

Chapter 246: Bonded by Blood, Broken by Family

Jayce ran straight at the main doors leading directly to Scáthach's throne room, and he slammed into them before bouncing back down the stairs leading up to it. "Great," he muttered, looking at the squad of Null Legion aiming their rifles at him. "The long way it is!" he growled, rolling to his feet and dashing at them with a sword and shield. They stood little chance against him as he ran left along the corridor crossing the front of the mansion.

Arthuria faltered as she looked down at the blood and vivisected bodies lining the floors. They all led off in one direction, given the trajectory of the blood sprays, so she immediately ran forwards – spotting Jayce up ahead of her as he pushed open a large set of doors. "Jayce!" she yelled out after him, as he stepped through into the next room. He stopped and waited for her as they stood in a large open room with four sets of doors. "That way, right?" she questioned, as she caught up to him. "Probably," he stated, pushing forwards and opening the door. "What, you don't know?" Arthuria questioned, striding alongside him.

"Guys, wait for me!" Morgana yelled, as she flew into the room aboard her broomstick. She crossed the room almost instantly, but the doors closed before she reached them. She hopped off her stick, the broom floating alongside her as she pushed open the doors, only - instead of finding Jayce and Arthuria - a squad of Null Legion stood waiting on the other side. "What the?" she questioned, the quintet drawing their blades. "I'll give you one warning: surrender and you'll live," she told them. They advanced towards her, the doors closing behind her to the cut-off sound of screams on the other side.

"The path is constantly changing, whatever is controlling the layout will throw as many obstacles our way as it can," Jayce told Arthuria, the pair of them duelling against a small group of cybernetically-enhanced Null Legion – their metallic limbs glowing blue as they swung large blades. "Right, so we're on our own until we make it through?" she questioned, catching a heavy downwards blow with her sword and then grabbing the blade with her gauntlet. She freed her sword and stuck the blade upwards into the Null Legionnaire's ribcage, the blade piercing out through his collarbone. He screeched, a metallic wail coming through the mask, that quickly ended as she grabbed the hilt of her blade, twisted, and cut up through his body before decapitating the cyborg. "Yeah, it seems so," Jayce confirmed, his blades slurping the blood covering them as they cleaned themselves. Arthuria tore off a piece of clothing from the deceased and wiped her sword. "Ready?" Jayce questioned. She nodded, discarding the bloody

fabric. "Ready," Arthuria confirmed, the pair of them pushing through a randomly chosen door into the next room.

A large cannon sat in the middle of the room mounted on four crab-like legs. A gunner sat next to it and fired a huge shell at them. Arthuria dove to the side, but Jayce swung down through the middle, parting the metal shell and sending the two halves into the wall behind him in a large explosion. Jayce dashed forwards, sliding under the walking gun and cutting open its underside. The legs gave out and Jayce finished off the gunner. "What in the Gods is that thing?" Arthuria questioned, as Jayce looked more closely at the broken weapon. "Some sort of Guild prototype," he stated, pointing out the Guild markings. "They'll throw everything they have at us." Arthuria nodded in acknowledgment and they continued onwards.

Half a dozen rooms came and went, everything inside them meeting a swift end as Arthuria and Jayce pushed forwards. The fatigue was building, the pair of them noticing it in each other, as they pulled closer and closer in order to guard the other. Arthuria pushed up her visor, before taking off her helmet altogether. "I need a rest," she stated, taking a waterskin out of her bag as Jayce watched the room. "Your turn," she then said, giving him the remainder. He drank it quickly before letting out a sharp exhale. "You know what's coming," Jayce told her. She nodded, looking ahead to a slightly more ornate golden door ahead of them. The rooms had been randomly connected using magic, but even she could sense that this one was different. It connected back to the path leading towards the throne room. "Yeah," Arthuria stated, wiping sweat from her brow and straightening up. "Then let's do this."

