

Chapter 251: A New Calling

The Stacked Hand docked on the main pier and Wicke wasted no time in clambering aboard. "Where have you been?" she questioned immediately. "The Sovereign's War ended ages ago!" She glared at Jayce and Bjorn and then dove into Vexx's chest. "And you!" she yelled, pulling back at glaring at him as he stood with wide eyes. "You fucking idiot!" she yelled, forming a pair of fists and pounding uselessly on his chest. "Do you know how much I worried about you when you ran away?" she questioned, shaking her head as he tried to form words. "I'm sorry, look it was a confusing and-" Wicke grabbed him in a tight hug. "Just shut up," she cried as he hugged her back.

Eventually she stopped, her eyes scanning those around her. "Where's Ordo, Astris and Falconer?" she immediately asked. The numerous faces around her darkened. "Astris and Ordo have returned to the Navy," Jayce intercepted. "And... Falconer?" Wicke asked nervously. Jayce shook his head and tears immediately streamed from her eyes. "No... no-no-no... no!" she cried. "How?" "He gave his life to revive the Scourge," Jayce said softly, placing a hand on her shoulder and pulling her into a hug. Wicke shook her head as she cried. "Why didn't anyone tell me? Couldn't I have said goodbye?" she asked. There were no good answers, but Jayce eventually took out a letter marked with Wicke's name. "It was in his room. It's for you," he told her.

She took it and turned away, tearing it open and reading quickly before sniffling and wiping her eyes. A soft laugh escaped her and she shook her head before pocketing it. "That..." she trailed off and turned back to her crew. "Right, well – I guess we need to get moving. The Old World awaits!" she stated eagerly. Jayce opened his mouth and she shook her head in disbelief. "You promised!" she cried. "And we will, but... not all of us," he eased, looking around him at the numerous crewmates with their bags packed. Wicke's eyes widened.

The Rising Aces assembled at the end of the pier in their groups. "Sister!" Morgana cried, rushing forwards towards Morgause. Jayce raised an eyebrow, she didn't look like Elaine, Arthuria or Morgana – the silver hair was definitely different, but then she turned and looked at Arthuria and Elaine, her eyes golden like theirs. "Ah," he muttered as she cautiously approached the older sisters. "Morgause, right?" Arthuria questioned, looking down at the smaller girl. Morgause nodded. "It's Arthuria, and Elaine?" she guessed, pointing between the pair. Arthuria nodded. "I recognise you," Morgause stated before turning fearfully towards Elaine. "You're a lot bigger than when I last held you," Elaine

said gently to her baby sister. Morgause almost fainted, but Elaine pulled her in for a hug and lifted her up into the air. "My sisters!" Morgause sobbed, hugging Elaine like she was going to disappear. A small smile crossed Wicke's mouth.

Jayce met his younger brother's gaze, the pair standing in front of each other. "You did well," Jayce told him. Damian nodded, his eyes flicking from Morgause to Wicke before falling on Wam as he was smothered in Bjorn and Marisha's embrace. "Thanks, I'm glad you didn't die." Jayce grabbed his brother and hugged him tightly. Damian awkwardly patted his back. "Yeah, yeah, we don't have to do this," he protested into Jayce's chest. Jayce laughed and shook his head. "Yeah we do, Mum would kill us both otherwise." Damian smiled: there was no defence to Jayce's statement.

Jayce released his brother and turned towards Jeanne, Arthuria, Morgana, Elaine and Morgause. "So," he stated to them as they looked at him. "This is it then?" he questioned. Arthuria stepped forwards. "Until you need us again, and if you do we will drop everything and come to fight with you. I swear upon my blades." "I believe you, don't worry. Take care, all of you. It's been an honour," he stated. Jeanne stepped forwards and hugged Jayce. "You will visit our Order once it's established," she demanded. Jayce nodded to her, the pair sharing a smile. He then turned to Morgana who leapt into his arms and wrapped her legs around him. "Thank you," she whispered into his ear, before kissing his cheek. She then leapt off him and returned to her sisters, leaning forwards and waving at him. "Until we see each other again!" she cried. The sisters and Jeanne turned away, but not before Morgause ran over to Wicke and said something to her. The pair nodded to each other and separated.

Jayce turned his attention towards Red. "Your debt is cleared, not that it ever... thanks, Red," Jayce stated. Red shook his head, looking out towards the ocean. "Part of the deal is that you will tell our story to my kin. You're not rid of me yet, Captain." Jayce nodded, extending a fist which Red bumped back. "I look forward to seeing you home," Jayce told him before turning towards the group that was definitely leaving.

