

Chapter 244: Death or Unity

The arguing lasted for almost an hour, and Jayce simply sat there and waited – listening in on what drew his attention. Several others sat and observed: Kitty, Tim and Tanare – they had already agreed on Jayce’s proposal, they already knew what was at stake. Cassandra had sat almost frozen, slumped back into her throne-like chair, biting a nail, as she stared directly towards Jayce. His hook had been thrown out, but the consequence of it would be far greater than he could ever realise. He had restarted the age of piracy.

“Quiet!” Alara called out, getting to her feet. “Quiet everyone! Please settle down!” she cried out, trying to settle the room. Astris stepped forwards to stand behind Jayce. “Shut the hell up!” she yelled, taking out her gun and firing a shot into the floor. Silence fell and she looked towards Alara before nodding. “Thank you. What Pirate Lord Exarga has said... unfortunately makes sense. If the Sovereign falls, it is only right that someone will take her place. Whether Pirate,” she stated, gesturing towards Jayce. “Syndicate,” she added, gesturing towards Myra and Holli. “Or Republic,” Alara added, looking down towards Cassandra. “But all of that is wholly reliant on taking down Scáthach and her armies.”

“We can argue and fight amongst ourselves as much as we want but as long as she is still sat on her throne then we are arguing over nothing. I will stand with Jayce Exarga and his ideas – but the second the Sovereign is defeated, I am taking that crown for the Republic and restoring it to where it rightfully belongs: on the head of the people’s leader, the democratic leader of the Republic. I would hope that whoever is able to defeat her would do the same!” Alara declared. Jayce smiled gently as he nodded to her.

“I will also fight with Exarga!” Kitty stated, getting to her feet on her chair and looking upwards. “And my boys will too!” several cheers came from above as she raised a fist. Somme nodded to Jayce too as he stood behind Kitty. “Need it be stated?” Tim questioned, standing up. “I killed a Betrayer for you, but I warn you now – my friend – I’m taking that crown for me! The Scholar’s Fort will fight with you!”

Tanare stood up. “The Therians have allied with the Republic, but I will fight with you Exarga!” he stated, tipping his large hat to Jayce. Jayce then glanced forwards towards the Syndicate leaders. “Business is business, and war is profitable!” Holli stated. “I have several merchant fleets on standby and ready to offer all willing to fight – on either side – all the arms and ammo you could ever need!” Marisha smirked from behind Jayce, shaking her head slightly.

The doors to the chamber opened, a cold air passing instantly through the room as a set of heels clacked on the stone floor. A blonde woman strode in wearing a gold leather jacket and black leather trousers. Her eyes were gold and reptilian and her mouth was filled with canines. Nanabolele immediately took a defensive stance, pulling Thákane out of her chair and behind her. "You!" snarled the Dragon.

Kaina looked across the room with an arrogant bemusement. "Don't mind me," she stated. "I've come of my own accord. I heard rumours of discussion of war, and I simply wanted a list of who I should expect?" Kaina stated. It was if she had physically murdered the enthusiasm in the room. The Betrayer stood proudly before walking towards Jayce. Almost immediately a trio of figures dropped down from above, two men and a woman. "Oh," Kaina said in gentle surprise. "Aren't you adorable."

Zhurong stood in the middle, his crimson hair spiky and pushed back. His features were sharp, body muscular, with scaly red talons as hands, and he stood of a similar height to Jayce. His eyebrows were jagged and black, with his eyes reptilian and bright red. He had pale skin that took on a slight cream colour. Taranis was far larger, closer to seven-feet in height and on appearance far more muscular. His hair was a dark blue, eyes the colour of lightning and black scales covered his hands. Soteria was the smallest of the trio, her skin pale like snow but covered in pearlescent scales. Her hair was a similar pearlescent colour, with white eyebrows and ice-blue eyes. "You will not touch him!" snarled Soteria. "No, I will not," confirmed Kaina, glancing across the room. Her smile faltered slightly and she sharply turned and left the room.

