

Chapter 245: For the Crown, Regardless of Whom it Ends Upon

The journey south to Diasta's capital was fast, too fast for any of the Rising Aces to enjoy. The Navy had been left behind and, as the Stacked Hand sailed towards Novalis and the Sovereign's mansion beyond it on the horizon, they found themselves alone on the ocean. It was early morning, a fog flowing across the waves and the sun low on the horizon. Jayce found himself stood near the bow, his body tense and cold as he stood in body armour. Sleep had been avoidant for almost the entire crew, but he found himself one of the only members on the main deck. "It's quiet," Astris stated, handing him a coffee before sitting down and looking ahead, dressed in her own armour and covered in ammunition. "It always was going to be," Jayce returned. "No one wants to be the first to arrive to a battlefield."

Astris looked up at him as he bore a grim expression. "It will be okay," she reassured. "We'll make it out of this. I know we will." He forced a smile and looked down at her. "I hope so. I'm not ready to say goodbye to any of our friends. Or her," he added, looking out towards the city of Novalis where Alara was due to assault. "She'll be fine. Alara's tougher than both of us. She'll do her part as long as we do ours, and the faster we do ours the faster we can help her with hers." Jayce shook his head; he couldn't quite understand where Astris' optimism had come from. They both looked back out towards the Sovereign's mansion on the horizon.

Jayce heard the first ship approach the rally point, long before he could see it. The crew were nervous, loud and chatty, but that was representative of their Captain. The Great Seacat came close to the Stacked Hand, the Heavyweight on its other side. "Mornin', great day for a war!" Kitty yelled over from the bow of her ship, before easily leaping aboard the Stacked Hand. She looked up at Jayce, her tabby-coloured hair short and her clothes casual for an incoming battlefield. She wore her usual grey leather jacket and a green choker with a bell. "Just the three ships with us then?" she questioned, looking around. Jayce chuckled. "They'll be here," he stated, the fog still laying low across the water.

A loud zap of lightning erupted nearby, followed by several more as half a dozen ships teleported onto the ocean. "Are we late?" Tim yelled out, pulling up with his flagship – the Knowledgeable – next to the Stacked Hand on the other side. "Still early!" Jayce called over. Tim nodded appreciatively, letting out an exhale of visible breath as he looked out ahead, his body tense and anxious. "Stick to the plan and we'll be fine!" Jayce told him, the younger man forcing a smile as he

met Jayce's gaze. "I've not lost faith in you yet. I trust you, Jayce." Jayce could only hope to repay that trust.

Slowly, more and more ships began to arrive. A neat thirty ships full of therians from Tanare, himself aboard a colossal ramming ship. Three huge maroon airships loaded with countless flyers from the Machinist, alongside two dozen sailing ships and a few submersibles. Thákane flew in the air aboard her water Dragon Nanabolele. Ningyo hovered above the ocean using a jet of water coming out of the back of his head, alongside a small army of ocean crawlers. Finally, a fleet of Engines arrived – their cyclops glowing red in unison as they sailed towards the Pirate Lord fleet. The fleet wasn't small, but compared to what lay ahead of them – it felt like nothing.

The fog evaporated, revealing at least three hundred Null Legion ships spaced out into five separate fleets – two assigned to guard the Sovereign's mansion, two to guard Novalis, with a third in between ready to engage Jayce's fleet. "By the ancestors," Bjorn muttered, as he came to stand next to Jayce, Kitty and Astris. "I'm sure it looks bigger than it is," Kitty dismissed, her joke barely hiding her shaking body. "We've faced larger before," Jayce stated. Kitty shook her head. "Last time they locked themselves into being sitting ducks. This time they're not going to waste their ships." It was true – the Null Legion was made up of veterans from the Old World war; they had faced all sorts of horrors before.

Jayce looked back, a small squadron of flagships sailing towards his fleet. "They're here," he stated, pointing out Alara's ship as well as the flagships of Rear-Admirals Loire, Ewon, and Alpin – each of them experienced Marines that had fought in the New World war. Somewhat alarmingly, there were only the four ships. "Where's the rest of them?" Kitty questioned in sharp alarm as the Navy pulled up alongside the fleet. "They're here," Jayce reassured, spotting Alara, Riley and Wulf across the line of ships between them. Alara nodded to him and he nodded back. "You look good in that uniform," he stated into his communicator. "Shut up," came a firm response.