They pushed towards the door, shoving it open and stepping into a large circular, pillared room. The floor was covered in sand, congealed blood and broken weapons. A lone warrior stood in the middle dressed from head-to-toe in black armour. "Yours," Jayce stated, stepping back and letting Arthuria step forwards. Two blades lay embedded in the ground in front of her, both of them large and heavy, made of black, shard-like, metal with one side curved in two places and the other side straight. The hilt was short for such large swords, and both were marked with countless scratches. Elaine's armour was dark as night, visible pieces of chainmail lay beneath the numerous spiked plates and the pauldrons were large and jagged, like weapons themselves. A black cape connected to the back, but Elaine reached behind her and tore it off in a simple movement. Her helmet looked almost draconic, with two narrow diagonal slits for vision and a large golden plume coming out the back. "Sister," Arthuria stated, stepping

forwards. Elaine grabbed the two blades in front of her and took a defensive stance. "Good luck," Jayce told Arthuria, running towards the door towards the far left of the room. Elaine didn't move to intercept, she let him go – her gaze locked entirely on Arthuria.

Arthuria held her spare sword firmly in her right hand, she then tensed her left and a round golden shield appeared on her left arm. Arthuria nodded her head and her helmet reappeared, its own black mohawk plume atop the golden helmet. Her armour was gold with black accents, far smoother than Elaine's jagged armour with a metal battle skirt and cape on her lower back. "I don't want to fight you," Arthuria stated, stepping forwards towards her sister. Elaine said nothing. "Please, sister – let's talk."

"No," growled Elaine, lunging forwards and swinging both huge swords with a ferocity and speed of far lighter and smaller blades. Blocking and defending was all Arthuria could do as she was pushed back step by step with each strike intending to kill. The blows were heavy and exhausting, but Arthuria kept her guard up, waiting and watching the blows for patterns. Her foot left sand and touched stone, Arthuria then thrust with her sword, catching a chink in Elaine's armour. It wasn't much, Elaine's mastery of Focus immediately created a barrier to prevent the blade from touching her skin, but the metal broke under the blow – her chainmail splitting and revealing the skin underneath. Elaine took a step back and Arthuria pressed her, charging into her with her shield to knock her staggering backwards.

"End this now! I don't know what Scáthach has on you, but we're putting her down! You don't need to fight with her," Arthuria yelled, engaging the blows with precise slashes and thrusts that pierced through Elaine's defences. "Shut up!" Elaine yelled, unleashing a blast of Panic that staggered Arthuria. Elaine then swung her leg, sending Arthuria flying across the room into and through a large stone pillar. Arthuria coughed as she pushed up off the floor, only for her eyes to widen as a shadow descended upon her, impaling the floor where she had been as she rolled to her feet and darted forwards as Elaine hounded her.

Arthuria turned on her heels, a new layer of ferocity having surged out of Elaine as her blows came faster, harder and heavier than before. Arthuria waited, watching for the slight pause in Elaine's chain of blows – but the pause had vanished as another kick swept Arthuria's legs, an elbow dropping them both the floor. Arthuria swung with her shield, catching Elaine's chin and knocking her helmet free from her head. She then rolled away but Elaine dropped her left

sword and grabbed her cape, pulling her back before slashing across Arthuria's back. The armour held, but the blow knocked the wind out of her as her cape tore and she fell forwards.

Arthuria released her shield as Elaine picked up her dropped sword and rounded back upon her. A heavy kick caught Arthuria's chin, knocking her own helmet loose as she fell on her back. "You never should have come here!" Elaine growled, her slightly rounder face red and golden eyes furious as she lifted both blades up to stab down at Arthuria. Arthuria swung with her shield knocking the blades aside as they came down towards her before following with a two-footed kick that caused Elaine to double over. Arthuria rolled backwards and threw her shield like a discus at her sister as she retreated without her weapon. The shield bounced off Elaine's skull, causing her to stagger backwards and then let out a roar of anger.