Zeta stood in a ridiculously over-the-top travel outfit, abundant with straps and pockets and a large travel backpack on her back. "Don't say anything or I will cry," she said firmly to Jayce. He nodded and hugged her, tears falling regardless. "Now that's not fair!" she cried. "I held it in so well!" Jayce held her until she stopped crying. "I think I'm going to miss you most of all," Jayce told her. "Including Astris? Sure..." He chuckled.

"Go be that big superstar you always said you would be! I will be expecting backstage tickets at every venue, and I will do my best to be there." "VIP passes all around," she returned with a grin. Jayce glanced to her two travel companions. "Take care of them," he told Thalia. She nodded, stepping forwards but not raising her arms for a hug. She seemed to want one, but equally wasn't sure how to ask for one. Jayce gave her one and slowly she eased into it. "I will keep them safe, I promise, Captain," Thalia told him, pulling back and looking down towards Mai Lu.

"Goodbyes are far from my speciality," she told Jayce, crossing her arms and looking up at him. "So I won't say it. This isn't the end and I will see you again." Jayce nodded, appreciating the sentiment. "I hope you get to make up for those years you spent trapped," he offered. Mai Lu nodded, looking towards Zeta and Thalia. "With these two, undoubtedly. Don't sacrifice any more of your life trying to fix the world Jayce, you've given up enough for people that will never thank you. Be careful, your kind nature will get you killed." He appreciated the warning and waved after them as they headed off.

What remained felt alien. Jayce turned to those that had stayed: Wicke, Bjorn, Vexx, Yuthura, Marisha, Tempest, RK-227, Caelie, Wam, Red, Gaea and Little Witch – now firmly back in Wicke's arms. It felt empty without the rest, and he could see in Wicke's face that she felt the same way. Damian cleared his throat and Jayce looked at his younger brother. "Um, so..." Jayce let out a long sigh. "Okay," he relented.

"Okay?"

"Okay."

Damian pumped his fist as Wicke let out a long groan. "Right, this is us for now. One last journey!" Jayce stated to his Rising Aces. "Rest up. We'll leave in a few days. We're heading south to find Wicke's sisters." A voice came from further along the harbour. "Mister Exarga! Captain Exarga!" yelled a young man running over with a red face. He doubled over as he stood before Jayce, panting heavily with a newspaper in hand. "Yes?" Jayce questioned, recognising the boy as a local he hadn't seen in many years. "Chris? Gods you've grown up!"

"Thanks, Jayce. Uh, sorry – I thought you might want to read this," he stated handing over a newspaper to Jayce. Jayce held it loosely in his grip, only to lean forwards and for his eyes to widen as he immediately took a closer look. "Wicke," he called over. "What?" she questioned, as Bjorn and Marisha also approached

to get a better look. "Holy..." she muttered, turning and looking directly at him. "Is that...?" Bjorn questioned.

"The Warlocks," Wicke and Jayce answered, the newspaper talking about an island having fallen to a mysterious undead infection, the photo showing a shambling corpse with a large black-purple tendril embedded in its neck. Jayce flicked the teen a platinum pearl, the kid's eyes widening before he bowed profusely and ran off. "I thought Wicke murdered the Warlock that would have caused an outbreak, and didn't all the Warlocks die in the War?" Marisha questioned.

Jayce turned and looked at Wicke, her pre-emptive actions were the sole reason he had banned foresight magic on his ship. The last time a supposed outbreak had occurred she had murdered the Mage before it had even happened. She had spent the following months searching for a method to extract her memories and give evidence for her actions, but Jayce still hated the idea of killing before someone had even done something against them. Begrudgingly, given the entire crew died without Wicke's intervention he had let her off lightly, but the entire grizzly sight in the newspaper was not a path he wanted to go down. "Not our problem," he stated.

"Not our problem?" Wicke questioned. "Um, since when?" she challenged. Jayce looked towards Bjorn expecting a similar expression of hesitation, but he was stood behind Wam with his hands on his son's shoulders. "I think we should," Wam stated. "You really trust the Republic to root out and kill a Warlock?" Bjorn added. Jayce let out a groan, Alara's words about one last adventure ringing in his mind. "Perhaps Alara won't realise... Fine! Come on, the longer we wait the more islands will fall into ruin! Stock up! Let's make this a quick one!"

