Chapter 254: To Seize the Seas

Jayce was dead. Most likely. At the very least he was missing, and with his absence the Stacked Hand was gone too. But Bjorn couldn't cry as he and Wicke fell from the top of a cliff towards a small Navy warship below. He landed with a crunch, setting Wicke down as a group of traitors drew their weapons. "Now is not the time to mess with me," Bjorn growled, drawing his axes and standing tall. "Baned!" hissed a cultist's last words.

Damian awoke to find himself in a dark and cold cell. Everything other than the sweat and bloodstained clothes on his back had been taken, even his shoes. He shivered as he sat up, a groan escaping him without command along with a seeping feeling of warmth across his waist. He looked down, peeling his shirt off his stomach to see a gaping hole in his flesh. The wound had been treated – barely. It had prolonged his life, but even without medical training he could feel that it had only staved off his death. Someone had wanted him to suffer a slow and painful death.

Damian tried to stand up, but his legs refused to obey him – his body slumping back down against the stone wall. "Hello?" he groaned. "Anyone?" he called out. Footsteps echoed along the corridor ahead of him, a flaming torch illuminating the darkness as a guard came and looked at him. "I need a doctor," Damian stated. "Probably do, scum. But the gallows await you for murdering one of our own, so I don't think I'll bother finding you one."

"My… parents are-"

"Oh, I'm aware. But that doesn't matter anymore. Your mother resigned after finding out what you did. Couldn't stand the shame of her only son being a murderer. Oh, and your father can't help you. I heard he's under investigation for how he manipulated the system to help your fallen brother whilst he was a Pirate Lord and actively wanted. He's got his own problems to handle and by the time they've found out your condition, killer, well… all is resolved on its own."

"You can't do that," Damian said weakly. The guard spat into his cell, the spit landing by Damian's bare feet. "Rear-Admiral…" he wheezed. The guard shook his head. "Couldn't give a shit about a nepotistic cunt like you. Times have changed. It's a new age, a return to the ancient ways – as they always should have been." He turned and walked away, the warmth of the light going with him. Damian cried as he fell forwards, crawling towards the door. "Come back! Come… back… Please… help me…"

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Vexx landed softly onto the deck of their stolen ship, slipping slightly as he stepped in a fresh pool of blood. “Woah, what a mess,” he stated, looking around as the moonlight illuminated trails of gore across the main deck. “Where have you been?” Wicke questioned, her eyes puffy and red even in the darkness. Vexx tossed something large towards her. She caught in both hands, only to scream in short horror and throw the severed head overboard. “That’s the Warlock leader, he took a beating and a half. The other one got away.”

“Got away?” Yuthura questioned in alarm. Vexx glanced towards Wam as he glowed slightly, stepping towards him. Wam looked at him with confusion. “You’re warm,” Vexx said simply. “It’s cold. What’s going on, why’s everyone looking so miserable?” he questioned. Wicke stormed over to him and pounded on his chest. “Jayce is dead!” she cried, the words cutting deep into Vexx’s heart. “What?” he said in almost a whisper, physically staggering from the news. He looked towards Bjorn who scratched his head and looked down. “It’s true…” he admitted.

Vexx shook his head, stepping away from Wicke and looking from Bjorn to Caelie. He then turned and leapt away into the night, vanishing in an instant as he darted back towards the island on the horizon. “Vexx!” Bjorn called uselessly after him. “He’s gone, Bjorn… We couldn’t stop him if we wanted to,” Yuthura stated, resting on her cane as she sat on a crate. A silence, broken by Wicke’s quiet crying, fell across the ship.

The Navy vessel was sizeable and completely alien to anything Bjorn was used to. It was mainly made of metal, with a large portion of the main deck covered by large guns. Towards the centre of the ship was the bridge where the ship’s wheel sat housed inside, with a row of windows looking forwards and around. There were four decks in total: the main deck with the guns and a sizeable area to walk around, as well as ring of passageways, an elevated command deck, with large living quarters below, and two decks below the main deck. The entire ship was a military grey, with gold and blue markings, and - to Tempest’s greatest curiosity, and Red’s horror – it was engine-powered.

“So what do we do now?” Marisha questioned, looking towards Bjorn. He shook his head: he didn’t know, he really didn’t know. “We need to rescue Damian, right?” Wicke questioned, looking to Wam for support only to see him look away. “Wicke…” Bjorn said softly. “Damian is guilty of the crimes they’ve accused him of. He murdered Tallan – not necessarily without some justification, but he’s far from innocent. And… Jayce is gone.” Caelie shook her head.

