

Chapter 250: A New Home

The Great Seacat and the Stacked Hand sailed south together, leaving the flames of Novalis and the Sea Sovereign's mansion behind on the horizon. The Heavyweight had sunk, but Somme had managed to rescue as many of his crew as he could, bringing them aboard the Great Seacat before its demise. Kitty sat on the deck of Jayce's ship in silence, her eyes periodically glancing towards Elaine as she leant looking out towards the war they had left behind, and Vexx as he stood by the wheel with Bjorn. She knew the reason to them both being present, but she couldn't help but feel slightly uncomfortable. All the more uncomfortable as she quietly said goodbye in her head.

"I will miss you," she whispered, to the Demon that had been her truest companion for so many years. "There are no words to say what you mean to me, dearest Kitty," returned Pursan in her head, as Morgana drew a ritual circle on the deck and placed a clay golem inside it. "But all good things must come to an end, and it appears this is it." Kitty smiled softly as Jayce offered a hand to her. "We're ready," she said gently, stepping into the circle. A faint flash of red light and it was all over, a small green cat with nine tails purring by her feet. "You're far cuter in this form," Kitty said, with a tearful grin to Pursan. The cat sat and looked up at her with his green and gold eyes. "How diminishing, but..." he stated, looking at the similar tiny forms of Baal – a blood covered humanoid with two pairs of curling horns and a pale face – and Belial – a humanoid with horns and a blank mask-like face dripping gold from its eyes. "Well, I suppose I'm amongst kin."

Kitty nodded, stepping away and watching Pursan approach the other tiny Demons. "You'll take care of him, right?" Kitty questioned to Jayce. He nodded, holding out a bottomless bag to her. "Falconer knows a spot. It'll be perfect for them, I'm sure." She smiled before grabbing him in a tight hug. He stood frozen for a moment before wrapping his arms around her. "Never in a million years would I have presumed we'd end up like this," she said into his chest. He held her back and rested his head on hers. "No, but I'm glad I could count on you until the very end."

She stepped back and wiped her eyes with the bag containing a greater fortune than several nations. "You say this like it's goodbye forever," she half-laughed, half-cried. "True, it's just for now. I may need you to deal with those two fools," he stated, pointing back north. Kitty smiled and shook her head. "Pair of idiots fighting over nothing," she said, looking up at Jayce's head and the stubborn

crown that refused to leave his head. A sigh escaped her and she turned back to her ship. "We best get going if we want to avoid that mess. Be seeing you, Sovereign Exarga," she stated with a curtsy, before leaping aboard her ship. "Alright boys, let's go home!" she yelled, her crew cheering as they pulled away. "Bye bye!" yelled her sailors, waving at the Rising Aces. Jayce shook his head as he watched them leave, all eyes slowly settling upon him and his crown.

"So, care to explain how you have that?" Bjorn questioned from the wheel. "Well, rather irritatingly, it appears that it has decided I'm the new Sea Sovereign," Jayce stated, folding his arms. A few chuckles emerged, and with a roll of his eyes he took it off and threw it overboard, only for the crown to fade back into existence upon his head. "Tempest, please fix this for me," Jayce stated, taking it off and handing it to the djinn. "I will do my best, Sea Sovereign." Jayce nodded appreciatively and looked towards the rest of his crew.

The three sisters were all sat with each other in a quiet and nervous silence. Vexx nodded to Jayce from his position by the helm with Bjorn. Astris sat brushing the hair of Lucinia as Orianna waited her turn. Zeta was helping to bandage up Ordo and Thalia with Jeanne and Yuthura. Marisha was walking around with snacks and fresh water with the help of Gaea. The three Dragons were asleep. RK was grumbling by the bow with Caelie sat on top of him and the Demons were running around in a circle by his feet whilst Mai Lu attempted to settle them. Wren sang as she flew over the Stacked Hand and Red was stood leaning against the main mast. But Jayce's gaze landed on Falconer, the stoic man's golden and green eyes locked on the island they were approaching, and the sheer cliff where the ocean ended and the Scourge began just beyond it.