Vexx stood leaning against the railing of the Stacked Hand as it pulled out of Last Drop's harbour. His eyes lay towards the houses nearby and a pair of shadows hiding on the rooftops. "What's up?" Wicke questioned, drawing his attention away. He looked back, the shadows were gone. "Nothing, don't worry about it. Jayce told me you've learnt a whole new array of spells – anything particularly interesting?" he questioned, guiding her away.

Jayce let out a long sigh as he locked his bedroom door. Picking up Wicke, and Damian, had been only one part of his countless tasks, but there had been one in particular he had been avoiding. One that he knew he would regret if he didn't do it before it was too late. He concentrated hard, opening his eyes in the familiar dusk of the Underworld. His eyes landed upon the lone dark pyramid and its

portal to the unknown at its peak before he glanced around as he had done many times before. Falconer was not there.

Caelie had already confirmed it. And Gaea has concluded that he wasn't dead, only transformed. If anything, Falconer – in the form he was now – would, almost certainly, outlive them all by centuries. It was a haunting thought, one that flew in and out of Jayce's mind at random, but every time he couldn't help but think back to the look of satisfaction on his Navigator's face. To have had such a positive impact on the world was undeniably him, and for all the pain it brought Jayce – he couldn't be happier for his friend.

But Scáthach stood waiting, her body nude and eyes curious. "I was wondering if you would visit," she stated. "Equally, I wondered if I would see you because you had died, or if I would see you because the rumours of your secret abilities were real. I am glad that the latter is the truth." Jayce approached her with caution. She was unarmed in the truest sense: she was dead, and he was not, yet even so he still could feel his heart race in fear at the sight of her soft brown eyes. Her dark red hair floated around her pale neck, her body devoid of tattoos and face lacking its piercings. His eyes briefly glanced down and she rested her hands on her hips with no concern for modesty.

"You know, you can manifest objects. You don't have to be naked," he stated, glancing away. "Oh, by imagination I'm guessing? Do you find this uncomfortable, being able to see through me?" she questioned and then challenged with a familiar smile. A black dress covered her body, but her tattoos and piercings remained absent. She then sat down on a wooden bench that faded into existence. It was unnerving how quickly she had grasped the concept. She patted the bench next to her, but Jayce remained standing.

"Why did you wait for me?" Jayce questioned plainly. Scáthach shrugged. "The tales of you inspired me to want to talk to you." Jayce eased forwards and sat down next to her. "And what did you want to say?" he asked nervously. "Oh, I'm not here to apologise or to spin some tragic story about how my nation betrayed me which is why I did all this. I am dead, Jayce – I have been for a long time. It's over for me, only this time it will stick. I wanted to look the man who caused it in the eyes," she stated firmly, meeting his gaze and grabbing his wrist. Her form passed through him at first, but it then suddenly solidified and he felt her grip. "The imagination is quite something..." she muttered, releasing him as he pulled away.

"What do you want from me?" Jayce asked. She shook her head and looked up towards the pyramid. "I..." she faltered and then looked down. "I hope I was the villain that the world needed." She placed a hand on Jayce's shoulder and stood up before walking towards the pyramid. "What do you mean? Scáthach?" Jayce called after her. She glanced back. "Throw out the rules, Exarga. Don't let tradition ruin what once was, and what could now be. I'll be seeing you again, that I'm sure of." She strode up the stairs, a long black cape flowing down from her back as an axe appeared in her right hand. Without hesitation she stepped through the portal and left the world behind.

Jayce's eyes bolted open to find Wicke sat kneeling in front of him with a pout on her face. "Some things just don't change, do they?" she said softly, offering a wet cloth to him. He smiled and wiped the sweat from his brow. "I guess not," he returned. "Falconer?" she questioned; her voice somewhat hopeful. Jayce shook his head. "It's... complicated. Was there something you wanted?" he asked, getting to his feet and approaching his bathroom. "You know you can tell me anything," she stated, standing awkwardly as she watched him splash his face. "I'm not a kid anymore, you don't need to hide things from me."

Jayce tried not scoff. "No... you're not," he said back to her, turning and leaning in his doorway. "So... who was it?" she pressed, folding her arms. Jayce shook his head and stepped towards her. "The Sovereign," he answered truthfully, opening his door and stepping out into the evening air. "The Sovereign?" Wicke questioned in alarm. "Why? What did she say?" she pressed, following after him. "Nothing much, she just gave me her blessing... in her own way, I suppose."