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"Don't say that! He's… He…" She trailed off turning to face the water as tears dripped from her chin. "We can't just leave him!" Wicke protested. "Damian may be… He… Jayce wouldn't!" Bjorn stood up and approached her, resting a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. "It's over, I'm sorry, but Jayce is gone and it's not worth us throwing away what little security we have. Not for him. I would for Jayce, but… Damian is not Jayce."

"Bjorn, I need you. We can't just give up. We can't just… I don't want this to end."

"But maybe it has to. Dropping you off home with your family was always going to be our last adventure and maybe we still can, but the Stacked Hand is gone with Jayce. All our things, our… home. It's gone, Wicke, it's all gone," he said sadly. "But it can't be gone," she stated, looking desperately towards Tempest. "If the container was breached then the ship should have been released. And if it fell into the ocean then-"

"I looked," Red stated, shaking his head before standing up and walking to the edge of the ship. "Where are you going?" Wicke questioned. Red turned and met her gaze. "My… ties were to Jayce. He was my way home. With his death I am lost and must find another way to return home. That I cannot do here, I am sorry. Bjorn is correct that Damian Exarga is not Jayce Exarga. A murderer isn't worth it, even if he is Jayce's brother. It is a shame that this is the way it ends. Goodbye." Red leapt overboard. "No!" Wicke cried after him. "Red, come back! Please come back!"

"Maybe he has the right idea," Bjorn said gently, looking towards Wam and Marisha. He had everything he needed. "What about Gaea? Little Witch? The Demons?" Marisha questioned, sitting up straight and looking towards Tempest. "If the container was destroyed and the ship wasn't released, then what has happened to the Stacked Hand?" she asked. "Our lives are on that ship, could it be recovered?" Tempest pondered, looking to Yuthura and then at RK – who was grumbling softly in mourning.

Caelie wandered away and sat down on the floor, crossing her legs and beginning to meditate in a similar way to how Jayce used to when communing with the Underworld. "Theoretically," Tempest began, "the ship could still be out there. Whilst stored, the Stacked Hand exists within a void. If the seal was indeed broken then the ship is likely still trapped within that dimension. Potentially, with the right tools and resources I could reforge the seal and

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recapture the vessel with spatial magic that is currently unknown to me. Maybe the ship could be saved."

"Dad," Wam said softly, stepping closer to Bjorn. "Damian is… rough around the edges but he's not a… not a bad guy as such. He saw Jayce die because of him-"

"Jayce is not dead," Caelie said from across the deck, in a mantric way. The others looked towards her. "Are you sure about that?" Bjorn questioned, a glimmer of hope growing inside him. "I…" Caelie said uncertainly. "He can't be," she added before bursting into a fresh wave of tears. "Dad, Damian isn't that type of person – he was just confused because of Jayce's death. We can't leave him, we shouldn't," Wam stated.

"Not dead!" Caelie protested.

Bjorn looked across the group. They had an unfamiliar, stolen ship, barely a crew, no Captain, and next to none of their resources. And now they were intending to storm a Navy base that had just been attacked. "If not for Damian, then for Jayce, and for Gaea, and Little Witch and those Demons - Morax and Avnus – all trapped on the Stacked Hand," Wicke stated, looking at Bjorn. Marisha stood up, looking across the group with uncertainty. "We should vote. If we decide to do this then any chance of a peaceful future ends with it – we'd be criminals again, well and truly. But if we decide against it then we'll probably have to testify against Damian," she warned.

Wicke took out a piece of paper and tore it into strips. "Folded means aye, scrunched is nay," she stated, handing each crew member a strip before faltering in front of RK who simply grumbled sadly. They threw out their decisions and Wicke tallied the results. There were two nays amongst the eight of them, and RK's indetermined answer. "Then we do this," Wicke stated, looking towards Bjorn. "Will you be Captain? There's no one closer to… no one more capable." Bjorn shook his head. "Your adventure, your story," he stated with a smile. "Besides, I was always better as a First Mate than a Captain." She hugged him tightly and looked across her crew. "Then let's rescue Damian."