"Are you sure this is the best place for them?" Jayce asked him as he stood next to Falconer. "It is by all definitions, the end of the world. The Leyline will support and protect them. And... trust me, Jayce, I know they will be safe," Falconer returned. Jayce nodded, his eyes glancing towards the vast wooden growths covering Falconer's body. "Are you... are you alright?" Jayce questioned cautiously, but where pain had been on Falconer's face a simple smile broke through. "Yes, I am. For the first time in a while, I feel I can breathe easier." Jayce rested a gentle hand on Falconer's human shoulder, the pair of them turning to the approaching island.

They brought everyone and the ship with them, stepping through a short tunnel out into a large grove. The ground was dry, a few patches of nearly dead grass across the huge crater. There were signs of an old spring but a weak dribble was

all that remained. The Demons looked around in hesitation, as did the Rising Aces. "Are we sure this is the place? I mean – I know they don't need to eat or anything but this seems a little... cruel?" Zeta questioned, looking around.

Falconer stepped away from the group, slowly approaching a small and dead tree in the middle of the grove. "Falconer?" Jayce questioned, approaching him. "I haven't been fully honest with you, any of you," he said, turning to the crew. "The Scourge... it is not dead, only asleep, and whilst we were all separated Fenn and I sought about changing that. Here is... the last point to undo the damage wrought upon our world, but... well."

Falconer knelt down and gripped the dead tree with his wooden arm. The wood began to twist and extend, wrapping around the tree before digging into the ground. "What are you doing?" questioned Yuthura, stepping forwards. "Someone stop him!" she stated, pointing with her cane before stumbling to her knees, her body still covered in wounds she had taken upon herself. "What's going on?" Marisha questioned, the ground shaking before flowers and grass sprouted around them.

Jayce's eyes widened and he stepped towards Falconer only for a firm human hand to be held out towards him as Falconer shook his head. "We all have our duties, our purposes. We do not always know or understand them, but we all know when they are ours," Falconer told them. "This is mine, it always has been." A spray of water erupted from the spring as water rushed out of it, the entire island shaking violently.

Large roots tore out from the ground, digging into Falconer's legs and body as his wooden growths began to wrap around him. "No! Falconer!" Jayce cried, stepping forwards, but Falconer simply smiled at him. "We all have our dreams. This is mine and I will see yours become a reality, my friend. Thank you all." The wood twisted around his head, enveloping him completely within the trunk of a huge tree that reached high into the air. Jayce dropped to his knees. "No..." he cried quietly.

Silence fell across the entire crew as they all stared at the tree Falconer had turned into. The grove had transformed, the dead replaced with life. A loud cry split the skies as Wren circled above before slowly dropping down to land on a large branch that extended outwards in a near-perfect perch. She sung loudly before dropping to the floor with a crash and laying against the tree. Jayce hung his head low as tears silently fell from his face.

"We can bring him back right, get him out of there? He's just inside the tree, we can get him out right?" Zeta questioned, rushing forwards and placing her hands on the tree. "Gaea, we can get him out – right?" Zeta questioned, looking towards the dryad with tears streaming down her face. "I... I'm sorry... he's... he's gone," Gaea cried. Zeta slowly slid down the tree and buried her face in her hands. "No..."

The stars had started to appear above by the time any of them were ready to accept what had happened. But Vexx was the first to say anything. "You were a good man, a great eye," he said quietly to the tree, before stepping away. "I will look after your garden," Gaea then reassured. Marisha stepped forwards and placed a hand to the trunk. "I could always count on you to be the voice of reason, and - in a crew distinctly lacking it - I was glad to know you were always there."

"You've dumped your workload onto me now, old friend. It was pleasure," Bjorn said gently. "Stupid fool," Yuthura whispered, placing her forehead to the tree and leaning into it. "The old people should always go first." Each and every crew member said their goodbyes until the eyes landed onto Jayce. Slowly he approached the tree. "Every good crew has its Navigator. The person that tells them where they're going and how to get there. You were always more than that. You were our light in the desert, our rock in the storm, our eyes in the skies. Thank you, Falconer, thank you for being here all this time and never giving up on me... on any of us."

