl. "Lady Astris said she was going to take me and Luci for some target practice. Apparently we weren't as useful as we could have been." "Uh huh, right. Well, just be careful and keep drinking." She nodded appreciatively and continued eating."

"Explain it to us fully," Jayce stated to Yuthura, as she stood in front of the crew after giving the girls an examination. "Vampirism is a blood disease that alters the cells of a human, albeit seemingly other species too. In exchange for regeneration and resistance against cellular decay, a byproduct that reacts destructively to ultraviolet radiation is produced. It also halts the production of antibodies – it's why Vampires need to suck blood and also why they are weak to sunlight," she explained once again, injecting Astris in the shoulder.

"So why did it take so long for the girls to...?" Zeta questioned, looking over at the two children swinging their legs as they sat on stools. "Vampire cells are similar to a hive-mind, they communicate. Until they have enough command cells within them, they are locked onto receiving commands from higher Vampires – in this case Astris. She has continuously been giving her blood, and the command cells have been assimilated. This is why the girls have woken up, as such."

"And what are you giving Astris and them now?" asked Marisha, as Yuthura injected both girls. "This should, with a bit of luck, allow them to start producing their own antibodies again, with a few more injections over the next few months." Jayce looked towards Astris as she rubbed her shoulder and stood up. "Which should mean I get to walk in the sunlight again," she stated with a big smile. "And that Lucinia and Orianna should be able to live their own free lives," Yuthura added.

"You've kept this project quiet," Jayce commented quietly to Yuthura. She turned and looked at him. "I'm always busy, Jayce – don't underestimate me." He nodded and stepped away, getting prodded in the back of the knee with her cane for good measure. "The girls will need educations," Jayce stated to his crew. "It's going to be everyone's duty – with only a few exceptions." He then turned to the girls. "I expect you to work hard, am I understood?" They both nodded vigorously.

As Jayce headed towards his quarters, he heard the heavy footsteps of Bjorn and the softer footsteps of Marisha behind him. He turned and looked at them, the pair of them locking their eyes on him with a pair of differing expressions. Bjorn looked almost awkward, and Marisha looked slightly angry. "Jayce," Bjorn said quietly. "You know, don't you?" he intercepted, turning and sitting down on the stairs leading up to his quarters. Bjorn and Marisha both glanced towards Falconer at the helm, before nodding to Jayce. "Why?" Marisha asked plainly.

"I was shown a future by Paimon, one where I informed you of Wam's survival. It was held against you, and the Sovereign used it to turn you. I was also shown one where I refused to let them go – we lost a lot more than them. That's not an excuse, the future is... foresight is messy and I've always hated using it precisely because of how much it affected Wicke, but... I'm sorry for hiding it from you. I wanted to keep him safe, so that I could bring him home to you when we defeat the Sovereign," Jayce told them honestly.

Bjorn let out a sigh and sat next to Jayce. "For a while I blamed you, and in someways – knowing this – I still do, but I couldn't have stopped them for trying to do what they did. I'm just glad one of our idiots survived. I tried to contact him..." Bjorn half-asked. Jayce looked towards Marisha. She ran her fingers through her hair and looked out towards the ocean. "How did you find out?" Jayce asked. "The Syndicate basically flashed him on the cover of one of their newspapers a while back. I've only just managed to get around to reading through them again, and the idiot was staring right at me." Jayce chuckled. "He was out on his own so I sent him Wicke's way. I figured some time with the kids could do him good. It won't make up for Fenn or Ohno, but friends... friends are good."

Astris stepped out onto the main deck and caught Jayce's eye. She tilted her head and then descended the stairs below deck. Bjorn saw and looked directly at Jayce. "Speaking of friends, I'm getting fed up of the rumours I'm hearing from the crew. Explain it to me, or put it to rest for everyone else," he told Jayce, punching him in the shoulder as Jayce stood up. "It's... complicated. From what I hear she speaks to Alara more than I do." Bjorn scoffed as Marisha rubbed her forehead. "Enjoy that when we dock at Final Bastion," he stated towards Jayce as he descended the stairs. Jayce turned with a big grin. "Oh, you think I'm not looking forward to it?" he returned, before walking off in pursuit of Astris. Bjorn shook his head and looked at his wife. "Don't get any funny ideas. Think of another woman and I'll turn you into a rug."

Astris was waiting for him in her room. "My room is bigger," he told her as he shut the door behind him. She rolled her eyes and then gently guided him to her bed. "Why don't you just join me this evening?" he questioned, as she sat across him. "Because now is probably the only time I can get your full attention," she stated, pressing him down. "Talking is not exactly what's on my mind right now."