Wicke frowned as she followed him. "Really?" she pressed; her voice laden with suspicion. "Wicke," Jayce said softly, but with a firmness to it, continuing to walk but glancing back over his shoulder. "I'm telling you what I'm telling you, we've been apart a while, but you need remember how this works. If we're going to have a problem with you trusting me, then you need to say it now so we can put this to rest. I cannot count on you if you cannot count on me, and these foes we're about to hunt together will feed on any distrust. So, is there a problem?" he questioned, turning and facing her. She looked down. "No, uh, no Jayce. I-I'm sorry. I just... you should have told me about Falconer. You could have told me long before you came to pick me up, but you didn't."

"You could have kept me informed about so many more things throughout the last year. Ever since you sent Morgana to join us, I've been... here... waiting, and-and you didn't... you didn't trust me. So... how can I... how can I trust you?"

she said quietly, shuffling on her feet as she looked at the floor with her hair over her face. Jayce let out a long sigh and she looked up, her orange eyes shining in the sunset glow. "You really have grown up without us, haven't you?" he stated with a gentle smile. She nodded, looking up at him as he stepped forwards and placed a firm hand on her shoulder. She stepped forwards and buried her face in his chest.

"I am proud of you, Wicke. You and Damian both achieved a lot without us and I guess I didn't take enough of a look to see just how much you've changed. You're right, I don't need to hide things from you, or treat you as anything less than the... than the woman you've become. I think... I think it's time you stop standing in my shadow and I stop leaving you in it. I need someone to take over from Astris – to be my left hand – can you do it?" he asked. She sniffled and wiped her eyes as she stepped back and stood up straight. She nodded firmly, a tearful laugh escaping her as Jayce placed a hand on her head. "Then come on, let's have some dinner and you can tell our crew about your adventures."

It was strange to have Wicke back with the crew after so long, but not as weird as the large holes that the various absences the rest of the Rising Aces had left behind. The main table felt empty without the usual arguments between Zeta and Ordo, the living quarters felt empty when Jayce walked into it and found no one inside. And above all, he missed them. He missed his friends. He missed his crew. He missed the life the ship had held, but now it felt like the adventure was over. He'd won... or maybe he'd lost. He really didn't know.

"You really need to remind Bjorn that, as your brother, I'm second in command," Damian chimed in, as he leant against the railing next to Jayce, the pair of them looking out across the ocean as they sailed east. Jayce shook his head. "Tell him yourself if you're so sure of your status, little brother," Jayce returned, glancing down towards Damian. Damian's green eyes met Jayce's blue, a spark of fire behind them as he glared up at his brother. "Hmph," Damian eventually resigned, looking away.

"Wicke's stories last night were... quite something," Jayce eventually offered. "They weren't stories, it's all true – I promise you. We did it all together. I'd say it's as impressive as what you guys did without us," he boasted. Jayce shook his head. "I'm not so sure about that. It was impressive, but you know... you didn't defeat the Sea Sovereign and her Betrayers," Jayce countered, standing up as tall as he could and facing his shorter brother. "From what I heard it was all exaggerated, and come the end of it all, Brother, you ran away from the real fight."

I bet Tanare did all the work, isn't that why he's an Emperor now and you're not?" Jayce clenched his fists. "Oh my, did I touch a nerve, Captain?" Damian goaded, stepping closer to Jayce and glaring up at him. "Perhaps we should go a round or two?" Damian proposed. "Or are you afraid I'll show you up?"

"Ahem," came a voice to the side, Damian and Jayce both turning to look towards Yuthura as she leant on a cane in front of them. "Are you two knuckleheads quite done?" she asked. Damian and Jayce looked at each other before looking away. "You know better," she added, pointing at Jayce. "And you need to know your place. We've dealt with power-hungry, uppity jumpstarts like you before and if we have to treat you like we used to treat Thalia then you're in for a shock, young man. We're about to engage something nasty, primeval, and at less than half strength. Act like this in the wrong moment and someone will die, probably one of you two."

"But-" Damian tried to chime in.

"No buts. You're still both riding the highs of your own achievements and that's when people lose sight of the ground they're walking on. You, Jayce, have someone waiting for you to hang up your swords and I'm not going to be the one to tell her that you died to a remnant of the Church. And you are not your brother, Damian." Jayce stood up slightly taller, only to slink away as Yuthura glared at him whilst Damian's face flashed red. "You have not achieved what he has, nor have you earned the right to wave around your power. You're young, strong and capable, but this arrogance will hurt others. And your little brother mentality is unbecoming. Be your own man, stop trying to be him, be better than him rather than trying to drag him down to your level."