Jayce turned towards the large roc leaning against her master. "I'm guessing you're staying here?" he questioned, approaching Wren and placing a hand on her head. She cooed gently and he smiled. "Look after him, Wren, look after them all," he stated, looking towards the Demons across the grove. She let out an ear-piercing shriek and Jayce nodded to her before stepping away. Slowly he left the grove, releasing the Stacked Hand from its bottle and waiting for his crew to return when ready.

They stayed by the island until the morning, all of them grieving in one way or another, but as the sun rose, they found a new sight ahead of them that in someways brought a little bit of relief to them. The Scourge had shattered and fragmented: huge canyons had spread across the barren lands ahead of them, a steady layer of water spilling out of the ground and filling the horizon. The water flowing over the edge of the world was no longer simply fading into the ground,

it was filling the south of the world and the red was turning green. "That damn fool," Yuthura said gently. "He actually did it. He healed the world."

They turned away from the edge of the Ancient World, beginning their long journey north, but rather than teleport all the way – Jayce figured he and his crew should take it slow, and enjoy the journey back home. Tempest took them northeast, just enough to get out the way of any potential enemies and then, with a casual trajectory towards the Frontier, the crew finally took a real moment to breathe again.

Vexx however, didn't really know how to do that. He'd spent pretty much the entirety of the day staring out from the crow's nest looking for anything potentially hostile. Unsurprisingly, with the whole world reeling from the death of Scáthach and the emergence of, what people were now referring to as, the two Pirate Emperors: Tim Kane and Therian King Tanare, there was nothing waiting to fight them. Periodically someone would visit him in his spot, mainly Caelie, who would sit in comfortable silence for a little bit with a snack or two, or Jayce who would share a story from his adventures, but time passed and the sun swiftly rolled over his head towards the horizon.

Eventually, Vexx descended from the crow's nest and began to wander in search of some food. "You okay?" questioned Jayce when Vexx stepped into the living quarters. Both Astris and Caelie were asleep and leaning into him as he sat on one of the sofas. "Yeah, just a bit hungry," Vexx stated, helping himself to the remains of dinner in the fridge. "You know, you could eat with us. And that goes for Elaine too. You two don't have to be all edgy and keep your distance. You're welcome here, regardless of... well... everything."

Vexx looked at the sofa Jayce was gesturing to, his eyes slowly glancing towards his old bounty poster on the wall, his first title amongst the crew and his signature written upon an ancient document. "Sit," Jayce pushed. Vexx sat down with a plate laden with leftovers and looked towards his old Captain. "So...?" Jayce questioned, a faint mumbling coming from Astris as he gently repositioned her. "A lot has changed... everything has changed," Vexx said quietly, stuffing his face. "You'd be surprised at what has changed and what hasn't," Jayce returned. "Anything in particular that stands out?"

Vexx scratched the back of his head, a simple glance towards Astris saying enough. "She and Ordo found their way to us. When Astris became infected... there wasn't really a home for her in the Empire and Alara asked me to take her in. Ordo was on the chopping block, a target for the Church and the Navy to

eliminate. With a bit of luck, he bumped into us and he helped fill a gap you left.” “Right...” Vexx said quietly, Jayce immediately questioning whether he had misspoken. “It wasn’t really my question but it explains a few things.” “How so?”

“This place, this crew... feels a lot closer than I remember. Everyone seems to have someone.” Jayce glanced down towards Astris and Caelie before looking back at Vexx. “Was there anyone...?” Jayce questioned. Vexx stared at him before the tips of his ears flashed red and he looked away. “A long time ago... I left him behind,” he partially lied. Jayce held his tongue for a moment, letting Vexx continue his meal. “Was this Oni?”

