Chapter 256: Amongst the Leaves

Wicke looked across the small crew assembled in the mess hall. There were two distinctive groups, of which she, Damian and Wam were stood firmly in the middle of. Bjorn, Marisha, Tempest, RK and Yuthura all sat observing the others as they finished their tour, but rather curiously Morgause immediately crossed the gap and sat next to Marisha – a gentle, claiming, arm crossing Morgause's shoulder as she was welcomed and stolen. Sabine stood visibly shaking across the way with Enki, Cinderlee and Raido near her. Her purple eyes lay locked on Yuthura, whose own purple gaze lay anywhere else. "So-" Wicke began quietly.

"So," Damian said more loudly, cutting her off. "Thank you all for being here. As of this point onwards, we're now a crew! A Pirate crew! Please get along, we're going to need each other if we are going to achieve our goals!" he stated. "Which is?" Morgause questioned, noticing Wicke's crestfallen gaze before getting waylaid by Sabine's terrified form. "We're going to continue searching out the grimoires of the ancient Archmages!" Wicke basically screamed, desperately intercepting Damian. He turned and looked at her with a confused expression. "I mean," she said more quietly. "We're looking for my family. My older sisters and the others of my people. They left for the Old World six years ago and headed towards the Ancient World more recently. Equally, they set me a task – which I believe to be the goal of collecting all of the ancient grimoires. It was also a goal Jayce set for me, and…" Her voice trembled. "I want to finish it – for him."

"Yeah, as Wicke said. But we're also setting our eyes on becoming the new Sea Sovereign," Damian stated, stepping forwards past Wicke. "We're going to beat the Pirate Emperors to finding the Great Forge and we're going to show them that we're in charge." A cold silence followed, Damian's grin slowly falling as he was met by a vast mixture of unconfident faces. "Sounds great!" Cinderlee stated, breaking out into applause. "We're going to need bombs! You, forge master, do you have materials I can use?" she questioned, pointing towards Tempest. The djinn sparked. "No, but an alchemist station could easily be prepared," he offered. Cinderlee grinned madly as Bjorn's eyes widened and his expression fell. "By the ancestors…" he muttered, his hair standing on end as he envisioned the unhinged destruction she and Tempest would wreak. Morgause stood up, placing a hand on Bjorn's shoulder. "Enki will work with the djinn to fix up this ship first, then you'll get your station," she stated. "You'll help them, Cinderlee, and no untested experiments without permission from the command crew."

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Marisha and Bjorn both let out a sigh of relief. “Which is who?” Morgause then questioned, turning to them. “I am Captain,” Damian insisted, much to Bjorn’s ire. “Bjorn is in charge, Marisha will continue as Cook, Yuthura is our Doctor and Tempest is our Shipwright. I’ll take Navigation,” Wicke stated. “The rest is to play for and will be decided with time.” Morgause nodded in acknowledgment, looking at Wam. “Same as before,” he reassured. “Together.” She nodded appreciatively, drawing out a curious expression from Wicke as she wondered what agreement they had secretly created. “So, Phoenixes,” Damian stated. “Let’s get going! To the Old World!” No one cheered.

As the others stepped out of the mess hall, Wicke caught Bjorn’s arm. “Have you seen Caelie anywhere? I’m getting worried. It’s been weeks. And what about Vexx? He’s not responded to anything since… since Jayce.” Bjorn glanced around before guiding Wicke to a bench and sitting down beside her. “Vexx won’t be coming back. I’m sorry. He only really came here for Jayce and… we won’t be enough for him. Caelie… she’s probably just taking a break. She’ll track us down sooner or later.”

Jayce let out a yelp as a body dropped on him from above. Both Gaea and Red leapt back, raising their fists defensively whilst Vexx simply chuckled. “What? Caelie?” Jayce questioned as the dust cleared, the young woman pounding his chest with her fists as tears streamed from her eyes. “Not dead! Not dead!” she sobbed, her tears dripping onto his face. He reached up and pulled her down into a tight embrace. “Alright, alright, move along!” Vexx stated loudly to the mass of passers-by around them. “I’m sorry,” Jayce told her softly, as she sobbed into him. “I should have told you.”

