Chapter 255: A Silent Call

Jayce's body felt heavy as he awoke to find himself tied to a chair in the attic of a house. Sunlight was streaming in through several gaps in the old roof, illuminating two figures in front of him. He groaned, his left arm numb and his shoulder in agony. The figures perked up, the pair of them dressed in tight black clothes up to the chin, with dark metal gothic gauntlets and a pair of expressionless red ceramic masks. One of them was a man – his head shaved and skin light brown. The other was a taller woman, with a muscular form and short black hair tied in a small ponytail with two long strands across her mask. Jayce couldn't see either of their eyes; his vision blurry and body groggy like he'd been drugged.

He felt his Focus kick in, attempting to deal with the toxins as the man approached him. A sharp jab quickly eliminating the drowsy sensation. "Ow!" Jayce yelled, struggling against the bindings in swift panic as the Emperor's Fist retreated back a few steps. "Relax, we're not here to harm you," said the male, his voice surprisingly soft but carrying age to it. "You're safe. We just needed to talk to-"

The rooftop exploded, a figure standing in the dust with a pair of crimson eyes. Vexx stood with his palms down by his sides, both Emperor's Fist assassins immediately taking defensive forms as they leapt back. Vexx stepped in through the sudden and intense bright light, the dust falling away to reveal a clearly fatigued face, but he faltered as he lay his dull gaze on the pair. "You okay?" he immediately asked with genuine concern, stepping towards Jayce but not undoing his bindings. "Yeah, peachy. Everyone okay?" Jayce returned. Vexx nodded and turned fully towards the Fists. "I did think we were being observed, but I was not expecting it to be you two," he stated in bemusement.

"Vexx?" came the woman's surprisingly deep monotone voice. Vexx stepped forwards and both Fists stepped back. "Please wait, there's an explanation," she pleaded, reaching up and taking off her mask. She was quite pretty, her eyes a stark grey. "Athena, Malachi," Vexx noted, looking towards the male – his eyes a curious purple and face heavily scarred. "You have a minute to explain," Vexx graciously offered. "A minute?" Malachi questioned. "It will take far longer-"

"Forty seconds." The pair stammered. "Twenty. Ten," he stated, folding his arms. "Just wait, hang on. It's about Oni," Athena said desperately. Vexx twitched and then a loud blast shook the building as another hole was made in the roof and a figure rolled in wielding a glaive. "No one move a fucking muscle!" Alara yelled,

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pointing her weapon at the two Emperor's Fists. She stood up upon noticing Vexx before setting her gaze on Jayce. She grimaced at first but then eased up upon seeing him tied to a chair. "Can someone please untie me?" he questioned.

Seeing the situation was in hand Alara embedded her glaive into the floorboards and cracked her knuckles as Vexx moved to free Jayce. "No, leave him tied up. I have a bone to pick with him," she stated. Jayce fidgeted desperately in the seat, only for it to fall over. "We apologise for spying," Malachi stated, bowing low. "We were just looking for a chance to speak to Lord Exarga alone without alerting his crew."

"Or me?" Vexx clarified. Athena stepped forwards and Alara turned towards her, stepping in front of Jayce defensively. "Indeed," she confessed. "But that seems now to have been an error." Alara crouched down and freed Jayce before helping him up. His face faltered as he looked down at his left arm, finding nothing more than a bloody, bandaged stump at his shoulder. "We did what we could, it was all we could do to save you," Athena said uneasily. "When you fell, we felt no choice but to intervene. We amputated before the spell fully took hold and brought you here. It's been about three days since then."

Jayce looked at his lost arm in complete and utter grief. Alara placed her flesh hand in his. "I guess we've now found something else in common," she said with a sympathetic smile and genuine worry in her eyes. Jayce couldn't help but form a weak smile. "I guess so. We could get matching pairs," he joked. Alara grinned and gave him a soft kiss on the cheek, only for Athena to clear her throat. "Sorry," Jayce stated, turning back to the assassins. "What's this about Oni?" Vexx questioned, with an unusual tone to his voice. He sounded afraid.

