

Chapter 64: Congratulations, Get to Work

Alara rubbed the bruises on her body as she sat in her room aboard Rear-Admiral Otrera's flagship: the Amazon. It had already been a few days since they had left the island of Fractured Pearl, but she couldn't remember anything she had actually done during her time on board. She just remembered pain, exertion, and exhaustion as the Admiral personally trained her. She sat there, staring at the head of a nail in the wall. A crashing of waves built up in her ears before silencing with a droplet hitting water, her vision enhancing as she entered into Focus. She held it for a few moments before it gave out, a wave of exhaustion overwhelming her.

She lay back in her bed, a whole new alien world opened up to her. Innate physical energy, qi, magic, it all felt strange, unnatural - yet built into the very fabric of her being. A knock at her door jolted her upright. "Yes, come in," she called out. The door opened, Astris and Riley peeking their heads through the gap. "Hey," Astris said with a smile, whilst Riley made a peace sign by placing her knuckles together with her thumbs up. "Hey," Alara said back, laying back down on her bed.

"How's training going?" Astris asked, stepping inside. Riley shut the door behind them. "Tiring. I'm still getting used to this Focus thing," Alara answered honestly. "Yeah, it's not easy," Astris stated, much to Alara's confusion. "You know of it?" she questioned, as Riley stared at the pair dumbfounded. "Yeah, my Father nailed it into us when we were young. I've never really bothered with it, it was always just one of his weird training things. I've also never been in a situation that required it."

"Hold up, hold up. What is Focus? I'm confused," interrupted Riley. "It's taking the innate energy of our universe and channelling it through your body to enhance your strength, stamina, endurance, speed, and perception," Alara recited. "Huh?" stated Riley. "Sounds weird." She then faltered, thinking about people turning into animal hybrids, magic, sea monsters, floating cities. "Never mind. Can you teach me? Maybe Wulf and the others as well." Alara glanced towards Astris. "I can handle them. I only know the basics, so I'll need you to tell me what the Admiral teaches you," Astris stated. Alara nodded in agreement. "Sounds like a plan."

Alara woke up early the following morning, a foot placed into her back as she found herself pressed into the wall of her cabin. She let out a sigh, regretting agreeing to let Astris and Riley stay with her. The bed was small enough with

just her in it, let alone the pair of them, yet the nightmares had stopped with them keeping her company. And it reminded her of home. She rolled over, Astris pressing herself closer into her with Riley laying over the pair of them. She shut her eyes, holding them tightly as she listened to them breathe. It felt unreal that it had almost been ten months since she had left home. It felt like she had known Astris and Riley her whole life: they were more than her friends, and she was so happy they were with her. Until Riley farted, an unconscious laugh coming from the gremlin.

Later that day, Alara found herself stood outside another cabin. She knocked, the voice of Commander Vao inviting her inside. "Commander," Alara greeted. Delta nodded, putting down her book and sitting up in her bed. "Shut the door and sit Alara," she ordered. Alara nodded, doing as she was asked and looking at her curiously. "I apologise for being such a recluse over the last few days," she began. Alara quickly shook her head, holding up her hands. "You're injured, I'm disturbing you. There's no need for an apology."

Delta shook her head. "No, I've been putting it off. I said we'd talk another time, and I've been hiding. I'm sorry. Anyway, I've heard you've begun learning Focus. That's good. It's something we should have taught you. But the Captain and I decided against it, given how much you were already dealing with." Alara nodded in appreciation. "It's a lot to learn, but the Admiral is a good teacher. I'm open to any tips you can give me."

Delta smiled. "Keep at it, practice is the most important part. It's a new muscle, that takes time building. Anyway... Onasi. It's a complex situation, we are and aren't together. He used me when I was younger," she stated, much to Alara's horror. "It's fine, we used each other. As you are no doubt aware, the Fleet Admiral is my grandfather. It was expected of me to use the connections granted by my family to become a leader, to rule an island, or a company, or something. Instead, I enlisted in the Marines - against my family's wishes."

Alara listened intently, Vao's face twisted as she relived an uncomfortable memory. She snapped out of it, shaking her head and glancing back towards Alara. "Anyway, like you, I was accelerated through the ranks. Before I completed my basic training I was granted the rank of Commander and given the opportunity to have my own crew or to pick a Captain to go under. I chose a Captain - I wasn't ready for my own crew, and I knew it. I found myself in a meeting room with twenty prospects, all vying for me. I was nineteen, I think - this was seven years ago."

"They all wanted to use me to get their names heard; direct access to the Fleet Admiral, they didn't care who I was. Apart from one young, charming Captain." "Onasi," Alara muttered. Delta nodded, letting out a soft chuckle as she shook her head. "I fell for him, hard. No one had ever been so devoted, so charming, so... kind. Whilst the others were selling themselves to me, he was playing with my foot underneath the table. I was an idiot. I chose him and for a while things were great, until he realised he couldn't use me to destroy the Church."