"Why? What did I do to you for you to hate me so much? You left me alone! Abandoned me!" Arthuria yelled, as Elaine shook her head and refocused her vision upon her. Elaine grit her teeth, unable to look Arthuria in the eyes. "Why?" Arthuria screamed. Elaine leapt at Arthuria, swinging her swords at the empty-handed Arthuria. In a single motion, Arthuria drew Caliburn, swinging the flaming sword as her body erupted into radiant energy and white-feathered wings appeared across her back. The three swords met and Elaine was knocked backwards across the room. She rolled and slid backwards to a crouched position before she charged forwards as Arthuria took up into the air and flew down upon her.

One minute. One minute was all Arthuria had to put her sister down before she was left practically defenceless. "Dad was the scumbag! He left our family!" Arthuria cried, swinging a dozen blows in a blink of an eye. Her flaming sword left golden lines in the air as the blades clashed together, sand turning to glass around them, pillars shattering from deflected strikes and huge grooves gouging the stone floor as they clashed. "But you left me!"

A glancing blow tore open the armour across Arthuria's left arm, revealing crimson scales covering her body. "Mum took away our sisters, but you took away the only person I ever really had! You took away my sister!" Arthuria yelled, cracking Elaine's chestplate. Elaine swung, their blades clashing once again but locking in place against each other. Elaine leant forwards, pressing her swords down towards Arthuria, but then Arthuria flapped her wings pulling up above Elaine and pressing the blades down.

Elaine twisted the blades to the side, cutting through Arthuria's left wing to no effect before thrusting the other blade through her thigh. Arthuria screamed, throwing a gauntleted fist into Elaine's jaw before flying backwards. The blade remained in her leg but she tore it out before diving down at her sister trailing blood. "You gave up on us!" Arthuria yelled, swinging her sword at the singular blade left in Elaine's grasp. The anger in Elaine's face seemed to crack, a glance of confusion crossing through before the anger returned. "That's not true!" she yelled. "You chose solitude! Even now, you hate him so much that you don't even think about the only damn good thing that bastard did! He gave you me and me you!" Arthuria yelled, Elaine's blade faltering. Arthuria knocked the sword aside and thrust, her blade entering the crack in Elaine's armour and piercing straight through out of her back.

Arthuria's wings disappeared and she dropped to the floor in a crunch as Elaine staggered backwards with a confused expression on her face. She dropped her sword and slowly reached up to Caliburn in her chest, pulling it free in a large spray of blood. Elaine coughed, a dribble of blood escaping her mouth before she fell forwards onto her face. "No, no, no!" Arthuria cried, crawling forwards as blood seeped from her own wound. She rolled her sister over, the older woman looking up Arthuria with an expression of grief and loss as the anger subsided and tears filled her eyes. "Why did you come here?" Elaine questioned in a quiet wheeze.

"Shut up!" Arthuria snapped, taking out a large gemstone from her bottomless bag and pressing it to Elaine's chest before chanting. "Why?" Elaine questioned, shaking her head. "You fight me, kill me and now you're trying to save me? Twisted, don't you think? What's the point? I'm just going to fight you again," she warned. Arthuria finished chanting, her hands glowing golden as the wound started to knit closed. "You may have given up me, but I haven't given up on you. If I have to kick your butt all the way to the New World and back I will! Every day, for years, I waited for you to come home. To rescue me from that hellhole! You left me behind – you didn't even ask if I wanted to come with you!" Arthuria sobbed, tears falling down onto Elaine's face. "I would have run away with you, instead you made me watch our father kill our mother! When he left again... it was like she was... empty. And I went through that alone!"