The chill persisted; the Dragon's presence having successfully interrupted the meeting at perhaps its most important moment. A Marine hurried into the room and whispered something to Cassandra. She nodded and he quickly departed, a few bloody footprints left behind in the process. "I will fight alone if I have to," Jayce stated, getting to his feet once again and looking towards those that had not agreed to fight. The Machinist swore loudly and scratched her head. "Fine, but the Betrayers are on you guys! My guys will aid with the Null Legion." "The same is to be said of us," stated the Engine leader. Ningyo nodded in agreement. Jayce lay his eyes towards Thákane. "We will fight, but we will flee if it doesn't look promising." Jayce sat down and looked at his army. It wasn't nothing, but considering what they were up against he couldn't help but wonder if it would be enough. "Then prepare for war."

Slowly but surely the hall emptied out until only Jayce's crew, the Admirals, Alara, Tim, Mirabelle, Kitty and Somme remained. "What a mess," Cassandra muttered, looking towards Jayce with a tired expression. "I'm sorry, better me than Scáthach saying it," Jayce told her sympathetically. Cassandra shook her head. "Better not said at all. If we succeed then there will be a very dangerous power vacuum."

"You've given Scáthach a lot of time to prepare her forces, aren't you worried she will strike first?" Kitty questioned, sitting on the edge of the table and looking at the group. "No, she will wait for us to come to her. This is exactly what she wants to happen. And a month gives everyone time to get in position," Jayce answered. She stood up and stepped towards him before resting her hand on his forearm. "I hope you know what you're doing. You led us through the last one, I hope you can this one too. I'll see you at the rendezvous." Kitty stepped away with Somme in tow.

Tim gave Jayce a curt nod before teleporting away with Mirabelle, leaving only the Rising Aces and the Navy behind. "What a mess, Jayce," Cassandra said more bluntly, looking towards her son before pulling him into a hug. "Sorry, I just can't seem to help myself." Cassandra released him before opening her arms wide for Caelie to run into them. "Oh, look at how much you've grown. A real young lady now!" she fussed, as Jayce hugged his father before both Alara's parents rounded on him. "There is much to discuss," Silas said firmly, looking from Jayce to his crew before faltering as he spotted Ordo. "But that will have to wait till later." Silas gave Jayce one last glare before departing with Admiral Yashiro.

Victoire Vanathur remained at the sides with her arms folded, but she disarmed almost immediately as Ordo approached her. "It is good to see you alive, Vivi," Ordo said to her frankly. Her mouth opened slightly as before she looked down and let out a nervous chuckle. "I... it's good to see you Instructor Ordo – I was not expecting you to still be alive, least of all as a... well, um, a..." she stammered, her face flashing slightly red as she struggled to look at him. "Still the nervous girl with too much to say and not the balls to say it," Ordo told her, placing a firm hand on her shoulder. "A Pirate is what I am, Vivi. Don't be afraid to say it."

Victoire took a deep breath and regained her composure before rounding on Ordo. "You idiot! You bumbling buffoon of a man! Scoundrel! Scallywag! Scum! Traitor to our oaths and all that has been sacrificed by me, by Silas, by all the brothers and sisters we've lost, and by all... by all... by the Old Dogs!" she admonished. "Done?" Ordo questioned, looking at her with a raised eyebrow.

She swung with an open hand, slapping him loudly across the cheek. He rubbed his face, a firm mark across it. "Why? Just... why? Am I the only one who sees this all as insane?" she questioned in soft defeat. Ordo smiled sympathetically at her. "Come on, you young fool – let's have a chat, you and me. It's okay."

Both Jayce and Alara looked at the pair with mild confusion as they wandered off. Alara turned towards Jayce and raised an eyebrow. "I get the sneaking suspicion your mother hasn't quite adapted to everything that has happened," Jayce stated. "I haven't seen that side of her... but I guess the Ordo was a mentor of hers when she was my age – perhaps he can actually make her see what I've been trying to tell her these last few months. Speaking of talking..." Jayce nodded, turning to his crew. "You have leave. We have time here, and there is much to discuss, so be on comms, but otherwise... prepare yourselves." Jayce then turned towards his mother. "Business first, or later?" he asked. She looked towards Caelie. "Later."

Jayce needed nothing more. Alara led him through the city towards her accommodation, but as they arrived, he quickly noticed someone waiting for them both. "How did you-?" Jayce questioned, as Astris stood leaning against the door. "I caught up with Wulf and Riley first, they told me where to go," she answered. Alara unlocked the door. "Sorry, you'll have to wait out here. I have a debt to pay," Astris stated, as she walked in and Alara followed, closing the door in Jayce's face as he stammered. He stood outside in stunned confusion, only for the door to open and a hand to drag him inside.