"The attention disappeared, and I had the audacity to think I had done something wrong. I craved his attention, I destroyed myself chasing him whilst trying to fulfil my duty to the Empire, but I had made my choice. I couldn't go back on it, not after the competition for me. It took a long time for me to get over loving him, and even longer to get over hating him. But eventually I realised he was just a broken man looking to get revenge for his mother."

"Don't you feel any... anger towards him? He used you, threw you away." Vao shook her head. "Not anymore. I don't blame him. Everyone in that room wanted to do the same, he just played me better than they did. The point is, I know what it's like to have expectations placed upon you. I also know what awaits you. You're going to have eyes on you when we arrive at the Capital, a lot of eyes. You'll get offers, chances for glory, wealth, promotions. Every time, I want you to remember these words: what do they get out of it? Promise me, you'll think carefully and stay safe."

Alara nodded. "I promise, Delta." Commander Vao nodded, leaning back in her bed. "Good. I'm not going to be there with you, Alara. I'm sorry for that, but Onasi needs me, now more than ever. And it's not like I can sail the seas as your Captain without working legs. Anyway, tell me what's been going on. It's really boring here," she concluded with a smile. Alara nodded, breaking out all of the gossip and reciting her personal connection to the Rear-Admiral.

The journey concluded with the Capital growing quickly on the horizon. It was just over two weeks until the summer solstice and the sun sat comfortably in the middle of the sky. Alara glanced towards Rear-Admiral Otrera as she stood next to her, a strong feeling of comfort coming from her presence. "Something you need, Vanathur?" she asked, spotting Alara's expression from the corner of her eye. "No, uh, no Admiral... Just, thank you. For everything you've taught me, and for looking after my crew." Otrera nodded in acknowledgement, turning her attention back towards the Isle of Duty, as the mountain and Navy Headquarters grew larger and larger.

Both crews assembled on the main deck, once the Amazon had safely docked in the dockyard, glancing up towards the Rear-Admiral as she stood by the ship's wheel. "Welcome home. Marines, I hope you have enjoyed your stay. The rest of you, business as usual. Dismissed," she stated efficiently. The Marines then turned towards Alara, and she gave a quick nod. "Stay available, keep your eyes and ears open for further orders," she stated, picking up her bags and walking towards the gangplank.

Immediately Alara was bombarded with bright flashes, a sea of reporters crowding the dock below. She stumbled forwards, walking slowly as her name was called from multiple angles. "Commander! Miss Vanathur! Alara!" The words echoed around her, the strangers crowding closer, held back by a few of the Navy who had departed first. Flash after flash, call after call, Alara quickly found herself overwhelmed, her heart pounding, fear rushing through her.

"Alara," said a gentle voice behind her, a hand gripping her shoulder tightly. She turned, the Rear-Admiral next to her, her Navy, as well as Alara's Marines, rushing forwards to form a tunnel to hold back the reporters. "Someone must have leaked our arrival. Snap out of it, stay close," she ordered, shielding Alara from the onslaught. The Admiral pushed forwards, a gentle but firm arm across Alara's back as she guided her onwards. Alara glanced at those around her, holding back the reporters. Wulf stood proudly, staring them down as he snarled. Witchford had his arms wide, blocking the other side. Astris, Riley – the pair gave reassuring nods as Alara passed by. Brett, Violette, the rest of the Wolves, they all guided her through.

Eventually the flashes and the yells faded away, the cold interior of the Navy Headquarters bringing a sense of safety and security as Rear-Admiral Otrera continued to guide her onwards. "Someone is going to be punished for letting all of them through," she growled. "Are you okay?" Alara nodded quickly, snapping herself out of her daze. "Yes Admiral, I'm sorry." Otrera shook her head, releasing Alara. "Anyone would be startled by an ambush like that. This is all new for you, do not apologise – learn from it and handle it better next time."

Alara nodded, the Admiral stepping forwards and leading the way away from the route where the rest of the Navy and Marines were headed. She led Alara away to an isolated wall, strange markings covering the surface. "Admiral Exarga requested I bring you straight to her. Head through the doorway, up the stairs, through the large room and along the corridor until you see a large red door. Brace yourself, you of all people should know what to expect. Tell the

Admiral... tell her that I'm wondering if I could still get that drink. I'll see you at the Emperor's Ball," she stated, pressing her hand to the wall.

