

## **Chapter 247: Vexx**

He was waiting for Jayce. He knelt in the middle of a colossal rectangular room. The floor was shiny, ceiling decorated with carvings of the ocean, and a dozen pillars lined the path leading to the Sovereign's throne room. Vexx hadn't changed in the last few years. He still had a mess of dirty blonde hair, a short and skinny yet muscular frame, pale skin apart from orange stains on his hands and forearms. His eyes were shut, but they matched the red earring hanging from his left ear. He wore a simple pair of black shorts and a black vest, his feet bare.

Jayce stepped forwards into the room, his eyes immediately glancing towards the retinue of additionally armoured Null Legion across the edges of the room. "So you finally arrive," came Scáthach's voice, her form shimmering into existence next to Vexx – her hand on his shoulder. Vexx didn't react, his eyes still shut. "I've come for him, and for you," Jayce stated, stepping forwards. All of the Null Legion raised their bayoneted rifles and aimed at Jayce. From the way their bodies reacted to his outreach of Focus, he could tell that these were the cream of the crop, the veterans amongst veterans, all of them more than capable of putting even Thalia into an early grave.

"Now I thought that would be the case," Scáthach stated, raising a finger to her lips as she feigned thought. "But, now well that causes me some issues. You see, Vexx and I have a little arrangement – broken man to broken woman and all. I swore to him, that if he disobeyed me, I would kill you. You see when I came across him, way back when, he was heartbroken. Lost and sad." She tutted. "A real loser. But out of the kindness of my heart," she stated, pulling out a bottle of some brown liquor out of thin air and presenting it Vexx. "I nursed him back to health." Vexx slapped the bottle out of Scáthach's hands, the bottle smashing on the ground. "Only, for some reason or another he didn't actually want to accept my kind offers. So, I had to improvise. And that's where you, Jayce Exarga, come in."

"Now, I have a deal to not kill you in exchange for Vexx, and I made a deal not to kill Alara in exchange for you, but she won't make a deal for Vexx's life so our little three way doesn't quite pan out. But I didn't end up killing Alara when you betrayed our little group of Betrayers, and that makes me look... weak. So, what do I do? I quite like a big dramatic battle to the end, scorched earth and all that, but if Vexx is only serving me to keep you alive then how can I get him to fight you?"

"Oh, I know."

“Kill him boys,” Scáthach commanded, her soldiers all twitching as they began to pull the triggers of their rifles. In near synchronicity the masked helmets of the Null Legionnaires exploded, spraying blood into the air before collapsing. Vexx hadn’t moved, he was still sat on the floor, but his hands dripped blood. “Thought as such...” tutted Scáthach, looking down at Vexx and shaking her head. “Then I guess we go a different way. If you won’t fight Jayce, then in order to save him I need you to first slaughter his crew, and then Alara and her friends, and then make your way onto his brother and parents. Now that, I know you can do.”

Vexx’s red eyes opened, locked directly onto Jayce as he stood up and took a step forwards. “Vexx, no, don’t do this – please,” Jayce begged, stepping forwards as Vexx began to walk towards him with glazed over eyes and a vacant expression. “I’m sorry,” Vexx said softly, as he got within a few metres of Jayce, but Jayce swung a gauntleted fist catching Vexx in the jaw and sending him staggering backwards. Vexx slowly looked at Jayce out of the corner of his eye before he spat blood and popped his jaw back into place. “Vexx, now hang on a moment,” Jayce immediately attempted, holding up his hands as Vexx glared at him and turned to face him with a look of malice. “There we go, see you soon,” Scáthach goaded, vanishing into thin air as Vexx knocked Jayce to the floor with a single precise punch to the stomach.

“I have no choice,” Vexx stated, turning and beginning to walk towards the door. “There is always a choice!” Jayce yelled, diving forwards and grabbing Vexx’s ankle in a pathetic attempt to stop him. Vexx looked down at him in disappointment. “Let go,” he commanded plainly, his knuckles cracking as he formed a fist. “You’re not going anywhere ever again!” Jayce growled, a kick hitting his side and sending him sliding across the floor across a pool of blood. Jayce retched before forcing himself to his feet and running at Vexx.

The assassin shimmered, Jayce’s eyes barely managing to track him as he dashed to a pillar and then leapt off it with a flying punch. Jayce raised his arms and blocked the blow, physically feeling the bones in his forearms crack under the impact as a sonic boom followed. “If I have to put you under, I will!” Vexx stated, his body shimmering as he moved across the room attacking Jayce from all manner of angles with a series of punches and kicks.