Damian lay on the floor looking up at the moonlight as it crept through a window overlooking the harbour. His eyes were open, but they saw nothing. His heart silent and body cold as he lay in a pool of his own blood.

A soft patter of feet tapped across the stone floor, hopping towards the cell's bars before squeezing through with the ruffling of a set of sun-coloured feathers.

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Morax looked down at the corpse that had been Jayce Exarga's brother. He pecked the human boy's body, but it didn't react. "Hmm," uttered the Demon, ruffling his tiny body and looking down at the blood underneath his feet. "Well, that makes things tricky. Lord Baal will be most displeased if all my couriers are dead. Maybe I shouldn't have snuck out of the ship in the Captain's backpack. Oh well. Hey, boy – wake up. I'm in need of a lift."

Damian stared at the endless ocean around him, his body slowly sinking deeper and deeper into the abyss. "I hardly even got a chance," he mumbled, his short life rolling through his mind. Then he felt a pair of claws grip onto his back and pull him out of the water. He landed with a thump onto a grassy island floating in the sky, surrounded by many other floating islands each laden with waterfalls and endless rainbows. "Is this… heaven?" he questioned to himself, entirely naked.

"Indeed," stated a beautiful sun-coloured bird with a peacock-like tail and large wings. Morax looked at Damian, his golden eyes boring into him. "You died." "I kinda figured that out already on my own, thanks," Damian returned. The Demon cocked his head. "I can put you back," he offered. Damian held up his hands. "No-no-no-no! That's okay, thanks – I'll just walk home I suppose. Which way is home?"

"You're still dead. I haven't fixed that," Morax clarified. Damian looked down. "Oh," he said quietly. The Demon ruffled his feathers and pushed out his chest. "But I could, if we came to an agreement." Damian's eyes lit up and he stood up. "What do you need?" he questioned. "I'll do almost anything," he stated immediately. "Lord Baal and the others of my kin have a conclave somewhere beyond the Frontier. I wish to join them, so let me exist within your body and I will keep you alive until you drop me off. We will escape your prison together, and in doing so you will agree to free me from mine. Do we have an accord?"

Damian thought back to what Wicke and Wam had taught him about Demons. "Only if I keep full control of my body," he offered. Morax thought for a moment. "Very well," he stated, offering out a talon. Damian extended a hand to shake it, only for Morax to scratch his hand and draw blood. In a flash of green fire, Damian bolted upright in a rapidly illuminated prison cell. His wound had healed and an uncomfortable feeling lay on the back of his mind, as something was hanging on the back of his head. "Let us leave this place behind," Morax said gently into his mind. "Woah, that's… unsettling. How do I do that?"

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Damian's fist erupted into green fire. "My flames will burn our foes and heal ourself. Should you perish, as long as the flames remain then we shall return," warned the Demon. "Cool," Damian stated, grabbed the bars and melting them. "Very cool!" he grinned, only for a torch to illuminate his face. The guard beyond it opened his mouth. "Escape attempt! Sound the alarm!" he yelled, drawing a sword. "The other way," recommended Morax, but Damian instead lunged at the guard – a grin on his face as he grabbed the handle of the blade and melted it onto the guard's hand as he screamed. "That's for leaving me to die," Damian growled, extinguishing the flame and throwing a heavy fist into the guard's jaw – knocking him out. "That's for everything else you said."

"We need to escape, Damian!" Morax stated loudly in Damian's head as he rummaged for keys. "No, we need our things!" returned Damian, several bright lights illuminating the darkness of the prison as guards came rushing in from all directions. "Do not let him escape!" yelled a guard, firing a shot at Damian from his pistol. Damian slid under the bullet, diving forwards and throwing a heavy fist into the guard's stomach before pulling him back and charging at the next. A sword clipped his side, the wound erupting into green flame and healing closed.

Damian barrelled his way through the crowd of guards in a rapid melee before he entered into some kind of locker room. Signs identified which lockers were the effects of prisoners and which were for the guards. After struggling with the keys, Damian simply gave up on trying to figure out the locks – instead throwing a flaming Focus-enhanced fist through the locker doors until he found his things. He then ran out through the main entrance with little difficulty.