Vexx choked on his meal and almost swallowed his fork in the process. “Who – argh – who told you that name?” Vexx questioned, his entire posture defensive and red eyes twinging with panic. “It was a name that came up from the Republic, they have a few Fists amongst them now.” Vexx’s face darkened as he looked at the floor. “It was...” He shook it off. “A story for another time.” Jayce nodded. “Sorry,” Vexx immediately stated, but Jayce shook his head. “I just need a bit of time to get used to... this again.” He stood up and headed to the kitchen, dumping his plate in the sink. “Marisha will kill you,” Jayce warned. Vexx chuckled, washing up his things before leaving. “Night, Jayce.”

“Night, Vexx.”

Elaine nodded to Vexx as he stepped out onto the main deck. He nodded back to her but kept walking, descending below on his path back to his room. She almost called out to him, her right hand leaving the safety of the edge of the Stacked Hand before it clenched into a fist and returned back to position. It didn’t feel real. No one had threatened her, or told her to leave. There was animosity, plenty of it, along with a more than fair dose of fear, but the Rising Aces had been fair to her – and she hated it. She wished they would scream and yell, threaten or attack her. It all felt... unnatural. Too quiet.

“I’m going to bed,” Arthuria stated from across the deck, “you remember where my room is, right?” Elaine nodded to her sister. “Okay, goodnight big sis.” Elaine tried to speak, to return the words but it got caught in her throat. She simply nodded and turned back out towards the moonlit waters. A gentle set of far softer footsteps than Arthuria’s stomps pitter pattered next to her, a long exhale announcing Morgana’s arrival as she looked up at Elaine. Elaine towered over her in practically every measurement. She was a foot taller, her shoulders near equal to two of Morgana’s and her weight likely similarly doubled from her

dense muscular form. They really didn't look like sisters, yet as Marisha walked past and their identical golden eyes glanced her way – there was no denying it.

"Do you remember much about Dad?" Morgana asked softly. The wood creaked in Elaine's clenched grip. "More than you, that's for sure," Elaine responded, looking up at the sky and trying to block out her last memory of Uther Pendragon. "Yeah... definitely," Morgana returned, immediately piercing an uncomfortable feeling into her sister's heart. "Fuck, what do you want?" Elaine pressed, turning to face Morgana and causing her to physically step back with fear. "Never mind," Morgana muttered, turning and stepping away.

"Morgana, shit, fuck! I'm sorry!" Elaine stated quickly, abandoning the safety of the edge of the ship and following her sister. Morgana turned and looked at her. "I... I don't know how to do this. Any of it. I don't have any happy sisterly stories to share. Or fond memories of the home with two crying babies and a house full of adults screaming and shouting. But..." Elaine met her sister's gaze. "I want to try to be better at... this," she stated, gesturing between them. "I just... don't know how." Morgana stepped forwards and buried her face in Elaine's large chest. "Just hug me back," Morgana returned. Fearing she would shatter her if she wasn't careful, Elaine slowly hugged back. "I remember this..." Morgana said into Elaine. "Your smell."

"Well... I guess I did sit with you sometimes, when I was holding... Mor... Morgause? Are you crying?" Elaine questioned, feeling a dampness spreading across her chest. "No," Morgana lied, pulling deeper into her eldest sister. "Okay, sure." Eventually Morgana emerged for air, before gesturing towards Gaea's tree. They sat down underneath its pale branches. "This is more me," Elaine stated, feeling the grass in her fingers and the breeze on her face.

Morgana sat in silence, not quite sure of what to say. "I'm sorry about your mother," Morgana eventually stated. Elaine tensed but it quickly faded. "It's... it's okay. I knew it in my heart that she was gone. She was... a weak person, and a selfish one for forcing us to abandon you and your sister... and your mothers. I'm sorry for not... for not being enough to stop them. It wasn't fair for one family to be..." Elaine trailed off with a chuckle and a shake of her head. "My Mum died too... sickness. Um, but Morgause's mother is still well." "That's... nice. She was kind, if I remember correctly. Practically a child when she had Morgause, she felt more like an older sister than a... stepmum."

"We... We could go see her?" Morgana proposed. Elaine looked over towards her. "I... I'm not sure. This is a lot and there's something you deserve to see first.