They retreated to a more discrete alley, Caelie refusing to take her hands off Jayce’s arm even as they walked. “There was a complication,” he explained to her, as she stared up at him desperately looking for answers. “Emperor’s Fists rescued me and asked us for help,” he began. She turned and looked at Vexx, an unusual expression of anger in her eyes that caused his hairs to stand up. “Not his fault,” Jayce corrected, the anger dissipating. She looked away, and, rather curiously, Vexx felt himself ease. There weren’t many that could scare him, but he had seen the sorts of horrors Caelie’s shamanic magic could unleash and he certainly didn’t want to be on the receiving end. “We’re here to buy a submersible, so we can find the Guild headquarters underwater.”

She rested her head into his arm. “Does Bjorn know you’re here?” he asked. She shook her head. “Okay then, little stowaway. You’re coming with us then?” he

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offered. She looked up at him, her eyes twinkling. She nodded vigorously and he hugged her tightly. Jayce looked over to Vexx. “Let’s buy this submersible and get out of here.” He nodded in agreement, leading the way forwards towards the harbour.

Jayce folded his arms as he looked down at the ray-shaped submersible before him. Caelie stood next him, a pair of matching sunglasses on her face as she copied his stance. “It’s top of the range, capable of reaching nearly any depth. Reinforced viewports, cabins, storage areas, and dive suits included. It can move nearly as fast as a standard flyer and has two days’ worth of air supply. There are additional weaponry packages for purchase, specifically for such high-quality mercenaries such as yourselves,” attempted the Syndicate salesman trying to upsell what was clearly a well-used vessel.

“That won’t be necessary,” Jayce stated, glancing towards Red. Even the air supply wasn’t an issue with Gaea around. “Will it fit the five of us?” he questioned. The salesman nodded. “Would you like to take it for a test drive?” he offered. Jayce looked down towards Caelie, she looked back at him and nodded. “That won’t be necessary. We’ll take it.” It was far from cheap, but as Jayce turned on the headlights and engaged the engine the ocean opened up for him in a way he could never have imagined. With a smile on his face, Caelie sat next to him with Little Witch on her lap, and Gaea and Vexx stood behind them, they dove beneath the waves. “To the Frontier,” Jayce stated, Gaea letting out a whoop as Red twisted past the viewport.

“How can you be so… uncaring?” Wicke cried, pushing away from Bjorn and standing up. “She could be anywhere and Vexx… he… he-he wouldn’t abandon us again… would he?” she questioned, her voice breaking as she clenched her fists. “Wicke…” Bjorn said softly. “I…” he let out a sigh and looked away. She shook her head. “You don’t care! You don’t care that Jayce is dead! How could you not care?”

“I do care, Wicke!” he said loudly, before swiftly softening his voice. “I care a lot, but look around you. Look who’s missing and take a moment to think about why.” She faltered. “Vexx told us in advance that we were being followed from a distance by two unidentified individuals. Jayce was hurt, but… Vexx’s absence says far more about Jayce than anything and now Caelie’s gone too. I’m just saying…”

Wicke’s face twisted, her eyes watering before she reached up to wipe her eyes only for them to stream as she began to sob. Bjorn stood up and held her. “He’s

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alive?" she realised, relief flooding into her. "He's alive…" she realised, knowing now that he had abandoned her once more. She wailed into Bjorn's stomach. "He left me! He left me again! Why? What's wrong with me? What did I do? Why does he hate me?"

"Oh, Wicke," Bjorn said softly, sitting down and taking her hands. "It's not you. It… He's an idiot, who doesn't always think of others in the ways he thinks he does. But Jayce was genuinely excited to be sailing with you again. He's wanted to for years and missed you every day we were in the Old World. He spent months stressing over you when we left you behind on your mission." She met Bjorn's gaze and he gently wiped her cheeks. "He loves you, like a sister, and you know that, but this quest… everything we're doing now; it's for you, in the same way it always has been. This adventure was always yours."