"So, what now?" Bjorn questioned. "Everyone's here, do we wait for them or do we go to them?" As if in answer, an image burst into the sky over the ocean between the Sovereign's mansion and the fleet – an image of Scáthach. "So," it stated, "I see an army has risen up to challenge my authority! Well, it took long enough! Honestly, do you know how long it has been since I've had a real fight – a real challenge, not that... well, not to discredit... this, but..." Scáthach stated. One of the giant airships exploded in a colossal fireball, Kaina tearing out of its

falling wreckage in her giant golden Dragon form. Flames spread outwards, flaming debris falling down towards the ships below whilst also puncturing another airship and igniting the gas that was released in a large plume of flame. "Enjoy! I'll be waiting!" goaded the Sovereign, her image disappearing as the seas between the two fleets erupted in a mass of colossal tentacles and teeth.

"Red, Ningyo, take down Ura Soruk and her krakens!" Jayce commanded, as Bjorn ran back to the helm and took the wheel. Red nodded, leaping into the ocean with his trident as the ocean crawlers dove into the water to engage the sea monsters surging towards the fleet. "Launch all fighters!" commanded the Machinist, standing inside a large bronze exosuit that looked like an ancient diving suit only with a mounted jetpack, flamethrowers and two huge claws as arms. The bays on the damaged airship opened, a swarm of fighters flooding outwards as the airship tilted to the side and began to fall towards the ocean.

"Forwards! We fear no monster!" yelled the Therian King, his fleets surging forwards towards the sea monsters and the enemy fleet safely behind them. Jayce glanced towards Kitty and her Delivery Kats. She nodded and her two ships charged as well. "Soteria, Zhurong, Ordo, Taranis, Morgana!" Jayce commanded, pointing towards the Dragon diving towards them with a mouth full of fire and a mad snarl. The three Dragons launched off the deck, their sudden propulsion and heavy masses causing the entire ship to lurch backwards. Morgana shot off into the air aboard her broom with Ordo leaping into the skies after her. Wren launched as well with Falconer aboard her back, flying up high past Kaina as she slammed hard into Soteria's shield, shattering it before slamming into Tempest's behind it. Blood flowed out of her nose as she pushed off and took into the air after Wren and Falconer, with three Dragons, as well as Thákane and Nanabolele, in pursuit.

The Engines surged forward aboard their fleet, launching red beams towards the water at any creature that came close. The Machinist's fleet set off as well, her ships spewing flames and lead. The Stacked Hand held back, watching and waiting. Jayce ducked, a spear impaling the air where his head had been as Sétanta seemingly appeared out of thin air, a spear in each hand. "I was wondering when you would show," Jayce stated. A black bolt of a Focus-enhanced bullet flew past his cheek and almost hit Sétanta in the face. The Betrayer stumbled backwards as three more shots came flying past Jayce towards him as Riley and her snipers took shots at him. A grunt then escaped him as Thalia tackled him off the ship, the pair darting across the surface of the ocean.

Jayce turned towards Alara's ship, giving a thumbs up, before bending his elbow and then pointing towards Novalis.

"Forwards!" Rear-Admiral Alara Vanathur commanded, her flagship surging ahead of the other three ships. A small group of Null Legion ships moved forwards from their larger fleets, seeing only a small group of ships. "Ready!" Alara commanded. "Now!" she yelled as the ships came into range, her Marines throwing the variety of enchanted capsules in their hands towards the water as hard as they could. The capsules broke on impact, releasing the contained ships inside and unleashing an immediate and battle-ready fleet upon the unsuspecting Null Legion. "Fire!" screamed Cyrenna, her battle group immediately pushing forwards and spewing explosive shells from their top-mounted heavy weapons. The sudden barrage tore apart the enemy in heavy blasts of fire, the rest of their fleets immediately surging forwards to engage the sudden increase of Republic ships. Alara's fleet was the largest of the four, but the Republic had brought an extra hundred-or-so ships to the fray. The three Rear-Admirals commanded their own fleets to push past Alara's, immediately working on creating openings for her fleet to continue pushing forwards towards Novalis. Periodic beams of blue, cyan and even black Focus launched from Alara's flagship, the snipers picking out anyone on the enemy ships that looked important.

"Jayce?" Bjorn questioned from the helm. Jayce looked across the battlefield; Mages filled the air – throwing spells at one another. Periodically a large blast of golden energy would descend from above, obliterating a ship full of Engines or the Machinist's Pirates. Jayce's eyes swiftly locked onto a blonde woman holding a large staff atop the Sovereign's mansion. "Tim, Alice is on top of the Sovereign's mansion," Jayce warned.

"Not much I can do about it, at the moment, not until those sea monsters are dealt with or those guns are stopped," Tim responded. Jayce glanced down from Alice; the entire coastline of the island was mounted with heavy artillery and a standalone army ready to defend the island. "Take us in!" Jayce commanded, the Stacked Hand pushing forwards towards the battlefield. "Home crew, you know your roles – protect our home and be ready to get us out. Everyone else," Jayce stated, glancing mainly towards Arthuria and Astris. "Engage!"