Athena and Malachi shared a glance, Vexx taking a single step that prompted both of them to back up. "Vexx, leave them alone. I owe my life to them." Vexx let out a long sigh and stepped away, tipping over the chair and sitting on it before crossing his legs. "Well, go on," he insisted, his voice layered with firm malice that was far more familiar to Jayce. Athena cleared her throat and stepped forwards.

"After the Empire fell and the command was given for the Emperor's Fists to disband, most of us ended finding some way to serve the Republic. A few of us became independent contractors, or outright retired. But some became mercenaries, one of whom was Oni," she began. Alara scratched her cheek. "Who's Oni? Do you mean the Oni?" she questioned. Malachi and Athena looked

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at each other. “Anything you would tell me you can tell both of them,” Jayce stated.

“Oni was my… my best friend,” Vexx said quietly. Malachi glanced towards Vexx. “He was more than that.” Vexx’s red eyes were near-lethal from the look he gave Malachi. “Oni was our greatest fighter, a genius combatant second only to one other,” Athena clarified. “Him,” she stated, pointing to Vexx. “He and several others amongst our order failed to find a place for themselves after the Empire fell, and they ended up as enforcers for the Guild. Only, when the Guild fell, Oni seized control of the remnants – ousting or controlling the Guildmasters by force.” Vexx twitched. “I just have to reinforce, we’re here to speak to Jayce – not you.”

“I can handle Oni alone,” Vexx countered. Athena shook her head, folding her arms. “Once you may have. Not anymore. Scáthach brought you to heel, she failed to bring in Oni. She found no hold on him,” Athena stated, the very idea sending a shiver down Alara’s spine. “So, what do you want from me?” Jayce asked. “Well, we were hoping to ask for your help. You managed to defeat the Sovereign and put a leash on him, so we thought perhaps you could solve our problem.”

“I am not leashed,” Vexx protested, folding his arms and huffing. Jayce nodded in agreement. “He’s definitely untrained still, that I promise you.” Vexx turned and looked at him with a plain and unamused expression. “Oni is dangerous,” Malachi stated. “He’s always been angry and now he’s unleashed and unhinged and looking to take his anger out on the world. He has all the Guild’s remaining resources and the will to burn it all in order to inflict as much pain as he can. Now that the world believes you are dead-“

“What?” Jayce questioned, looking towards Alara for an explanation. She nodded. “I’ll tell you in a minute. Go on,” she instructed to the Malachi. “Well, now that the world believes you are dead it should be simple to infiltrate the Guild and eliminate Oni in whatever way you can,” he stated. There were no happy faces other than Jayce. “Sounds like a plan,” he stated, only for both Vexx and Alara to grab his shoulders. “Absolutely not!” they both stated. “Ow!” he protested.

“Sorry,” Vexx stated. “This is for me to handle and for me to handle alone,” he stated. Alara pulled Jayce aside. “You said one more adventure. You’ve completed one and lost an arm for it, the next one could be your life. This is serious Jayce. This Oni guy sounds… it sounds suicidal. As a full-strength crew

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maybe you could have taken him on, but now… your arm. Please, your mother resigned her position because of your death. Your father has been put under investigation and you could fix it all just by showing that you're alive. His critics have only dared because they believe you're dead, and… well… and Damian."

"And Damian? What do you mean? My mother's resigned? What?" Jayce questioned. "Damian… he murdered Commodore Tallan," she said quietly, as if struggling to even voice it. "No… no, he couldn't have. He wouldn't have." Alara leant into Jayce. "It's not a question, it's a fact. Damian beat him to death in front of Rear-Admiral Paler, as well as Wicke and Bjorn. They confirmed it." Jayce felt his heart stop for a moment. "Damian… he's a murderer?"

"I'm sorry. I know that Tallan was a vocal critic of you and your family, but… he didn't deserve that." Jayce turned away and rubbed his face, shaking his head. "No… no he didn't. Gods what a mess." Athena cleared her throat and Jayce turned to look at her before looking back at Alara. "I need to do this, for him," Jayce said softly, gesturing towards Vexx. Alara looked past him and let out a sigh. "It needs handling, I get it, but… you've done enough, sacrificed enough. Why does it always have to be you?"