"Jayce may not be here, but I am. And it's why he hasn't contacted me, and by the ancestors I've tried contacting him, because he knows that we're here, doing what he wants us to. I will see you to your sisters, as he promised to long ago. He'll find us when he can, I know it, and he wouldn't be away from us without reason. We'll see this through, together, and that means working together to look out for his idiot brother."

"He is an idiot," she half-cried, half-laughed. Bjorn smiled and nodded, gently pulling her into a hug. "No matter what he says, and he says way too much, this is your adventure. He's too hot-headed to lead and it will get him killed," he stated. Wicke shook her head. "He's not that bad. He's just… struggling to find his place. He's a good leader when he's in his element and this is all new to him." Bjorn didn't look reassured. "He… he did get us into this mess though," she added. "And his 'dreams' are problematic. If he says that to the wrong people then we're going to be in far worse trouble." Bjorn nodded, standing up and resting his heavy hand on her head. "Then we'll watch him together, and make sure he keeps his mouth shut."

The Ashes roared as it powered into the Frontier, the entire ship rumbling as it pushed up the rapids guarding the giant wall of trees. Most of the crew were stood on the main deck as they drove into the main opening and joined the populated channels of cargo ships and passenger vessels, but Wicke and Bjorn stood in the bridge. Wicke's eyes still stung and she sniffled slightly as Bjorn steered the ship. A whole variety of labels and notes had been plastered around the cabin, ideas of Tempest's to help overhaul the environment for more manoeuvrability and control under a single driver. But also weapon systems and

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navigational tools that both Wicke and Bjorn were eager to see. “It’s coming up,” Wicke noted, gesturing ahead at the somewhat discrete side passage leading towards the Dragon Monk Village. Bjorn turned the wheel, engaging the engines in reverse. “This ship still feels so heavy, nothing like the old girl,” Bjorn grumbled, several surrounding ships sounding their horns in protest. “It’ll grow on you, I’m sure. Especially once Tempest has tweaked the controls.” Bjorn shook his head. “I doubt it.”

“All crew,” came Bjorn’s voice across the ships intercom system. “We’re about to enter into a Dragon nest, keep your eyes up and defend the ship.” Morgause glanced across the main deck towards Sabine, her gaze outwards and attention clearly elsewhere. “Hey, Sabs, are you okay?” Morgause questioned, resting a gauntlet on her friend’s surprisingly dense shoulder. Sabine flinched, suddenly escaping the clutches of her own mind and looking back towards Morgause. “Sorry, what?”

“Are you okay? You’re looking… lost,” Morgause repeated. Sabine nodded, forcing a smile. “Yeah, I’m just thinking. There’s… the Doctor, Yuthura, do you think…? Never mind,” Sabine questioned before turning away. Morgause leant beside her, her silver hair loose and over her shoulder as her golden eyes met Sabine’s purple glance. “Say your piece. You explode if you bottle things up.” “Um, Yuthura is the same name my mother had. But… I kinda imagined she’d look like me, and, well, Papa wasn’t a young man but she’s…”

“Ancient?” Morgause inserted. Sabine nodded, a weak smile crossing her face. “It might just be a coincidence. Surely Wicke would have said something considering she’s known this Yuthura for years? And wouldn’t the Doctor have said something? She’d recognise her own daughter, no?” Morgause questioned. A large shadow crossed the ship from above. “Um,” Sabine muttered, glancing up, but Morgause didn’t look away. “She would have said something.” Sabine shook her head. “My mother abandoned Papa and I. I-I don’t know why and, well, even if I do find her… I-I’m not naïve, not an idiot. She’d have left for a reason and she’s had plenty of time to come back – to look for me. But… this Yuthura, the one here, there’s something about her. I caught her looking at me, and purple eyes… and… could she be my grandmother?” she questioned. Morgause leapt up, summoned and swung her greatsword and then landed with a thud. A spray of blood painted the deck as a severed Dragon head rolled across the floor, the large corpse of the creature crashing off the side of the ship into the water. “Only one way to find out,” Morgause offered, all other circling Dragons swiftly pulling away from the ship.