"Oh, who'd have guessed," she said sarcastically. "Then listen, it's about Vexx." Jayce flinched and Astris' eyes met his. "Dammit, Bjorn was right..." she muttered, getting off him and hugging her knees. "What was right? What did Bjorn say?" Jayce questioned, sitting up and looking at her with confusion. "You still intend to try and save him, don't you?" she asked plainly. Jayce nodded and she immediately shook her head and placed her hands to her temples. "You idiot!"

"He's... I have to try. I owe Vexx that much at least and I know he's good inside." "He's a killer, a literal assassin. And one of Corina Liu's finest murderers. There was one other Emperor's Fist assassin that was on par with him, and Vexx washed out. Do you not understand how dangerous he is?" Astris questioned, standing up and crossing her room to retrieve a stack of documents that she immediately lay across her bed. "Where did you get these?" Jayce questioned, looking at countless images of corpses, and a photo of a younger Vexx with dark and hollow eyes. "Marisha picked them up from the Republic for me."

"Not everyone is savable, not everyone can be redeemed," Astris told him, sitting back down next to Jayce and resting a hand on his face. "I can't even say it's worth the risk for Elaine – we know too little about her, and what we've seen is that in terms of brutality and bloodthirstiness she's akin to Vexx. Strigon and Alberta killed for food - these two just kill. Not for position, not for power, not even for glory or reputation – they kill because they are good at it. Vexx because, other than this Oni guy, he was alone in an academy of assassins where they sent children into the Dungeon. As far as I'm aware, he's the only one that got out – and what did he do with it? He got drunk in the Arena and killed people for booze money."

"And Elaine... she's a sociopath taking out her familial anger on everything she can. She's not spoken to Arthuria in over a decade – and she's entirely aware of her. They're not the sisters you think they are, Morgana and Arthuria will die at her hands if you send them to try and redeem her," Astris stated firmly, with a twinge of panic in her voice. "And what should I do instead? Give up on them? Elaine is Arthuria's blood, the only connection she has left to her mother. And Vexx... I let him down, not the other way around. I..." Jayce's voice cracked. "I failed him, Astris. I failed Vexx. And if... and if I don't try, then I have failed myself. I never should have left him alone when he needed me most."

"Jayce... you can't blame yourself."

"But I do!" he yelled, standing up and towering over her as she remained sat down. Astris folded her legs and looked up at him as tears of anger and sadness filled his eyes. "I failed him! Every day I wake up knowing that I left him behind! That I gave up rather than fought for him! He was a brother to me! My best friend! And I took away the only stability he had – us! Do you know how it feels to know that you're the reason for every person he has killed since then? All the blood he has spilled in Scáthach's name is on my hands and I'm already drowning in it."

Astris reached up and took his hands, focusing his gaze down onto her. "It's not your fault. You do not have control over other people's decisions and lives. You do not have the power to solve everyone's problems and it is not your burden to bear alone. You have Alara, your parents, Bjorn, the crew... and you have me." "I can't abandon him again..." Astris stood on her bed, placing her arms around Jayce's head and pulling him into her chest. "I'm not asking you to. Just... be ready to fail, and live with it."

"Count your bullets," Astris stated, watching Lucinia aim down the shooting range whilst also glancing over towards Ordo and Orianna as he let her practice against him with a rapier in one hand and pistol in the other. "Use the pistol to trap me, you only have a limited number of shots but I'm forced to engage your blade. You can do it; I know you can," he encouraged. Jayce stepped into the training hall. "Guys!" he called out, the room pausing and looking towards him. "It's time."

Final Bastion had changed significantly since their last visit. The number of defences had increased vastly, with ocean walls limiting the approach of ships and large external harbours and piers offering vast space for the huge fleet present. Anti-air gun emplacements were ready for assaults by air and long-range guns were ready to bombard ships from afar. The civilian harbour was widely populated – with numerous ships bearing all manner of markings, but several stood out to Jayce. Ships flying a black flag with a white roundtable were laden with all manner of cargo, and heading almost continuously to and from the Frontier. "Syndicate ships," Marisha stated.

Jayce's eyes landed on a maroon airship hovering in the distance. It was on its own but a single ship was sailing from it towards Final Bastion. His eyes then spotted two familiar ships docked within the main harbour: the Great Seacat and the Heavyweight – Kitty Deliver's and Somme Ankor's ships. "Looks like some guests are here already!" Jayce called out to his crew. "Prepare to disembark, there's no telling how this will go!"