“I cannot let you do this. You’re better than this, she’s controlling you!” Jayce cried, swinging helplessly as Vexx slid under the strike before pressing his hand into Jayce’s ribs – the bones cracking with ease. “This is just me – the killer – it’s

always been me, Jayce,” Vexx stated, his entire figure vanishing from the room as the lights illuminating the room shattered and plunged the room into darkness other than a single beam over Jayce’s head. “The Sovereign hasn’t made me do anything I wasn’t willing to do before,” he stated, his words in the back of Jayce’s ear.

Jayce turned and swung, but he wasn’t there. “I’m sorry, Vexx,” Jayce stated. Shutting his eyes and swinging, his fist caught Vexx in the neck – a surprised gasp following. “I’m sorry for abandoning you when you needed me most. I shouldn’t have left you alone. You needed us and I...” A blow caught Jayce in the back of the knee, dropping him down to one leg – he felt Vexx’s hands across his head, but the grip released and Jayce was spared. “One,” Vexx said quietly.

Jayce scanned the darkness, ducking under a spinning kick before grabbing Vexx’s heel as he thrust out a secondary strike. Jayce slammed him down onto the ground, but Vexx rolled away into the shadows. A moment later Jayce felt Vexx’s fingers slide across his throat. “Two,” came another whisper from the darkness. “I... I failed you,” Jayce stated. A fingernail ran itself down Jayce’s spine. “Three.”

“I searched for you, waited for you!” Jayce cried out. A palm tapped his chest over his heart, a simple puff of air blew out his right eardrum. “Four, five.” Sola and Luna extended out into copies of Vexx’s dagger, a chuckle coming from the darkness. “Even now you’re still trying to save me! Why?” questioned Vexx. “Because I messed up, not you!” Jayce yelled. Vexx stepped into the light and looked up at Jayce, shaking his head. “No,” he said quietly. “No, you didn’t.”

Jayce dropped the two daggers but Vexx snatched them up and Jayce felt the air split above his skin before the two mimics bit Vexx and were tossed away by him. “Six,” he stated, stepping back into the shadows. Jayce shook his head, spinning on the spot as he tried to see Vexx. Jayce looked down at his fist, clenching it as tight as he could and channelling Focus through it. It flashed with black Focus. “Six,” Jayce mirrored, remembering their first fight back in the Imperial Arena.

Jayce swung, catching Vexx midair and sending him flying back into the darkness with a loud grunt. He heard stone crumble as a pillar collapsed. “Seven,” Jayce warned. “I waited for you!” Jayce yelled, concentrating a little bit more Focus into his fist. “I know you did. I know you all did...” responded Vexx, a sense of sadness to his words. Jayce’s ankles were knocked out from under him as Vexx rolled through them before he positioned himself and sat on Jayce’s back.

"Seven," he stated, standing up and stepping away as Jayce desperately got back to his feet.

"Come back to us, it's not too late!" Jayce pleaded. He was tackled into the darkness, a fast pain crossing his body as he crawled desperately back towards the light. "Eight." Time was running out; Jayce knew it had to end. They both knew it had to end, and there was no way he could defeat Vexx without lethal force. Jayce looked down as Sola and Luna slithered back onto him. "I deserved it. I nearly killed the kid. She would have died if I'd stayed."

"No! No!" Jayce protested, taking an unconscious step back as Vexx walked out of the shadows and stood before him. Slowly Vexx reached forwards, placing the edge of his palm gently to Jayce's arm in a soft chop. "Nine," he said sadly. Jayce threw a fist into Vexx's jaw. His head barely moved. Jayce threw another and it moved less. On his third strike Jayce felt the bones in his hand break. With a soft sweep of the leg, Jayce toppled to the floor laying flat on his back as Vexx mounted him and pulled back a fist ready to strike. "I'm sorry for letting you down," Jayce said honestly. "I failed you Vexx, and I wish more than anything I could go back five years and stop you from leaving our ship."

"You didn't fail me!" Vexx screamed, his face red and eyes blurry. "How many fucking times do I have to say it? I made the choice! I did! I nearly got Wicke killed! Me! I chose to screw up my opportunity to take your hand! You waited; I know you did! But I got so fucking high that by the time I came to, you were gone, just as you had said you'd be! You stuck to your word, and you were better off without me! As you always were! So do it! Kill me before I do the only thing I can to make up for failing you!" Vexx cried.

Jayce lay there stunned. "Vexx... We didn't leave Caedom for... weeks. We waited in the tavern by the harbour, but... you never came." All of the blood left Vexx's face and he shook his head. "No... no-no-no, I... you were gone," he said in disbelief. Jayce shook his head. "I thought you'd chosen to leave," Jayce said quietly. Vexx stood up, hyperventilating as he stepped away into the darkness before a slow laugh turned into a loud cackle. "What the actual hell! Fuck!" Vexx yelled, shattering a pillar with a punch before returning to the light. "You're telling me, that you were in that tavern? I thought you were going to wait at the pier?" Jayce shook his head and Vexx grabbed his head by his hair. "All this time... I thought you'd left me behind because I didn't find you guys in time." "I thought you'd left us because we hadn't been there when you needed us most."