If you want to afterwards, then sure – I'll go wherever you guys want me to." "Promise?" Morgana questioned, extending a pinkie finger to Elaine. Elaine nodded and hooked the finger with her own. "I promise... little sister. We do things together now... as a family."

Final Bastion eventually came into sight after a few weeks of gentle sailing. An expansive fleet surrounded it in all directions, the Republic wasting no time in exerting their authority in the Old World and bringing in a whole variety of nations into the arms of the Republic. Syndicate ships were sailing almost continuously in and out of the Frontier, but none of it mattered to Jayce. He stood on the main deck as Bjorn guided the Stacked Hand into the Navy's main harbour.

Astris, Lucinia, Orianna and Ordo all stood in front of him, each of them wearing their own backpacks and with their bottomless bags containing all of their personal items. "Have you got everything?" Yuthura questioned once again to the two young girls. "Yes, granny – we've got everything," the girls returned, a genuine smile on Yuthura's face as she stood hunched over on her cane. "Take care of each other, and of her," Yuthura told the children, gesturing with her cane towards Astris. "We will," promised Lucinia, hugging Yuthura tightly before her sister did the same.

Astris and Jayce refused to break eye contact with each other, a faint smile on both their faces as they stared at each other. "I would say it was fun..." he eventually stated. She shook her head, letting out a small laugh. "It was hell for me, and you know it... but I wouldn't trade it for anything." The Stacked Hand came to a rest; six people stood ahead of the numerous guards on duty on the pier below. Admiral Exarga stood at the rear with Wulf and Riley, both Cyrenna and Beowulf were before them, but Alara stood at the front.

Astris and Ordo moved from crew member to crew member, giving a long hug or a firm handshake to each individual. "Don't you dare fail to keep in touch," Arthuria told Astris, hugging her tightly. "Same to you, Paladin. I hope your new Order is better than the last or you'll have me knocking on your doors." Arthuria smiled, looking down towards Jeanne. "Oh, you can count on it, Vampire Queen."

Ordo stood in front of Yuthura, the old woman hardly able to meet his gaze. "You deserve a retirement, there's a hospital here that would benefit from your guidance. A lot of young fools that could use a firm cane to guide them," Ordo offered. Yuthura shook her head. "No, Ordo. My place is with these idiots. And

with you gone the average age is going to drop significantly. Someone around here needs to carry on the cranky old person persona," she said, hugging him tightly. He could feel her body trembling, the toll from the war evident. "Look after yourself, Doc." She released him and he stepped away.

Ordo turned and looked at the human form of Taranis, the Dragon standing proudly before him. "You could come with me?" Ordo offered to him, but the Dragon shook his head. "No," Taranis stated. "Our terms are up, and it's time that I to show the world once again why we are the top race! But... maybe once in a few years I might call upon you to fight alongside me. If that is okay?" "I will be waiting," Ordo stated, placing a firm hand on his Dragon's shoulder.

Jayce followed Astris, Ordo, Lucinia and Orianna down onto the pier. Astris ran straight into her brother and sister's arms. "You're home!" Cyrenna cried, holding Astris tightly. "You're finally home!" Astris nodded into her arms, tears falling from her arms as Cyrenna nearly crushed her. Eventually Cyrenna released her and both the elder Kai's looked up towards Jayce. "We are in your debt, Jayce," Cyrenna stated firmly. "In ways I don't think we'll ever be able to repay."

"Just take care of her," Jayce returned, before glancing towards Alara. "Them both," he added. Cyrenna and Beowulf both nodded, stepping away as Astris stepped into Alara's arms. Ordo stepped through the group with the two young Vampires. "Glasses," Ordo greeted to Philip. Admiral Exarga nodded to his old mentor. "Senior Instructor, welcome back. Who are these two girls?" he questioned. "New recruits, special aides of Captain Kai," Ordo stated, looking towards Astris as she and Alara looked at Jayce and made their goodbyes. "Well, Special Operator Kai may find it easier for her aides to settle in with her after her debrief." Ordo nodded, looking back towards the Stacked Hand and the crew that had saved his life. "An adventure unlike any other..." he muttered, tipping his head to Bjorn.