"Because who else would it be? I could ask the same of you," he stated, brushing his fingers across her many scars before taking her metal hand and kissing it. "For him," she said softly, glancing at Vexx as his ears burned red. "Just be careful." He nodded. "And Vexx," she said more loudly, "Look after him. And do whatever it takes to make sure he makes it out alive. Even if you have to bring him back to me by force. Am I clear?" she questioned. Vexx met her eyes and nodded. "I'll bring him home to you, I promise." She nodded and met Jayce's eyes before planting a long kiss on his lips. "Right, I'll do what I can to look out for Damian… and your father. Make this a quick one."

She turned and left the broken attic. "So, where do we start?" Jayce questioned. "First of all, you need a false identity, Malachi will sort that for you whilst I procure a suitable prosthetic for you," Athena stated. Vexx shook his head. "We can handle that. Where is the new Guild Headquarters?" he asked. Athena glanced towards Jayce's arm. "It's underwater, in the Old World. You'll need a submersible and for that you'll need to go East, to the Mysts," she clarified. "Then we have our heading. We'll set off immediately." Athena nodded appreciatively. "But before we do go, remember how much we are risking for you. I have one ask for you: protect my people in my absence." Athena faltered. "I… will do as you ask."

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The winds wrapped around Jayce as he stood amongst the wet grass atop the cliff the world perceived as his resting place. It was cold, an uncomfortable feeling filling his mind as he pictured Damian killing Commodore Tallan, and a worse feeling following after knowing that Wicke believed he was dead. They all did, and, as his thumb rubbed his personal communicator, every cell in his body wanted to warn them that he was alive. A hand grabbed his wrist. "Don't, it's better if they don't know," Vexx stated. Jayce nodded, taking his lone hand away before looking over the edge. "It must feel weird being here?" Vexx questioned.

Jayce nodded. "Yeah… I've come close to death before but this was something else. I… I was ready for it – you know? I'd accepted it. But… well." A red form caught his eye, circling in the water below. Jayce glanced towards Vexx. "See that?" he asked. Vexx nodded, the pair of them stepping off the cliff and falling into the water. They hit the water with a heavy impact, sending clouds of bubbles in front of Red's face, and when they dispersed, he looked like he was seeing a ghost – which given the circumstances… he was.

The relief that followed was immediate and for the first time in all six years of knowing each other, Red hugged Jayce. "It is of the greatest relief that you survived. I was beyond hope. We must inform the others," he said quickly. Jayce shook his head, a short spell drying off his body as they sat at the base of the cliffs. "No, we have a new, temporary mission. We are hunting an Emperor's Fist named Oni that has taken over the Guild."

It took quite some time to explain the details but, by the time Jayce had finished explaining, Red was already raring to go. "Then it appears to me that this proposed adventure is most fortuitous. For us, that is. Not so much everyone else," he stated, stretching his body before folding his arms. Jayce raised an eyebrow. "How so?" he questioned, the three of them tucking into the cliffs as a ship sailed past. "Well, in our possession is the Stacked Hand, and along with it is Gaea – who is no doubt beginning to worry. But beyond that, I require you to regale our adventures to my people – which will require a submersible anyway. I shall join your quest, and after we have defeated this Oni, we shall stop off at my home and I will make my leave."

"Sounds like a plan, in which case…" Jayce stated, reaching behind him and taking out the Stacked Hand. Vexx opened it for him, the ship landing on the ocean with a crash. They leapt aboard, Gaea immediately appearing before them along with Little Witch. "Captain, I was getting worried. Where is everyone else? Oh, by the trees, your arm! What happened to your arm?" Gaea asked.

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"Well, there's been a change in plans," Jayce began, as Gaea immediately began to fret over his wound. "I'm fine, I'm fine, but first we should get out of here." "On it," Vexx stated, heading away to the helm and taking the ship away from Veridian Cliffs.