Elaine shook her head and shut her eyes, a soft stream of tears sliding down the edges of her face. "I'm..." Elaine couldn't bring herself to even apologise, instead a bubbling anger brewed once more. She tried to sit up, feeling Arthuria's blood on the back of her head as she lay against her lap, but Arthuria pushed her back

down. "You're not healed!" Arthuria growled. "I'm not letting you die on me, not when I've got two little sisters counting on me to bring you home! I don't even know what to buy them for their birthdays - I already screwed up once, I'm not dealing with it alone again!"

A faint smile crossed Elaine's mouth, but Arthuria's face turned a ghostly white and she slumped to the side. "Arth...!" Elaine yelled, only for her name to get caught in her mouth as she said it for the first time in almost a lifetime. Elaine sat up and grabbed her sister, looking down at the huge wound in her leg. "No, no, no! Fuck!" Elaine yelled, desperately putting pressure on the wound. "Don't do this to me! You asshole, don't make me care again and then leave me!" Elaine cried, reaching into Arthuria's bottomless bag for anything of use. The door opened behind her and a pair of feet dashed across the floor towards them.

"Move!" Morgana yelled, glaring at her much larger older sister as she uselessly tried to shove her aside. Elaine flashed a simple warning, but then faltered as she met an identical set of eyes to her own. Morgana rummaged in her own bottomless bag, pulling out a healing potion and nursing Arthuria with it. Arthuria coughed on it but the colour returned to her face, her eyes fluttering open before focusing on her sisters. A faint smile spread across her face as she noticed Elaine holding her hand. "I don't know if you two have met before," Arthuria said quietly. Morgana and Elaine looked at each other, Morgana's face was blank and ghostly, whilst Elaine could barely look at her. "We..." Elaine said awkwardly. "A long time ago," she answered quietly. Morgana stared at her eldest sister with a confusing mixture of emotions.

Elaine looked very similar to Arthuria, only bigger and with a sharper nose and rounder face. She looked like she could snap Morgana like a twig, and almost certainly could, given her status as a Betrayer. The entire mansion shook around them, dust falling from the ceiling above. "A conversation for later perhaps... sisters," Elaine said awkwardly, groaning as she stood up before picking up Arthuria. A gentle spurt of blood came out of the crack in her armour and she immediately grimaced. "Put her down!" Morgana commanded, throwing Elaine's large arm over her shoulder as Arthuria took the other. "There are too many doors between us and the exit to fly straight out of. Come on!" Morgana stated, beginning the walk forward as the trio limped together.

Seize the Seas Tales: Horrors of the Past

"Wicke, this jump is something unreal!" Damian yelled, as the pair of them lay against a toppled stone pillar – a heavy vortex of fire incinerating the air above

them. "You don't say!" she returned, holding her hat to her head as the air was eaten up around them. Every single floor had been a battle: a combination of a hostile environment, monstrosities that thought and strategized and didn't just throw themselves at the group, as well as symbiotic relationships of creatures that by all accounts should have never allied.

"Move!" Morgause yelled from somewhere up ahead, the fire stopping and a loud croaking coming from above as the flames gave way to a swarm of brightly coloured frogs, the size of cats, stuck to the ceiling. Damian grabbed Wicke and dove forwards as they were descended upon; they rolled over each other and Damian scooped her up into his arms as she began to chant, throwing bolts of lightning behind them that popped the frogs like balloons. A heavy slicing sound filled the air further up the tunnel, a loud roar following before the ground shook. "Mop up the rest of them!" Morgause yelled, the tunnel illuminating as streams of magma flooded the walls.

"You two good?" Wam questioned, as he approached Damian and Wicke, Wicke still in Damian's arms. "Yeah," they both responded, only to immediately realise Wicke was still being carried and for her to be dropped to the floor like a sack of potatoes. "Ow," she complained, taking Wam's warm hand when it was offered before glaring at Damian. "I know you two mentioned the Dungeons increase in difficulty with each clear, but this seems... borderline unfair," Wam stated, as the three of them rejoined the others. They weren't even at floor eighty yet and several injuries had slowed them down significantly.