"I thought this was it, Jayce?" Alara questioned, the smile gone from her face and her voice hushed as she stood near to him. He held his hands up and backed away. "Last one, I swear. One last adventure to drop Wicke off with her sisters and then I'm out. I promised her, and I don't break my promises to you – do I?" he offered. Alara glared at him, her fists clenched and face red. She then looked down and stepped nearer to him, her eyes blurry. "I... need you," she said in a shy whisper. "I miss you and I'm done with waiting for you."

Astris stood nearby, taking a definitive interest in the type of wood the pier was made of. "I will be back, and then you'll never lose me again," Jayce stated before looking towards Astris. "Take care of her for me?" he asked gently. Astris stepped forwards and took Alara's hand. "We'll be fine. Just go and take that girl home. She's six years late for dinner." Alara met Jayce's gaze, stepping forwards and planting a kiss on his lips, before following up with a firm slap. "Last one, and then you're marrying me!" she threatened. She then turned on Astris and dragged her away. "Come on, we're getting drunk!" Alara practically yelled as she stormed off. "Alara, she has a debrief with me first!" Philip called after her. Jayce nodded to Ordo and he nodded back.

Zhurong and Soteria looked at Arthuria and Morgana, the two Dragons uncertain of what to do as the Stacked Hand sailed through the Frontier. "You don't have to leave us," Morgana said, her eyes brimming with tears. Soteria hugged her tightly. "I need to see what I am without... humans. I need to be me again, not us." Morgana nodded, pulling back from her Dragon and waving after her as she took off into the air after Taranis.

Arthuria finally met her stubborn Dragon's gaze, darting around as he refused to look at her. "We didn't always get along, but... thank you for fighting with us, risking your life for us, even against your will," Arthuria told him as he stubbornly met her gaze. "It wasn't intolerable," he returned. "But know this, that should you seek me out in the future for any undertakings, it may take some bargaining for me to join you on any adventures." Arthuria smiled. "Fried fishcakes? Chocolate donuts? Hamburgers?" she questioned. "Perhaps those would be acceptable. Stay safe... Arthuria Pendragon." He took off after his brethren, disappearing into the trees of the Frontier.

Eventually the trees parted, giving way to the familiar sight of Last Drop. A familiar redhead stood on the pier, a wide-brim hat on her head and a large grimoire in a holster on her belt. Her arms were folded, a firm expression on her face. "You're late!" came Wicke's voice through Jayce's communicator. Slowly he looked over his shoulder towards Bjorn and Vexx. "Here we go again," he said with a wide grin.

Seize the Seas Tales: Lost

Kaina groaned as she crashed into an island, her condensed form leaving a colossal trench behind her. Rain poured down upon her, dripping down from her hair as she weakly tried to push her body up from the mud, her body covered in cuts and holes. She looked up: a small hut sat ahead of her – the windows

glowing orange. The door opened, a figure standing in the light. "Gods," came the voice of a middle-aged man. His boots splashed in the mud as he ran towards her. "Are you okay miss? You look hurt?"

Kaina groaned, slumping forwards. "Lucy, she needs help!" he yelled back to the hut, reaching down and attempting to lift her, only to find himself unable to budge the giant Dragon in human form. "She's heavy, I need a hand!" A young girl raced out into the rain, similarly attempting to help lift Kaina. "Come on love, use your legs – let us help you," he asked, trying his best to support Kaina. With a pained groan, Kaina forced herself to stand and limp forwards towards the hut. Her reptilian eyes glanced towards the young girl and her father. She could easily crush and eat them both, but something stopped her: the pitiful expression of that old man – Ordo – filling her mind as he offered her mercy. "Help her towards the bed," the man stated. Kaina attempted to lay upon it but the frame immediately collapsed. "Um, papa?" stated Lucy.

"Make a bed for her on the floor," he corrected.