The four of them, and Little Witch, gathered by the Stacked Hand's wheel. Jayce rolled his shoulder as he adjusted a metal arm he had found within Tempest's workshop. "So… assassins?" Gaea questioned, scratching her head as she walked up and down along the mast. "Underwater assassins?" she added. Jayce shook his head. "There's been a takeover of the Guild. We're just helping to sort it out. We're going to head to the Mysts, buy a submersible, whilst posing as successful mercenaries. Marisha had lots of gear for forging identities so we should be fine – besides, most of the world believes me dead anyway."

"So, what about everyone else, shouldn't we let them know? They could help us?" Gaea questioned. "We could bring back Astris, Arthuria and the others?" Her words were sad, lonely. "Sorry, no. It's going to be the four of us." A meow drew their attention down. "Five of us," Jayce corrected, glancing down to the cat and then across the deck to the lone Demon sat on its own. "Although…" A curious thought passed through Jayce's mind. "Avnus, where's Morax?" he called out. The Demon looked up and shrugged. "Well that's worrying."

It was even more worrying when they stopped off at an island on their way east and glanced at any one of the many newspapers. "He did what?" Jayce exclaimed loudly, drawing several curious eyes to him, Vexx, Red and Gaea as they sat indiscreetly at a café. "That's Morax," stated Avnus, the little candle woman peering up from Jayce's lap and pointing at the newspaper showing a flaming Damian. "Well, that answers one question," Jayce muttered, sipping his coffee and looking at his companions. Gaea stared intently at the flower sitting in a vase on their table. "Hello?" she questioned curiously. The dead flower didn't respond. "What's this for?" she asked. "Food?"

"It's decoration," Red answered. "To make this moulded metal and its white cloth sheet more appeasing to the eye. To make it look more natural." Gaea nodded. "I see." She took the red flower from its vase and popped it into her hair. "Mine now." It did suit her but Jayce couldn't help but let out a long sigh. There was a reason Gaea normally stayed with the ship and, now that they were due to be spending a lot of time off the ship, there was little reason to leave her behind to guard it whilst it was in its protective bottle. That meant she was going to have to adapt to normal society, and quickly. "That drink you're drinking, why does

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it fizz?" she asked Vexx. He shrugged. "I see. Why doesn't Jay- I mean Captain Jackie make his drink fizz?"

"Gaea, no one wants fizzy coffee. And that flower isn't ours to take," Jayce said with exasperation. "Well, it's mine now. I stole it!" she said proudly. A server approached the table. "Is everything okay?" she questioned, looking curiously at the pale woman with cyan hair wearing a red flower. "My flower," Gaea growled. Jayce took out a red pearl and placed it on the table. "Sorry, thank you. We'll be leaving now." The server nodded and took the pearl with a look of curiosity and confusion. "Sorry, um, do I recognise you? You look familiar." She glanced towards the metal arm and the others around him. "Probably, I'm Captain Jackie of the New Dawn Mercenaries. You may have heard of our exploits during the war in the Old World," Jayce said deliberately and boastfully. "Bright sun defeats the night!" Red and Gaea declared in rehearsed unison, causing Vexx to place his palm to his face. "We're screwed…" he mumbled almost silently, causing Jayce to kick him in the shin. Little Witch meowed from Vexx's lap. "Um, uh, right. Sorry… I asked," she stated, quickly walking away.

"See, I told you it would work," Jayce said with a grin. Vexx shook his head.

Seize the Seas Tales: Reunited

"Bounties are here," Wicke stated, stepping into the mess hall and dropping a small stack of papers onto the long metal table Bjorn and Marisha were sat at. "Great…" mumbled Bjorn, looking down at his own face and a surprisingly small number underneath it. "Back to being a criminal." Marisha pulled a face and nudged him. "We knew what we were doing, just be glad our allies have pushed down the value," she stated, looking at her own image with a wrinkled nose. "I'll send them some newer photos."