Dinner was brought to them, and the three of them sat lounging in their underwear around Alara's dinner table. There hadn't been much talking, and Jayce couldn't help but feel that he had been both extremely lucky that Alara had been so accepting, but also slightly perturbed that he now felt a third wheel as Astris comfortably sat smiling at the pair of them. "Can we talk now?" Jayce questioned. "I mean, you were the speechless one," Alara stated with a smile, as she picked up a piece of pizza and took a bite. Astris stuck her tongue out at Jayce, a new bitemark on his neck. "Um," he attempted, trying to regain control of his mind. "Just stop thinking about it," Alara advised, "enjoy the fact that you have two beautiful women willing to waste themselves on a Pirate like you." "Now that's unfair," Jayce protested. Both Alara and Astris raised their eyebrows, glanced at each other and then back at him. Immediately, it dawned on Jayce just how much danger he had put himself in.

"Your mother was right to voice worry about your announcement. The Empire struggled with Piracy and that was without dangling a singular prize in front of every wannabe in the world. Once news breaks out it's going to be a bloodbath," Alara stated. "Only if we do beat the Sovereign, and I'm still not certain on our odds," Jayce returned. Alara looked towards Astris who was too busy picking off food that had missed her mouth. "You think we'll lose?" Alara questioned, somewhat surprised. "I didn't truly believe we'd win against the Church and we had a lot of hidden advantages then, this time... It's hard to not believe we are outgunned."

"Logically, if we pair up the remaining eight Betrayers with the Pirate Lords, you and my crew. Then that leaves the Sovereign completely unopposed. Tim was right to take out Myrddin early, the Navy would have been sunk almost immediately," he explained. "There's also a lot we don't know about what we're up against." Alara gestured for him to go on. "Alice for example. I believe she's a Mage, but we've not seen her fight at all."

"The Betrayers will fall apart if we can take down Scáthach. They can be dealt with afterwards," Astris stated. Jayce wasn't certain. "Okay, fine, then think of it this way. Kaina – Dragon – we have three of our own to lock her down. The Destructive One will be limited due to its lava body. That djinn won't fight over water and we can use that against it. Ura Soruk - Ningyo and Red can fight her underwater. If Alice is a Mage, then Tim should be able to handle her, especially considering he killed Myrddin. Sétanta is a rogue element. And Vexx and Elaine we know about."

"Whatever plan you and your father come up will work," Alara stated confidently. "We believe in you, so trust that you'll be able to create a victory out of this." Jayce was certain he could create a victory, but not one without serious losses. "Okay," he said quietly. Alara reached up to her ear and then turned away. "Right," she said quietly before looking back to Jayce. "You're wanted for a talk with the Admirals, and then dinner with my parents."

Alara looked towards Astris. "You joining us?" she asked with a coy smile. "Hell no, I'm treating this casually – keep me out of your family drama. I've got my own reports to submit then I'm getting drunk with my brother and sister, probably Riley, Wulf – Weapon doesn't drink – Kask," she stated, counting off names on her fingers and standing up to retrieve her clothes. Jayce and Alara glanced at each other. "The audacity," Alara said with a smile.

"How do I look?" Jayce eventually questioned, finally alone with Alara. He wore a simple black shirt and trousers, with blue cufflinks and leather shoes. "Dashing," Alara stated with a soft smile, wearing her Commodore uniform. Sola and Luna had blended into white tattoos concealed across Jayce's back. She ran her fingers through his hair. "I'm glad to see those blue eyes of yours again, I was worried Scáthach would keep you away from me forever." Jayce smiled, meeting her gaze and taking her hands. "Never again will anything keep me from you." "Don't speak so soon, you have my parents to handle first." He chuckled nervously, following her out the door.

The meeting room in Final Bastion's command centre was as functional as expected. The décor was minimal and it consisted of a main central table with two ways in and out of the room. A somewhat operational drinks cabinet sat to the side but Jayce got the feeling he wasn't going to be offered anything as he sat down opposite his mother and father, Alara's parents and Admiral Yashiro – the five highest ranked internal members of the Old World Navy. Bjorn came in and sat down next to Jayce. "I was worried I would be on my own," Jayce whispered to him as he sat. Bjorn smiled. "You'd have been fine without me."