Jayce leapt off his ship, Sola and Luna extending outwards into a pair of heavy greatswords. He dashed through the air, avoiding the barrage of gunfire shooting upwards from the Null Legion towards the mass of flyers in the air and the

Focus-enhanced warriors capable of dashing through the skies. A huge explosion shook the air as the damaged airship finally detonated, but Jayce ignored it – his eyes instead upon Alice and the guns protecting her.

The seas had descended into pure and utter chaos. The Null Legion fleets did their best to stay together, but they were similarly at the mercy of Ura Soruk's sea monsters as the huge beast thrashed about at the top of the waters, grabbing ships, sailors, and ocean crawlers alike before squishing them in their tentacles or devouring them whole in their colossal maws. Periodically, Jayce could spot a faint flash of Red beneath the surface as he and Ningyo engaged the ocean crawler Betrayer. A loud whine began to fill the air, the water bubbling in the centre of the battlefield before erupting outwards as a huge bipedal creature stood up. Jayce's eyes widened as he stared at a World Walker wearing an Engine's mask. The fallen giant unleashed a devastating beam of energy, disintegrating an entire line of enemy ships before a kraken launched itself out of the water and wrapped its tentacles around its huge body, the two colossal creatures falling into the water and thrashing about.

He carried onwards, glancing down to Astris and Arthuria carving a bloody path across a Null Legion flagship, with Lucinia and Orianna following Astris, each armed with a singular pistol and helping where they could. A roar drew Jayce's gaze east to the Dragons fighting against Kaina. She was far larger than all of them, with Nanabolele the largest of the quartet. Falconer and Wren had vanished, but periodically a large bolt of green would split the clouds and shatter the deck of a ship. Even Ordo seemed to have given up against Kaina, instead he and Thalia were dashing across the waters in pursuit of Sétanta as he cackled maniacally, cleaving apart ship and sailor on his chaotic dash away from them. He launched himself towards the Stacked Hand, only to bounce off a shield of lightning and a huge vengeful blood-crystal to launch towards him.

Through it all Zeta sang, her battle chants and songs drumming along with the thundering of the countless guns, a spectral band hovering behind her and playing guitars and drums as she channelled her magic to enhance those fighting with her whilst intimidating those against her. Across the warzone, blue portals would appear – eating up barrages of cannon fire and unleashing them back upon those that had sent it. Soldiers made of bone would crawl up along the hulls of ships before charging towards those aboard.

A steady plume of steam was making its way across the battlefield, the water bubbling as something moved beneath it in the direction of the therian fleet.

"Tanare!" Jayce warned. "Incoming, southwest!" The ocean erupted as the Destructive One rose up aboard a pillar of molten rock, beaching Tanare's ship aboard a platform of lava. The djinn let out a gargling roar, its orange armour opening up into a liquid maw. "You want to play with fire, huh?" Tanare questioned, taking off his hat and setting it down. "Then let's turn up the heat!" he yelled, charging at the being made of magma as his fur ignited into blue fire.

Jayce dropped down out of the skies towards the Sovereign's island, the guns turning towards him and immediately raining orange bullets towards him. He twisted and rolled, pushing off the air to increase his acceleration before landing in a loud burst of rock and dust as he shattered a weapon emplacement, before darting forwards towards the Null Legionnaires charging at him. He cut them apart with his swords, making a hole in the defence before leaping upwards towards the rooftop of the mansion. "Oh shit," Alice muttered, turning to face him with wide eyes. "Now this is unexpected," she stated, as Jayce darted forwards and cut straight through her. But her form broke apart into ice, a soft laughter in the wind. "That's me done! Byeee! Tell the Sovereign I'm sorry!" Alice stated. A nearby flash of purple indicated that she had fled. "Alice has fled the battlefield, keep your eyes out for her!" Jayce warned, looking out across the waters before dropping back down to fight the army beneath him.

Morgana weaved through the air aboard her broomstick, periodically dropping a singular vial of flash down towards a ship below. The resulting potion would then either begin to melt a hole through the decks or would burst into green flame that quickly began to spread and only got worse with water. She did her best to avoid the screams from friend and foe alike. There was nothing she could do to help them, not really, but she kept her eyes firmly on Astris and Arthuria as they made their way across the ships towards Jayce. If there was anyone she was willing to risk her life for, her sister was that person. One way or another, they were making it out of this – together.