"I doubt they're being pushed down," Wicke stated, sitting down and giving a brief glance towards Damian – sat on his own at another table – before taking out a newspaper. "With the supposed death of the Rising Ace, Jayce Exarga, remnants of the former Pirate Lord's crew have rallied to join his younger brother Damian Exarga. Damian Exarga was witnessed to have murdered a Navy Commodore, and his ties to the fallen crew appear only familial at best. Little of the Rising Aces remain, their ship and status burned away along with their Captain. Notable past members include the superstar Zeta, currently on a global tour in the Old World, as well as Commodore-to-be Astris Kai and Paladin Elder Jeanne d'Arc. All have refused to comment on their former crewmates' actions and affiliation with Damian Exarga, but it is evident that what remains of the

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Rising Aces is nothing but the originals clutching to their only tie to their former Captain and past glories."

"Ouch," stated Marisha. "Who wrote the article? I'd very much like to send them a letter and correct them." Wicke shook her head and pulled the newspaper tightly to her chest as Marisha reached for it. "It's irrelevant, what is relevant is that we are still here and them disregarding us is actually to our benefit. Although…" she displayed Damian's bounty, the amount far larger than the rest of the crew. Damian seemed to notice his own face, standing up and approaching.

"Well, the bounties will cause problems, we'll have to rely on more unscrupulous sources for our resources. Especially since the Steelwind-" Bjorn began, only for Damian to clear his throat. "The Ashes," Damian corrected. Bjorn stared at him blankly. "We're calling the ship the Ashes," Damian doubled down. "I heard what was said. We're not the Rising Aces, at least that's what they're saying. But we're coming out of the ashes of that crew. We're Phoenixes, some more than others," he stated, looking down at the image of himself flying through the air with a pair of flaming green wings. "Hence, this ship is the Ashes – our new home."

"Look around you Damian, this isn't a home. It's a glorified war-machine ready to rust. A direct example of just how much the world has changed. The age of piracy is over, no matter how much those Emperors wish it to not be," Bjorn returned. "I don't mind calling the ship the Ashes…" Wicke said quietly. Bjorn shook his head. "Almost every island in both worlds will be under the banner of the Republic soon and then we'll have nowhere left to go. We'll be choked out." "Well then it's a good thing that not all of the crew got bounties, and that Tempest will overhaul this ship, and that we're getting some reinforcements."

Sabine's eyes widened as the warship docked at Last Drop. It was definitely up there as one of the coolest ships she'd ever seen, the hull painted a variety of dark greens, black and white. A ramp was extended down to the pier and Wicke quickly strode down it before breaking into a run and tackling her friend with a hug. "You came! All of you," she stated, looking across the group stood before her. "Between this and menial duties at the new enclave, it was an easy choice," Morgause said with a smile, hefting her backpack and looking up at ship. "I… didn't really go far," Sabine said quietly. "But I did manage to pick up some clues about my mother."

Wicke nodded sympathetically. "Uh, good. Enki, Cinderlee, Raido – get on board and make yourselves comfortable." The trio nodded and headed up the ramp.

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"What about us?" Sabine questioned curiously. "And him?" she added, pointing at Damian stood near the bow of the warship. "Is it true that he murdered a…?" Morgause questioned in a quiet hush. "It's… messy. Um, not-not for talking about here."

"So it's true? Wicke are you sure about this? I know it's Damian but this-" Morgause pressed. "Look, I need you guys, and this is a chance for us to see more of the world than we could before, or would otherwise. Don't worry about him, he's fine. Can I count on you two?" Wicke questioned. Sabine and Morgause both nodded. "Of course," Sabine said with a smile. "So, what's the ship's name?" "The Steelwind, but Damian wants to call it the Ashes," answered Wicke. Sabine nodded. "The Ashes then… cool." Wicke's face fell a little.

"Right, well, come aboard. We're doing a quick resupply and then we're heading to the Frontier – Bjorn mentioned something about getting us some Dragons." "Woah, the Bjorn?" Sabine questioned, with wide purple eyes. "Are there other Aces here too?" Wicke placed a hand on her back and guided her towards the ramp. "And then some. Let's go, I'll introduce you. Although…" Wicke faltered, reaching up to her communicator. "Caelie? Vexx? Are you guys coming back?"

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