The sound of cannon fire rumbled in the distance, the ships in the harbour firing on a vessel that entered. Damian frowned as he observed, only for a spotlight to shine on him from behind. "Damian? Damian, can you hear me?" came Wicke's voice from his communicator. "Yes, I can – you won't believe what-" he returned. "Is that you up there? We're in the bay, aboard a stolen ship. Hurry, we're getting out of here – with or without you." Damian didn't need to be told twice. With bullets peppering the ground around him and sirens singing across the base he charged forwards towards the harbour, only to misjudge a leap and begin a large fall.

He screamed as he fell, but a pair of flaming wings erupted from his back. His scream turned into a whoop as he glided and then sped up, soaring across the base leaving behind a trail of swiftly vanishing green fire. He flew like a phoenix, freshly risen from the ashes of his death. Tears streamed from his eyes, his mind

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thinking to his fallen brother, before a surprising grin spread as he began to laugh. Only to crash painfully in the harbour in front of Wicke's stolen ship. "What are you doing?" she questioned, leaning over the edge and ducking as a cannonball collided with Tempest's shield. "Get on board!" she ordered. They turned the ship around as Damian clambered aboard, Bjorn pushing hard on the engines. Their ship cruised swiftly out of the bay, the island of Veridian Cliffs falling quickly behind.

They sailed until the island fell far beyond the horizon before Bjorn eventually let up on the engines. Only then did he dare look at Damian. "What happened?" Bjorn growled. Damian looked down. "How did you escape? And what's with the flames?" Bjorn questioned, already aware of the answer as he saw Damian's glowing green eyes. "Thank goodness you're alright," Wicke stated, stepping into the command deck and looking at Damian. "You…" she immediately realised. "You bonded with Morax. How?" she questioned.

Damian scratched his head, thinking to Morax. "He says he snuck into Jayce's backpack before the Stacked Hand was stored away. He then fell out at some point." Wicke and Bjorn met each other's eyes. "I, uh, died, and he brought me back." Bjorn scoffed and shook his head. Damian turned and looked at him. "What?" he asked. Wicke shared a similar expression to Bjorn but she seemed unwilling to answer. "That Demon could have saved Jayce, but instead it saved you," Bjorn said coldly. "What a waste."

"Bjorn," Wicke said quietly, as the bear turned and stormed away. Damian looked at the floor, the thought washing through him. It hurt to think about, and Bjorn wasn't wrong. "Wicke," Damian said gently. She shook his head and also walked away, leaving him alone on the unfamiliar ship. Most of the crew deliberately avoided him: the sole exception was Caelie – who seemed to be everywhere he looked. Waiting, with an expression laden with utter malice. She frightened him. She frightened Morax too.

The morning eventually came, shining light on their ship: the Steelwind. There wasn't much to eat other than survival rations, their supplies having gone down with the Stacked Hand, but Marisha did what she could for the group. They all ate in silence before eventually Wam spoke up. "So, what now?" he asked. "Well, as Captain-" Damian began. He was lifted off the ground in an instant by his throat and pinned to the wall by Bjorn, his other arm holding back a feral and clearly sleep-deprived Caelie. "You dare!" snarled Bjorn.

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"Bjorn, let him go!" Wicke stated, trying to pull away his arm as Damian's body sprouted flames. Ice smothered the flames and Bjorn maintained his grip. "Bjorn, please, it's not his fault! He's just an idiot!" she pleaded. With a sigh, he released Damian leaving him to gasp for air on the floor. "What you do is not my problem," Bjorn stated. "I'm dropping you off an island and sailing to the other side of the world."

"Bjorn, listen – I'm sorry, but-"

"But? But! But what Damian? But what?" he growled. Damian looked away in embarrassment and anger, clenching his fists. "Bjorn, you said you'd take me home," Wicke inserted, stepping between them. "And Damian, that Demon in you deserves to go home too. Both of these goals are aligned, so I'm sorry but we're in this together. This ship – it's our new home. We all have to figure out how to get along together. And I need you both to."

"So what then?" Wam questioned. "We're going to sail through the Frontier to the Ancient World?" Wicke nodded, looking towards Yuthura and Marisha – both of whom looked uncertain about the idea. "And we could collect the other grimoires too. I want to see the world, and-and I know you guys aren't done yet. And with Jayce gone…" Caelie shoved the remainder of her food into her mouth, stood up and then stepped outside, slamming the door behind.