Vexx sat down and put his head to his knees, shaking his head before slamming his forehead into his knees. "All this time... all this time... I could have gone home..." Jayce scoffed before beginning to laugh, only to double over in pain and hold his broken ribs. "Ow! You idiot! I thought... oh for fuck's sake Vexx!" They both sat there laughing at the idiotic miscommunication that had harassed both their lives for the last five years.

"I'm taking the blame for this," Vexx stated, eventually, his red eyes meeting Jayce's blue in the low light. "Damn right you are! Had you waited like five minutes you'd have known where we were! And all of... this..." Jayce trailed off as he thought about everything, he and his crew had been through without Vexx. "Xander died," Jayce eventually said quietly. "And Caelie, but she came back, and Falconer's birds."

"Not Wren too? I thought I saw her," Vexx questioned. Jayce shook his head. "No, she's fine, but... five years Vexx. You... you could have been there." "I'm sorry, and I'm sorry about the old man too. I didn't know him long, but... I remember him. He seemed... good." Jayce nodded, opening up his bottomless bag and taking out a healing potion. He threw it to Vexx who drank it quickly before taking out another for himself. "I thought you wouldn't take it. It would probably clean out your system."

"I... I am clean. No drugs, no booze... and you got in a few good hits. You're definitely stronger than you used to be," Vexx stated, throwing the vial into the darkness. "Um, thanks," Jayce stated, before gasping as his ribs popped back into place. The entire mansion shook, several streams of dust falling down from above. "We should probably get out of here, she's going to be pissed so we should find somewhere quiet to lay really low," Vexx stated.

Jayce stood up and shook his head, looking through the darkness towards the door leading to the throne room. "No, I'm here to finish this fight and that's what I'm going to do," he stated, taking a step forwards. Vexx dashed to block his way, placing a hand to Jayce's chest. "Jayce, no. You don't understand, she's... we can't beat her. Not even together," he stated, a real sense of panic in his voice that brought out a cold sweat in Jayce. "The world is counting on us to, we have to – the consequences for this will be so severe that there will be nowhere for us to hide if we do run away. And what about the others? The crew, Alara, the Republic, Kitty, Tim?"

"Jayce... please, I'm begging you. She's a monster." Jayce glanced towards the faint outlines of the corpses in the room. "We have to Vexx. I need to. Fight with

me, we can beat her – together,” Jayce stated, reaching into his bottomless bag and taking out a necklace. Vexx’s eyes widened as he looked at his old communicator. “Is that...?” Jayce handed it to him, a faint smile on his face. “Come back to us, I need you now more than ever before, Vexx.” Vexx squeezed the enchanted pearl, before tying the necklace around his neck.

“This is getting rough! I don’t know how much more of this we can take!” Bjorn yelled out, as Astris and her girls landed back onto the Stacked Hand. The Pirate Lords had left the battlefield and, in their absence, the Null Legion were rallying much harder than they had before. “Hang on! We need to hold out for Jayce,” Astris yelled up to him. “Trust in him! Only a little longer! I know it! He’ll come through!”

Wicke sat on the beach of Last Drop, looking out towards the ocean as the sun sizzled the tattoo across her back. She let out a sigh, her mind elsewhere as the boulder crabs scuttled around her, fighting over homes. “Don’t let me down, Jayce,” she muttered, listening to the communications flying out from her communicator. “Don’t die on me,” she prayed, dropping her eyes onto her knees. “Daddy’s home,” came Vexx’s voice from her communicator – the voice foreign, alien, but not forgotten. Wicke leapt to her feet, her eyes wide as she fumbled for her communicator as a uniform thought escaped the mouths of all of the original crew. “Vexx?” questioned Bjorn, Wicke, Yuthura, Marisha, Falconer, Zeta and Caelie. “Ready for me to win a war for you arseholes?” Vexx goaded, extending a fist towards Jayce as they stood in front of the throne room doors.

Bjorn chuckled. “Piss off, assassin. You’re five years late to duty,” he stated, spinning the Stacked Hands wheel and turning towards the Sovereign’s castle for another assault. “Sorry old bear, does that also mean I have five years of backpay to collect?” Vexx returned, as Jayce bumped his fist and pushed open the door. “We’ll see. Survive this, and maybe I’ll consider it.” Vexx grinned, but his smile faded as Scáthach glared down at him from aboard her throne.