"Jayce!" Alara called out as he stepped foot onto the main pier. She ran forwards and dove into him, hugging him tightly as he span her around. The numerous eyes all around - a mixture of photographers, military and civilians - were all locked onto Jayce with suspicion, his actions in Final Bastion far from forgotten. "There better be time later to talk," she said quietly before stepping away. Jayce's eyes moved past her as she stepped towards Astris, landing on Fleet Admiral Exarga stood in a v-formation with Jayce's father on one side and Alara's father on the other.

"You've come back!" Cassandra stated loudly, as she stepped forwards towards Jayce. "And you've invited guests that by all accounts I should arrest. For what purpose Jayce Exarga? You kill two Betrayers of the Sea Sovereign and believe all should be well after what you did in her name?" she challenged. Jayce stepped forwards, Astris and Bjorn either side of him. "It was Old Dog Xarga's plan," Jayce stated openly. "It was the only way to get the Sovereign to trust me." "And what evidence do you have to back that up?" Fleet Admiral Exarga pressured for their audience. "My crew and I have killed Jure Strigon the Vampire and Alberta Armin the Cannibal. Arcastalum has been freed." A faint smile appeared at the corner of his mother's mouth. "A hall has been prepared for you, come."

Jayce was led through the city towards the main naval district near the upper centre of the city. A large hall had clearly been built somewhat recently, a place for the many meetings that occurred between the Navy and outsiders. Countless guards were stationed around it, as well as numerous groups of Pirates: Delivery Kats, Machinists, Engines, and plenty of therians. "Exarga! Bjorn!" called over a figure, waving a hand. "Lord Solan?" Jayce questioned as he approached. "Why are you here?"

"I've actually been in the city for some time now. King Tanare dispatched me to negotiate a treaty with the Republic and the Syndicate. In all honesty, I was slightly worried neither of you would show - it's good to see you both, and it was certainly wonderful to hear of the beatdown you gave those monsters. I will see you inside," he added, before walking inside the large hall. Jayce and Bjorn glanced at each other before looking towards Cassandra as she scratched her head. "He's quite a loud bear, isn't he? And the property damage he and his men cause once they've had a few drinks..." she stated before letting out a sigh.

"Anyway, you called this meeting - so I hope you have a plan. We'll be waiting for you when you're ready," she said quietly, before stepping away with her

Admirals and Alara. Jayce then turned to his crew. "I..." he began before the words got caught in his throat. "Give them hell, Jayce!" Zeta called out, the others cheering. He shook his head as they departed to find seats in the viewing galleries, eventually leaving just Bjorn, Marisha and Astris behind. "Ready?" he questioned to them – his representatives of the Therians, the Republic and the Syndicate. They nodded, following him as he walked inside the huge main entrance.

The building itself immediately reminded Jayce of the Pirate Lord Hall that had once stood in Caedom, only it was much larger. It clearly held numerous meeting rooms scattered throughout the large building, but a huge central chamber stood behind a set of ornate double doors with black-uniformed Marines stood guard. They nodded to Jayce as he approached, their faces vaguely familiar, before opening the doors for him.

The meeting hall was huge, with several full rings of seating above the central meeting room. Jayce glanced up as he entered: the roof was a large glass ceiling, painting the long wooden table in the middle of the floor in light. A pair of large gold statues stood either side of the main doors, with a few other doors leading to smaller chambers lining the right side of the room and another exit partially concealed near the opposite side.

The long table held numerous faces Jayce recognised, with the edges of the floor containing various Lieutenants and Commanders belonging to each faction. The left side of the table held: Kitty Deliver, Tim Kane, Ningyo – the ocean crawler – and Tanare. At the far head of the table sat the Syndicate's representatives. Jayce faltered as he lay eyes on the Ronin, the small goblin chewing on a piece of straw as he leant against a pillar behind Myra and Holli. He shrugged it off and instead looked towards the empty space in the middle of the right side of the table for him. He approached it and sat down between the Engine representative and the Machinist. Thákane also sat on the right side of the table, her Dragon stood behind her in the shadows. At the other head of the table was Fleet Admiral Exarga, with Yashiro, Philip and the two Vanathurs behind her. Alara sat at the table next to Cassandra. Bjorn, Astris and Marisha all stood behind Jayce, eyeing up the various Commanders. Somme gave Bjorn a nod across the table, whilst Mirabelle gave Jayce a small wave and big grin.

The room was deadly silent, even with several hundred people sat above the table. "Thank you for coming," Jayce began, leaning forwards towards the table and looking around at the various allies in the room. Not all faces looked friendly,

least of all Alara's parents. Alara glanced up, spotting Wulf, Riley, the two Kais and Kask whispering to each other. They saw her looking and gave smiles of reassurance to her.