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They docked within the hollow beneath the great tree at the edge of the Frontier Lake, the crew assembling together on the main deck and looking towards Wicke, and Damian, for instruction. “We can’t leave the ship undefended,” Morgause stated, gesturing to a few other ships docked nearby. “We shouldn’t all go anyway,” Bjorn confirmed. “These people are… not overly fond of outsiders, and if the Frontier functions in a similar way as to how you guys described the Dungeons, then peeling away the grimoire here from the dead Wizard will end poorly. We should expect the Frontier to reject us.”

“Are we not here to also get ourselves some Dragons?” Damian questioned. Bjorn shook his head. “More trouble than they’re worth. And I’m not sure we have the room. The Stacked Hand had dedicated stables; the Steel-“ Bjorn let out a sigh. “The Ashes doesn’t.” Wicke nodded in agreement, whilst trying not to reveal her disappointment. The fantasy of having her own Dragon had festered in her mind ever since she learnt of their discovery. “Who will stay behind?” she asked.

Yuthura raised her cane. “Too high for my old bones. The djinn, the rokken and I will remain here,” she grumbled. Raido cleared his throat and leant back against the ship railing. “I will stay too. A warrior should remain to keep our new friends safe,” he said with a gentlemanly smile. Wicke turned towards Bjorn, who swiftly counted the group. “I’ll stay too,” Marisha confirmed. “I’ve still got a lot of work to handle.” Wam pointed to himself, held up a flame in his hand and then pointed to the wood around them.

“Okay,” Bjorn stated. “Then that leaves myself, Wicke, Damian, Morgause, Enki, and Sabine to ascend the trees.” Sabine awkwardly cleared her throat. “I’ll stay behind too. I was hoping to learn some medical techniques from Yuthura.” Yuthura flinched. Bjorn looked towards her and raised an eyebrow. “Problem?” he questioned. Yuthura shook her head. “Okay, fine then. Let’s make this quick.”

They departed the ship for the internal stairs leading up the inside of the tree’s hollow. It brought them outside, and rather curiously the large gaps between the old steps had been filled in – a more consistent and welcoming staircase put in its place. “That’s new,” Bjorn noted, the experience completely new to all of them. “I thought you hadn’t gone to the top?” Wicke questioned. Bjorn nodded, taking out a small notebook from his bottomless bag. “No, but Jayce did. You see these larger steps, they used to be the only way up. You had to jump, or fly. I don’t know whether the new way is a sign of good things, or bad.”

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They eventually reached a small gap in the foliage, after a few stops to admire the swarms of Dragons flying around and beneath them, and a quick moment of panic as Enki had almost fallen over the edge, the group clambering up and into a large village spread across wooden walkways. “Woah,” Damian muttered, looking around at the barely clothed dryads wandering around. One giggled as she caught his eyes, but a firm hand on his shoulder from Bjorn stopped him from going to talk to her. “Focus,” he stated.

“Welcome strangers,” greeted a familiar voice. Wicke slowly looked up, her eyes following the body of a giant woman with long green hair that touched the floor and woody, soft-brown skin. She stood as tall as Bjorn and was immensely beautiful, with a firm nutty smell that wafted around her. “Emme,” Bjorn greeted. She tilted her head, her flat green eyes analysing him before widening in gentle realisation. “Companion of my daughter, greetings to you,” she said softly. “It is a pleasure to see you, am I presumed that you have to come to deal with that one?” she questioned, gesturing a long finger to a rather large crimson Dragon snoozing on his back in the middle of the village. Bjorn chuckled. “Not intentionally, but I can see what I can do.”