"Another Dungeon has fallen, but not from us," Cinderlee stated, kicking a purple magic stone with her shoe. "How can you be sure?" Wicke questioned. Cinderlee fumbled in her bag and pulled out a strange block-like device with a large antenna upon it. She shook it slightly and the glass cover glowed green as a liquid sloshed inside. She showed it off proudly to the group as several large patches turned red. "Um," Sabine uttered, raising her hand. "I don't get it."

"Gosh, you baboon – it's so utterly intuitive, even a banana peeling-" "We get the point," Wam cut off, folding his arms. Cinderlee let out an exaggerated huff. "The magicules in the air, the mana, ki, whichever term you prefer – whenever a Dungeon falls, that which is stored within it is released into the atmosphere. Like a... like a... a bomb, or volcanic eruption. Ash fills the skies, the same is true of the raw components of magic. It's why the Dungeons get stronger, they have more to suck in and use – just look how electric the air is with it," Cinderlee explained. Wicke and Enki both frowned, stepping closer and

looking at the strange device. "Are you saying the world is getting more... magical, with each falling Dungeon?" Wicke questioned. Cinderlee grinned. "Exciting, isn't it? All that Focus stuff, the length of time for spells to refuel or be cast – it's only going get more explosive!" Wam and Morgause shared a glance. "Not good," Morgause said quietly, Wam nodding in agreement.

Somewhat reluctantly, Wicke agreed to slow their pace. And with proper preparations, usage of Raido acting as a scout using his wax clones, and actual strategy – the remaining floors began to fall away, until once again the group found themselves within the Dungeon's control room. "Are we bothering trying to capture the Demon again?" Damian questioned, as Wicke stood and pondered in front of the central stasis chamber. She thought back to the warning she had been given last time and the risks involved. A sigh escaped her and she shook her head, both beings inside had spent too long acting as living batteries. They'd gone in knowing they were unlikely to come back out. "No, get ready," she stated, touching the console and shutting her eyes.

"Well, so you're the one destroying the Dungeons I spent so long designing," stated a young man dressed in blue robes eating a donut. Wicke glanced around at the endless blank environment they were in. "Where did you get that from?" she questioned, pointing at the donut. "Please, I've been sealed inside this place for what a few hundred years? Millenia? Longer? You think I wouldn't at least give myself the means to enjoy some luxury." Wicke shrugged and then nodded. "Fair enough. I'm Wicke, who are you?"

He vanished and she felt a finger tap her spine. "Curious thing you are, Wicke. Call me Aramos, Archmage of all that flows," he stated, clapping his palms together before forming a ball of water that spread out into the shape of dolphin that flew around the open space. He was young, probably only a few years older than her, but Wicke knew better than to make assumptions on the ages of Mages. "So, given you're dismantling my Dungeons, and I'm about to die – I'm guessing you have questions for me?" he asked, crossing his legs and sitting on nothing. "These Dungeons, they were made to hide the world away from... the Entrasites? What are they exactly?" Wicke questioned.

"Ah, well unfortunately – even I don't really know. All I do know is that they were highly resistant – no, that's not the right description – those monsters fed on magic. They were drawn to our cities, our strongest Mages, our strongest fighters and they devoured them. Nothing seemed to stop them, or so I heard. Truth be told, they killed my master, and no one survived an encounter with

them – the world just grew darker and darker as they made their way north, consuming cities and nations. The Dungeons were designed to starve them out, to create an inedible wall of guardians for the people within. Clearly it worked - you're welcome. Perhaps they've starved to death, or maybe retreated back to the dimension they came from. That's all I know." Wicke thought to herself and he looked at her with distinct curiosity. "How bemusing, very human," he mumbled. "What?" she questioned. He shook his head, a blue book appearing in his hands. "Well, carry on our legacy – please release the others too. If you have the time, of course." His body shattered like glass and Wicke stumbled back, immediately getting dragged through a portal back to the surface.