"I won't do you the disservice of pretending that we don't know why we are all here," Jayce stated. "Four Betrayers are dead at the hands of my crew, Pirate Lord Kane, and Commodore Vanathur. The Guild is falling apart as we speak and Scáthach is more vulnerable now than she may ever be again. This is our time to strike – our chance to seize back the seas from the Sovereign and to defeat her Empire."

"To what purpose?" questioned the Machinist. "I quite like my life under her, fly by her rules and there is little for me to worry about," she stated loudly, leaning back in her chair. Two cyborgs stood behind her, both equally as menacing behind their visored helmets. "The Sovereign's freedom will not last, and you know it," Kitty countered, crouching in her chair. "Her next step will be to punish us for the deaths of her Betrayers – you think she's going to leave you out of that?"

Kitty stood up and stepped onto the table, walking along until she was stood in front of Alara. "She'll want your head first," she stated, crouching in front of her but popping back up and turning on her heels to point a finger at Tim. "Then yours." Slowly the finger turned to Jayce. "Then she'll ask everyone who's survived to take yours." Kitty then turned back to the Machinist, her eyes glowing green. "And when you try to take his – I'll take yours."

"Kitty is right," Alara stated. "There is no future for the Pirate Lords, Scáthach only preserved the titles out of novelty. That novelty has worn off and once the power of it goes, do you think there will be anything left to protect you? Any of you?" she questioned, as Kitty returned back to her seat and dropped into her chair. "What remains will be for any and all to claim," stated the Engine leader, the eye in her cyclops mask glowing red. "We can survive what is to come, can your Republic? Or your crews?" she questioned, looking towards Jayce.

"Scáthach told me herself what her goals were when I was forced to be a Betrayer," Jayce stated. "She seeks challenge, she seeks conflict – because without it she has no purpose. She wants this fight and we need to give it to her!" A steady silence crossed the room, broken up only by several murmurs from above. "Her spies are likely already in this room, she will know what is decided here – you know that, right?" stated Thákane. Jayce nodded, glancing up above to the mass

of onlookers. There was guaranteed to be at least one spy amongst them, potentially even a Betrayer like Sétanta.

"What you're proposing sounds like suicide!" stated Thákane. "The Sovereign all but seized control of the Old World singlehandedly, and she swept in and took the New World too with little issue. Killing a Betrayer or two is one thing but... she's something else... something... inhuman. She'll grow bored, she'll abandon her toys and move on. I suggest we seek instead to outlast her within her rules. She won't be around forever."

"You're wrong," Jayce stated plainly, standing up. "Scáthach has pacted with a Demon – for those unfamiliar with them, it means that she will not die of natural causes. There is no outlasting her or waiting her out. Scáthach will live forever unless someone kills her, and that is exactly what she wants!" he stated, hesitating before letting out a short exhale. "The person who kills her... by Scáthach's own words... will inherit her title."

An uproar emerged across the room. "What the hell does that mean?" Kitty cut through. "The Guild, the territories, the Null Legion?" Tim questioned. A heavy fist wrapped on the table. "The Sovereign possesses all of the Pearl makers. All currency falls under the Sovereign," stated Tanare, a faint grin on his face as he stirred the pot. "The world..." the Machinist muttered, her eyes widening and grin spreading.

"Enough!" yelled Cassandra standing to her feet, her heavy chair scraping across the floor behind her. Silence fell and she glared at Jayce, knowing exactly what he had just started. "The title of Sea Sovereign is not something that can be passed around or taken!" she growled, but she faltered – as if doubting her own words. "Unfortunately..." Jayce stated. "It can." He looked towards Myra and Holli, who both nodded. Myra clicked her fingers and papers rained down from above – all displaying images of Scáthach with a crown on her head. "The Sovereign commissioned a crown, an item that is enchanted to be bestowed upon the greatest in the world," Holli stated. "That crown... whoever possesses it... is the Sea Sovereign by all rights of the Guild, the Syndicate..." Myra looked towards her mother and then at Cassandra. "The Republic," Myra stated. Cassandra fell back into her seat with an expression of absolute defeat. "My gods... what has she done?" Cassandra questioned quietly.

"The Sovereign has contained freedom, and forged it into an item that is available for any to seize!" Jayce stated. "Whoever possesses that crown rules this world."

Seize the Seas Tales: Business

Myra and Holli looked at each other as the room once again fell into arguing. Marisha had sent them instructions well in advance, along with a variety of contingences depending on if Guildmasters had turned up or fighting broke out, but otherwise they had their own games to play. Jayce had been right on spies being present, but he would have never guessed that they would have been brought in under the cloak of the Syndicate. "All as expected," Holli muttered to Myra, glancing up to the reporters amongst the mix. "In some ways even better," Myra returned.