“I do not sense Gaea nearby; is there a reason she does not travel with you? Is all well?” Emme questioned curiously. Wam looked down and cleared his throat. “Um, Ma’am, Gaea-“ he began, only for Bjorn to cut him off and redraw Emme’s attention. “She’s travelling with another group of ours. We’ve come here actually for a different reason than the Dragons, or that one over there. This is Wicke.” “Greetings, young one,” Emme stated.

“Hello,” Wicke returned with a smile. Bjorn placed a hand on her back and pressed her forwards. “She’d like to talk to you about the Wizard in the grove,” Bjorn stated. “We’ll do what we can about Zhurong,” he added, stepping away with Wam and Enki. “Right, um,” Wicke said awkwardly, looking towards Morgause. “So I’m kind of on a little quest to collect the grimoires of the ancient Archwizards.”

“Hey, wake up,” Bjorn grunted, towards the Dragon blocking the centre of the village. There was a loud snort and the crimson Dragon’s eyes flicked open. “Huh?” he questioned, his gaze eventually settling on Bjorn. “It’s you.” Zhurong rolled over with a loud grown. He’d grown even larger in the month since they’d last seen each other, and Bjorn couldn’t help but feel grateful that the Dragon was no longer his problem. “You’re blocking the path, the people here are getting annoyed.”

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"How is the concern of the flammable my problem?" Zhurong growled, letting out a wide yawn that scared away a few of the nearby dryads. "Just… don't be a pain. Anyway," Bjorn turned and looked for Damian, only to falter as he couldn't see him. "Where's Damian?" he asked. Enki and Wam both shrugged. "Great," Bjorn muttered. "Do you want to come with us on another journey?" Bjorn offered. "We could use some air defence, and the youngsters with me this time would be angry at me if I didn't ask."

Zhurong chuckled. "No."

"Fair enough, I asked. Just don't cause problems for these people, and I would advise finding a new home soon anyway," Bjorn stated, turning around and walking back towards Wicke. "He'll move," he stated to Emme, who nodded appreciatively. "This tale, that young Wicke has told me – do you vouch for it?" Emme questioned to Bjorn. "She's smarter than I am, I have no reason to doubt her. And she's already spoken to several of that Archwizard's peers." Emme turned and glanced towards the concealed grove. "Very well, you may attempt to wake her. I ask only that I may bear witness."

As they walked towards the grove, Bjorn gently pulled Wicke back a few steps. "Have you seen Damian?" he asked. Her eyes widened and she glanced upwards towards the branches above them. "Oh no."

Seize the Seas Tales: Suspicions

"I am not as well stocked on potions, ointments and other medical supplies as I normally would be but this medical ward is far larger than my previous examination room. With time it should be more than func-" Yuthura explained as she showed Sabine around the room. "Are you my mother?" Sabine interrupted, causing the old woman to freeze. "Mother?" Yuthura eventually questioned. "What are you talking about girl? How could I possibly be your mother? I hardly know you."

"Well, it's just that… Wicke told me stories about your healing skills, all of them. And…" Sabine picked up a scalpel and ran it across the top of her hand. It drew blood and swiftly closed shut. "We also have the same eyes. My mother's name was-" Yuthura turned to face her and took Sabine's hands, shaking her head and meeting her gaze. "Girl, look at me. I'm a very old woman and you are far too young to possibly be my child, of which I have none. I am not… your mother. Okay?" Sabine looked down, before swiftly turning and running away trailing silent tears behind her.

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Marisha folded her arms as she leant in the doorway. “What? You know nothing!” Yuthura snapped, turning and hobbling away on her cane. Marisha glanced towards Wam, standing nearby with similar curiosity. “Is she telling the truth?” Wam asked. “Sabine’s got a pretty good case.” Marisha let out a sigh and stepped towards her son, placing a hand on his chest. “For your safety, drop it. Don’t ever ask, don’t ever mention it again.”

Yuthura slammed her door shut behind her, easing herself down onto the uncomfortable bed in her quarters. With a groan she pulled her legs up, resting her eyes onto her knees as they refused to stop running. She hugged herself, a muffled wail escaping her.

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