“I thought we had an agreement?” Scáthach questioned, the typical smile on her face gone – replaced instead with a glare that froze both Vexx and Jayce in place. “Deal’s off!” Vexx stated. “I’m where I belong, where I’ve always belonged!” “Pity,” Scáthach stated, Vexx dropping to his knees and then the floor as Jayce dropped to a kneeling stance. Scáthach vanished from her throne, appearing in front of them both with her boot on Vexx’s neck and hand on Jayce’s throat, her brown eyes glowing purple. “I would say I’m enjoying this, but I was hoping for more from you,” she stated, looking down at Jayce as he gasped for air. “You, I

got what I expected,” she added, looking towards Vexx. Jayce concentrated on his hands, black Focus covering them as he tried to break free. “Please,” Scáthach stated, her entire body burning with white flames. “You still know nothing!”

A blast of blue light slammed into Scáthach sending her sliding backwards into the centre of her throne room. “Jayce!” Kitty stated, running to his side as he took in a heavy gasp of air. “You okay?” Tim questioned, following in after her. Tanare gave a look down towards Vexx. “Get up,” he said unsympathetically. The doors on the other side of the throne room opened and group of eight Engines of varying sizes charged in with the Machinist in her exosuit, Ningyo and Thákane. “My Pirate Lords, you’ve come to me!” Scáthach cackled, backing up towards her throne and gesturing for the group to come fully into the room. “Good, saves me the effort of hunting you all down!”

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Parting for Now**

It was finally over; the Dungeons in the New World were all gone. Wicke had done exactly as Jayce and her sisters had asked, yet it felt almost disappointing. She was disappointed. For better or for worse, as she looked across the group in front of them, standing across the busy harbour of a nearby island, she didn’t want it to end. “The war should be coming to a close, hopefully,” Wam stated as he looked down at Wicke. She nodded. It was happening as they spoke, and regardless of the outcome – her time with the group was over. “I... I just want to say thank you,” Wicke said nervously to the group. “I couldn’t have done this without each and every one of you. I know it hasn’t always been the best, and it certainly hasn’t been the safest few years, but... it’s meant a lot to me to have you guys as my-” Wicke looked towards Damian, “-our crew.”

Sabine immediately began to wail, tears streaming down her face. “I don’t want it to end. I have like no other friends! And although you guys paid, like, a lot of money – I don’t know if I’ll ever meet anyone as cool as you guys!” she sobbed, wrapping her arms around Wicke and squeezing hard enough that she felt her ribs crack. “We’ll keep in touch, once we’re back with Jayce and the others we might be able to bring you along!” Wicke gasped. Sabine released her and wiped her eyes. “You mean it? I know we’re technically all members of the Rising Aces second crew already but...”

Wam slowly turned and looked at Damian and Wicke, raising a firm eyebrow. Neither Wicke nor Damian had any defence, waving away his silent judgement with a simple gesture. “We’ll meet again,” Morgause stated, placing a hand on Sabine’s shoulder and pulling her in for a hug. Sabine began to sob again. Damian

then turned towards Cinderlee. "You're free to go, as far as the Republic is concerned, you're not an issue for them. Just don't go blowing anything up that doesn't belong to you."

Cinderlee grinned madly. "I hear you perfectly - I'll do my best to only blow-up things that don't belong me," she stated, nodding to Wicke before turning and walking away. "No, I said don't!" Damian yelled after her, but she vanished into a crowd with disturbing ease. "Oh well, not my problem," Damian muttered, wiping his hands and looking towards Enki. "Do you have everything you need for your report on the surface?" Wicke questioned, to the ocean crawler. He nodded. "I believe so. This should be plenty to earn me an elevation in position amongst the archaeologists." Enki looked towards Damian. "It has been fun, despite all the violence – I did enjoy our time together. Should you be in need of me for any more exploration, do not hesitate to reach out," he offered before walking towards the water. "And how would we do that?" Damian questioned. Enki tapped his necklace. "Fair seas to you all!" Enki called out before jumping into the harbour.

Damian and Wicke then turned towards Raido. He let out a long sigh and held up his hands. "As discussed," he stated, stepping onto a large sheet of paper that had been laid out on the floor – a ritual circle drawn upon it along with two clay dolls. He groaned as the dolls took the forms of the two Demons he had played host to. Somewhat mercilessly, Wam immediately grabbed them as the two Demons attempted to run away – stuffing them into his bottomless bag. "Take care of them, my mind will be lonely without them and my nights lonely without you all. May our blades cross again on the same side," he stated, turning and walking away.

Morgause released Sabine, stepping closer to Wicke, Damian and Wam before looking back towards the bawling Sabine. "We'll see each other again," Wicke assured her. "I promise. Friends don't break promises." Sabine sniffed and wiped her eyes before forcing a smile. Wicke began to chant. "I'll miss you," Sabine stated before the group vanished in a flash of purple lightning, leaving her all alone.