"Admirals," Bjorn greeted graciously, nodding to Cassandra and then looking to the flanking Admirals. It was just the seven of them in the room, no guards, no observers. "Captain Bjorn," Cassandra returned, giving him a soft smile before her expression hardened as she looked at Jayce. "We can be civil," he offered. "If it wasn't for better council you'd be across my knee with a belt in my hand," Cassandra warned.

The very visceral image of the sort of discipline Jayce had experienced in his youth flashed back into his mind in an instant. "Right, well, uh, I suppose that's somewhat fair," he returned, rubbing his freshly-shaved chin. "In my defence," he then attempted, only for his father to give a subtle shake of the head. "I have no defence," he corrected. "What follows after Scáthach's defeat will come regardless, this way it is channelled towards a purpose and prize – even if it isn't necessarily within the Republic's interest."

"We are here to discuss the incoming war and the strategy for it," reminded Bjorn. "We should do so, so that we can all make the preparations we need." "Bjorn is correct," stated Admiral Yashiro, before looking towards Philip. "Phil." Philip Exarga sat forwards in his seat and adjusted his glasses. "The information we possess on the Sovereign's armies is... limited, but not inconsequential. This will be an invasion with the Sovereign acting in defence. Our psychologists have

concurred with Jayce's description of her goals, she is seeking defeat, seeking a final battle, and unfortunately this will be it. She will bring in everything, regardless of the impact the removal of her forces from various territories will result in. Every Betrayer will fight, every member of her Null Legion, and of course her herself. So, how will we approach that?"

"Well, I was hoping you guys could handle the Null Legion, you must have, what, three hundred ships here in the Old World with the additions of Tanare's therians and Brunxchume's Navy? With the five of you fighting-" Jayce answered. "We will not be engaging," Silas said firmly. Jayce faltered, freezing for a moment as he shut his eyes. "Excuse me?" he questioned, with as much as force as he could put to the words. "The defeat of Scáthach and her armies is crucial to the Republic," Victoire inserted, leaning forwards. "But this is not our only fight."

"The civilians of the Old World have come to rely on us for aid. Piracy has ravaged the nations that have fallen out of the Sovereign's gaze. Piracy, which today alone has had a sudden surge in activity – thanks to your words. We're helping to reestablish Brunxchume's military and trade routes, the same is true of the Therian Lands in Crea and their other non-human allies," Victoire stated. Bjorn tensed. "Ease up," she stated firmly. "I did not count the therians as non-human. I meant the goblin tribes, the ogres – regardless, even now we're busy cleansing Arcastalum from the remnants of the forces you left alive. The Sovereign is a priority, but we cannot afford for this to be our final fight if you lose."

"Fair points, but you understand that if the Republic doesn't aid us then the people of this world will never have faith in you again if we win?" Jayce countered. "You will have support," Cassandra stated, holding up a hand to intercept the Vanathurs. She then looked to her husband. "From both a morale standpoint and also a logistical angle," he stated, "you will have Alara to support you." Bjorn, Jayce and the Vanathurs all faltered.

"Come again?" questioned Silas, leaning forwards to look at Philip. "It's as I said: Commodore Vanathur will be participating in this assault. Alara has demonstrated clear capacity for leadership in her campaign for the Sentries and the defeat of Betrayer Khalid," Philip stated, only for Victoire to hold up a hand. "Participate, or lead?" she questioned. Philip remained silent for a few moments. "A mixture of both. Alara will receive a temporary promotion and will lead the ground assault against Diasta's Capital city. The Rear-Admirals with her

will handle the Null Legion fleet, with Alara in a position to take command should it be necessary.”

“You’re insane if you think that a twenty-seven-year-old should be made Rear-Admiral,” Victoire stated, only to falter as she realised her audience were the worst to argue that point to. “We were around that age when we were,” Cassandra commented. “But, they’re not wrong Phil – I need reasoning to bet so much on Alara and for what reason,” she stated diplomatically, likely already more than aware of Philip’s strategy.