Damian and Jayce both stood in stunned silence. "After that last jump, we should be arriving within the next hour or two. Sort this out before then, and I'm not healing either of you if you do decide to swing at each other." Yuthura turned and hobbled away. Jayce slowly looked down at his brother but Damian just growled and stormed away. Yuthura had touched a nerve, something Jayce hadn't even noticed. "He's going to be trouble..." Jayce muttered, turning away and looking back out towards the water.

They smelt the infected island long before they could see it. A heavy haze lay on the horizon, the stench of burnt flesh wafting in the air. Surrounding Sunflower Island in a wide ring were more than a dozen Navy ships, bombarding the island from afar with artillery. "At least whoever's leading this attack isn't an idiot,"

Marisha muttered, as she stood next to Jayce and Bjorn by the Stacked Hand's wheel.

Sunflower Island was a sizeable landmass, with a population in the thousands, but even from afar it was easy to see that there was next to nothing left. "If only Falconer was here," Jayce muttered as they approached, scanning the island with binoculars. A loud buzzing came from Marisha, causing both Bjorn and Jayce to glance towards her. "We're being contacted," she told them, pulling out a miniature transceiver and resting it on the railing. "Unidentified vessel, this is a quarantined area. By order of Commodore Tallan of the New Republic Navy you are to depart the area immediately. Failure to comply will result in your immediate destruction. Respond," the transceiver buzzed.

"What should we say?" Marisha questioned, looking towards Jayce. He glanced out towards the island. He could see squads of Marines by the shore, gunning down infected as they approached whilst desperately helping survivors towards smaller boats. "Let them know we're here to help," Jayce ordered. Marisha nodded. "Attention New Republic Navy. This is Marisha of the Rising Aces. We are here to help. We have suspicion of Church remnant activity and are here to deal with the problem. Copy."

There was a nervous pause on the other side, but rather swiftly a new voice responded. "Negative, Rising Aces. You are to leave as instructed. You are not needed, nor wanted. Turn around immediately, or be fired upon." Marisha, Bjorn and Jayce all looked at each with alarm. "And here I thought saving the world would carry some good will," Bjorn muttered shaking his head. Jayce reached for the transceiver. "This is Jayce Exarga of the Rising Aces. I wish to speak to Commodore Tallan."

"This is Commodore Tallan. Approach the quarantine and you will be arrested, Exarga. Final warning, Tallan out."

"Well shit," Bjorn stated, turning the wheel to the side before dropping anchor. "What now?" he asked. Jayce leant against the railing and pondered, his eyes looking out towards the mayhem across Sunflower Island. "Well, I suppose we could ask Alara for information?" Marisha suggested. Jayce's mind wandered to her warning of one last adventure and how he was technically already breaking that deal. "Probably not the best idea for my relationship," he answered, looking towards Bjorn and then down at Wicke and Damian. "So, what do we do?" Wicke asked. "What do you think?" Jayce returned. "We go in anyway, just sneakily."

Seize the Seas Tales: New Duties

“You look like you want to kill someone,” Alara stated, as she knocked on the door to Astris’ office. “I do, Admiral bloody Exarga – that’s who!” she immediately protested, looking up from the huge pile of documents on her desk to Alara. “Do you know what he’s done to me?” Astris questioned. Alara glanced down at the Special Operative label on Astris’ desk. “All of that information I’ve been routinely sending him, apparently it’s in the incorrect format for filing. He’s known this for years! Did he tell me? No! And now I’ve got to go through everything and correct it to Republic standards! Kill me. I’m not joking, put a stake through my heart or blow my brains out, Al – I’m already in hell.”

Alara couldn’t help but laugh. “Serves you right. Rumours are you’re getting my Rear-Admiral position once it’s done. Steal my man and now my rank too!” Alara stated, sticking out her tongue. “Really?” Astris questioned, her eyes widening. “No,” Alara returned with a grin. Astris opened her mouth in feigned shock before making a rude gesture. “Are you really going to make up for all the lost time by front-loading your irritating behaviour?” Astris questioned. Alara nodded, tapping the stack of files and making the tower wobble. Astris reached into her drawer and placed her handcannon on her desk. “They are making you Commodore equivalent though, just under the Special Operative branch. Phil wants you to push through to Admiral that way – he says it’s more likely since you won’t be competing against your siblings in standard Navy progression. But it does mean you’ll have Riley to compete with.”

They both scoffed.