Huge tendrils of wood whipped around the deck of the Stacked Hand as Bjorn weaved the ship towards the Delivery Kats and Tanare. "Die, die, die!" Gaea yelled, smashing the ships in their way. "Caelie, supply request!" Marisha stated, using the elevator near the front of the ship to hoist cargo from the cargo hold onto the main deck. "Where?" Caelie questioned. Marisha pointed forwards towards Tim's ship, a portal forming on the main deck that Marisha immediately shoved a crate full of magic stones through. "Medical supplies needed on Lord Solan's ship," Marisha then stated, pointed east. Any ship they could keep in the fight gave them an edge over the rapidly falling mass of Null Legion ships.

"All Pirate Lords, a hole has been made in their defences!" Jayce stated, wiping blood out of his face as he weaved through a series of strikes and cleaved a Null Legionnaire in two. "Make your way when you can! I will clear the path!" He staggered backwards, catching his breath for a moment before letting out a snarl and throwing Sola at a charging Legionnaire. "Just give up! Don't waste your lives!" he complained, to a mass of corpses around him. "Godsdammit!" he yelled, turning towards the sealed giant doors leading into the Sovereign's mansion. "Sola," Jayce commanded, the mimic returning to him before forming with his sister into a huge hammer. He swung, the doors shattering inwards in a spray of splinters. Jayce then half-ran, half-staggered inside. "Vexx!" he yelled.

"Astris, we need to move!" Arthuria yelled, twisting and beheading a pair of masked Null Legion with a single strike from her secondary sword. "I can see!" Astris stated, unloading her guns upon a trio of soldiers before immediately reloading. "We're going to need assistance!" Arthuria yelled, as Astris resumed shooting at anyone in sight. The Vampire Lord paused before shaking her head. A sigh escaped her. "No, you can make it!" she yelled back, apparating behind a group taking cover and gunning them down. "What do you mean 'you'? What about you three?" Arthuria questioned, taking a grenade out of her bottomless bag and dropping it below deck before closing the hatch shut. "We're needed here! All the Pirate Lords will be after that crown, someone needs to finish this fight! You need to find Elaine! She's not on this battlefield and there will be a reason for that – she and Vexx are the Sovereign's last line! Go find your sister, turn her or kill her! And if Jayce can't do the same for Vexx then I'm counting on you to take him out!" Astris yelled. "Ready? I'll clear you a path!" Arthuria nodded, the two Vampire girls apparating ahead in a splash of blood before Astris charged past them, guns blazing. "Good luck!" she yelled as Arthuria surged past.

"You too!" Arthuria yelled, dashing across the surface of the ocean as ships opened fire on her. Astris apparated from ship to ship, shooting the gunners before moving on. Arthuria made it to the island, cleaving through the few rallying defenders before surging in through the broken doors after Jayce. A moment later Morgana dove in after her aboard her broomstick. "Elaine!" Arthuria yelled. "Arthuria!" yelled Morgana.

Seize the Seas Tales: Last Push

Wicke sat tapping her foot as she sat on a beach in the sun outside of the final Dungeon. The faint remains of a scrapped outpost sat around her, everything

that the Guild couldn't be bothered to pack up in their hasty abandonment of the southern Dungeon. A stack of newspapers lay in a crumpled heap underneath her boot, the wind threatening to drag them away towards the waters. The one benefit of the Syndicate's rise to power was that the news now came from countless different sources – the issue with that was that it now required Wicke to subscribe to a whole roster of publishers in order to get some gleam of the full story on whatever was happening across the world. It was frustrating, and irritating, but for once all of the newspapers were saying the same thing: war.

War was on its way in the Old World, war led by Alara Vanathur and Jayce Exarga against the Sea Sovereign. "Hmph," Wicke uttered, adjusting her tiny sunglasses and then tipping back her wide-brim hat. "About damn time!" she stated, scrunching up the final paper before igniting the pile with a simple incantation. "Anything important?" Morgause questioned, leaning against a concrete wall as Wicke approached the Dungeon. "Only that we're on the clock. We need to be ready for Jayce and the others to return. We have about a month."

Morgause glanced out towards the south. "One month..." she muttered. "One month, sisters." Wicke carried onwards, glancing over towards Damian and Wam drinking some beers. "On your feet, we're going in! The Rising Aces are at war!" she called over. The pair looked at each other, tapping their bottles together before chugging the contents. Damian put his fingers in his mouth and whistled, Enki and Sabine looking up from their card game and Cinderlee and Raido glancing over from a cauldron bubbling over a firepit. "We're moving!" he confirmed, the group rushing to ready themselves before all assembling in front of the lone white tower. "The last one," Damian said to Wicke, looking to her. She nodded, a stern expression on her face. "The last one on this side of the Frontier."