“Alara has carried the title Hero of the Marines for a while now, and her presence alone has sparked significant boosts in morale, regardless of the costs she has faced in her various conflicts. This is a fight against an enemy not too dissimilar to Crach in his peak, and he nearly brought down the Empire then. Anyone who goes to fight in this war is more than certainly not coming back from it. Put it this way, would an everyday Marine fight without knowing that she is on the frontlines? Our military has always operated on the guise that might equals ranking. Alara is the only Republic Marine to take down a Betrayer, something even we couldn’t do – and whether we could now or not is irrelevant. The Republic war effort has to focus around Alara at its core in order for any assault to work. That or one of us has to go, and we all know the reasons why we each cannot.”

Jayce didn’t like the idea as much as Alara’s parents did. It was reckless, put too much pressure on her, and also made her a colossal target – even more than she already was. “Fine,” Jayce begrudgingly stated. “Alara will lead the ground assault, whichever Admirals you send along will handle the ocean-bound Null Legion until my crew and I have opened up the way to Scáthach – at which point, myself and the other Pirate Lords will engage her together. You better give Alara the Republic’s moneybag and a shopping catalogue; she’ll need everything you have available in order to stand a chance against the Null Legion’s finest.”

It wasn’t perfect, but it was a plan – and that was better than nothing. But as Jayce’s parents, Bjorn and Admiral Yashiro departed the room, Jayce remained sat – just long enough for Alara’s parents to notice and stay behind. They sat down opposite him. “Do you make her happy?” Silas questioned, looking Jayce sternly in the eye. “I do my best to - not always given our positions in the global state of affairs, but I never want to see her unhappy,” he answered. Alara’s father nodded. “Good enough for me,” he stated, reaching forwards and extending a hand. Jayce frowned and shook it. “You were equally as pissed off with your

father's strategy as I was, I could see it on your face. You want what's best for her, and given that she's in the military despite your... unequal status, it's clear that you've done your best to support her even when she's been fighting against you. I have to respect that. I'm built that way. My wife however..."

"You've grown up a lot since I last saw you," she said gently, standing up and walking around the table. Jayce stood up and looked down at her as she cautiously reached up with her hand. Her hand cupped the side of his cheek. "Still the troublemaker putting your mother through a world of stress, but that was never your worst quality. Senior Instructor Ordo has never spoken about anyone as highly as you, and for all that man's faults – of which there are many – he was always good at knowing who was worth betting on. Keep our daughter safe out there, I know you'll have your hands full but... try to come back alive, and maybe I can cook dinner for you like I used to. Do you still like chicken pie with a preposterous amount of gravy?" Jayce nodded and she smiled. "Then perhaps the world hasn't changed as much as I thought it had. Go on, she'll be waiting for you – I'm sure of it." Jayce nodded to Alara's parents and quickly departed, the couple holding each other tightly in a gentle embrace as they watched him leave.

Seize the Seas Tales: Preparations

Alara didn't like her new uniform – the black camo fatigues and matching beret felt alien, uncomfortable, fake. But orders were orders and, as for the moment, she was now acting as a Rear-Admiral. As much as she disliked it, she understood the logic: the armada she was helping to pick was unlikely to come back from this fight. She was unlikely to come back from this fight. Jayce. Astris. Wulf. Riley. Cyrenna, Beowulf, Kask, Weapon and all the others that had fought alongside her for years. All of them were as doomed as she was. But the Republic needed volunteers and she needed Marines to fight and die with her, so playing idol was her assignment – no matter how much she hated herself for it.

"Look at you!" Cyrenna stated, remaining seated as everyone else, including Beowulf, stood to attention. "Commodore," Alara greeted, looking out across the bar full of distinguished officers. "Admiral," Cyrenna returned, tipping her head with a finger salute as she sat back with her feet up on a table. "I want to thank you all for volunteering!" Alara began, looking at more than fifty people – all with their own specialist squads and crews.

"I have chosen each and everyone of you for this assignment, and quite frankly the only reason I believe we stand any chance at all is because of you all. You are

SEIZE THE SEAS

the best of the best of the best, or some of you have been unlucky to fight beside me before," Alara stated, looking towards Riley, Wulf and then Cyrenna. "There is every chance that this is a one-way trip, and I am sorry in advance to those of you that will not make it home, but we have a simple mission ahead of us: we are stealing the Sovereign's city and taking down the Null Legion Generals that are there. Any questions? No? Then make your preparations, put the Republic into debt and make our accountants work overtime! Prepare for war!"