Damian sat down and looked across the group. "We could do even better than that," he said quietly. Bjorn's face darkened. "Jayce beat the Sovereign but failed to take the crown for himself. Why don't we do what he couldn't? As reverence to his legacy," he quickly added, Bjorn's knuckles audibly cracking as he clenched his fists. "The Pirate Emperors are out there, unable to take a true claim, but we know of the Anvil of Agron. The source of magic items. Its in the Ancient World, right? We could assemble a crew, find the other grimoires, get Wicke to her sisters, and take the title of Sea Sovereign for ourselves. You all put yourselves on the line for me, and genuinely – I owe you. But I owe Jayce and I think this is what he would want for me, for us. So… who's with me?" he questioned. The group looked towards Wicke. "He's not wrong. Well, a little wrong. But we may need some more bodies… and I know exactly where to find some!"

Seize the Seas Tales: News of a Fallen Lord

News of Jayce's death was immediate. Who had leaked it to the papers? Astris really didn't know, but the word was out and it was everywhere. She couldn't

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believe it, nor could Ordo. They sat together in an officers bar, the place forcibly deserted sheerly from her expression alone. Then again, a grieving Vampire Lord, who also held a rank nearly equivalent to a Commodore and a reputation far beyond an Admiral, was hard to beat. And that wasn't even counting Ordo's foul expression.

They clinked their glasses together, toasting the man who had been their Captain. "I still don't believe it…" Astris mumbled, her tears dripping onto to the varnished wooden bar. "I… don't," Ordo added. Astris looked at him with her bleary red eyes. "Bjorn… said what he saw and he wouldn't lie about it. Jayce was hit with a lethal spell and he fell. There was nothing they could do. He's… gone."

"No, he's not," Thalia stated to Zeta and Mai Lu adamantly, as they sat backstage with a newspaper and an audience thundering through the walls. "I would know. My gut tells me he's still alive." Both Mai Lu and Zeta met each other's eyes and then looked back at Thalia with a mixture of affirmation and disbelief. "Have faith in our Captain," Thalia stated, looking out towards herself in a mirror. "He wouldn't die like this."

Morgause looked away from the fire to her sisters, each of them processing the news in varying destructive ways that painted a vivid expression of fear on their younger brother. "You should go home," Morgause told him. He didn't need to be told twice, fleeing the magic, blades and fists tearing up a forest they had made into their temporary home. Morgause didn't really understand their emotions, least of all Elaine's, but even she – for some reason – hadn't taken the news well.

Kitty looked down at the roulette wheel spinning in front of her with a numbness unfamiliar to her. The party had finally died, and it wasn't even over.

Holli lay on her bed, silent tears falling from her face as she buried her face in her pillow – her work finally meaningless to her.

Myra sat on her throne in numb silence, a meeting hall full of investors and influential traders all speaking over each other and at her whilst she ignored them all. They didn't matter. None of it mattered.

Emperor Tim Kane itched the claw mark over his left eye, it burned almost permanently thanks to Emperor Tanare, but he'd given the tiger a few marks of his own in their long fight to a draw. "Emperor?" questioned one of his advisors, slowly drawing Tim's gaze. "What should be our response?" she questioned

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nervously. “To what?” he asked, the words she had already repeated twice forgotten again. “I’m sorry, my Lord, I know news of Jayce-“

She flinched as he looked at her. “Empress Alice, my lord, she’s destroyed the Western Dungeon and taken the grimoire for herself. The others are at threat too, and with that girl-“

“Wicke.”

“-Wicke’s destruction in the New World, we could lose our chance at the remaining five grimoires.” Tim shook his head, letting out a long sigh. None of it made sense. Three grimoires were unaccounted for in their entirety, but why Wicke had taken all the ones in the north for herself was a mystery in itself. And now that Jayce was dead, she was unprotected, and unowned. “We should reach out to her, offer our condolences. She’s a very powerful mage in herself. Bring her to me.”

Tanare looked out towards the setting sun, a crumpled piece of paper in his palm. “What a mess you’ve left me,” he said alone. “You’ve gone and died and you couldn’t even finish off the Betrayers. Now I have Sétanta and Alice taking the remnants of the Null Legion, the Mechanist’s forces and even the damned Engines. And…” He shut his eyes. “I’m sorry Jayce. I’m sorry for letting you down.”

A lone notice of resignation sat atop a stack of fresh bounty posters on Fleet Admiral Truth’s desk. He couldn’t bring himself to look at it. “What a mess…” he muttered, looking out of his window at the Capital. “What a mess you’ve left me, Cassandra.”

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