The surface bubbled, twisting away to show a landing connected to two sets of stairs leading up and down. Alara stepped forwards, the doorway quickly beginning to close behind her. "Thank you for everything," she said quickly as the entrance sealed. Alara turned around, glancing upwards and following her instructions. She came to a large grey room, full of desks manned by numerous people. A few guards glanced at her curiously, one stepping forwards quickly.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant Commander. You don't have clearance to be here. How exactly did you get in here and what's your name?" he asked quickly, his Navy uniform completely black and indicating he was a Lieutenant. "I'm here to see Admiral Exarga, Rear-Admiral Otrera let me in. I'm Lieutenant Commander Alara Vanathur," she stated succinctly. The Lieutenant glanced back to the other guards, all well-armed and clearly well trained. "Sounds plausible. Very well, that way. Red door."

"Thank you," she said, nodding to him before walking through the centre of the room. As she passed the many desks, she slowed down, taking a quick glance as she passed by. The desks were covered in reports, orders flowing in and out of the room, information coming in from all parts of the New World. "Ahem," cleared the voice of the Lieutenant, Alara quickly picking up her pace and carrying on.

She entered into the hallway she had been directed to, passing by a green door, a blue door, and a yellow door before eventually finding herself stood in front of a large red door. She knocked. "Enter," came the voice inside. Alara took a deep breathe, pushing open the door. Alara smiled at the Admiral as she sat behind her desk, her eyes quickly widening. Alara blinked, her body instinctively entering into Focus as the Admiral tackled her in a tight embrace, kissing her face and head in a barrage as she held her.

"I'm okay, I'm okay!" Alara protested as she was smothered. Cassandra released her slightly, holding her at half-an-arm's length, as she looked her up and down. "You're okay," she said, with tears in her eyes. Alara nodded, and the relieved look on the Admiral's face immediately changed into one of quick anger. "You, Alara Vanathur, are never leaving my sight again. You are getting a desk job, and that's final. How could you do this to me? Do you know how worried I was? You know what, here: take this!" she berated in a blur, reaching out to thin air. A small

hand axe appeared in her hand in a flash of red lightning. "This stays on you at all times, do you understand me?"

"Admiral, Cassandra, Mother!" Alara intercepted, eventually stopping her barrage. "I'm okay. I'm alive." Cassandra's shoulders dropped, the redness in her face fading as she looked at Alara, before quickly noticing several eyes staring at them from the end of the hall. "Ahem," the Admiral stated, turning around and walking inside her office. Alara followed after her, shutting the door behind her.

Cassandra turned back around, holding out the hand axe. "I'm serious, Alara. Please don't... I thought I'd lost you," she said, tears streaming from her eyes. Alara tried not to, but she quickly began to cry as well, the axe falling from Cassandra's hands to the floor as she once again held her daughter. "You're safe now. I'm not going to let anything happen to you." Alara nodded, the pair holding each other.

The pair only released each other as the door opened behind them. Sylvie stared at the two with a soft smile. "We might need some tissues," Cassandra said, wiping her eyes. Sylvie nodded. "I'm glad you're safe, Alara," she said. "Thank you, Auntie." Sylvie shut the door behind her and Cassandra pointed towards the sofa in the room. "Tell me what happened. Not the bullshit in the report, everything."

Sylvie eventually returned, quietly sitting down in her chair on the opposite side of the room, listening to the end of Alara's tale. She curled her long green hair in her fingers. "Were we aware of Onasi's magic?" Sylvie asked. Cassandra nodded. "Philip was the one who recruited him. Onasi's an idiot, but the Church have never hidden their fear of him. Still, it's a shame. He's a good Captain, if a reckless one."

"And my niece? Delta," Sylvie Gamble asked. Alara's eyes widened, she hadn't put the pieces together. "She's okay, paralysed from the hips down, but alive." Sylvie nodded, lowering her head, before glancing towards the Admiral. "Go," Cassandra ordered. Wordlessly, Sylvie stood up and left the room, leaving the pair behind. "As has been mentioned, there's no proof it was the Church, however likely it may have been. Be careful, I doubt anything will be tried, but just play things safe."

Alara nodded. "Well, I suppose we've got all the bad news out of the way. How was the Rear-Admiral?" Cassandra asked, standing up and walking around to

sit behind her desk. "She was nice. I'd forgotten her, but she told me a lot of stories, ones I still don't really remember. She told me some funny ones about you." Cassandra grit her teeth, raising an eyebrow. "Ahem, um, well anyway. She told me to tell you that she was interested in that drink you offered." Cassandra's expression relaxed. "Huh, well that's a surprise. What did you say to her?" Alara glanced at her with confusion, but Cassandra just waved it off.

"Never mind. I suppose we should do some work today. In all honesty, I've done next to nothing since I was told you were on your way," she stated, casually sliding a large pile of documents off the edge of her desk onto the floor with the back of her hand before picking up another pile and replacing it. She then stood up, walking around to stand in front of Alara. "Stand up, Lieutenant Commander."

Alara did as ordered. "In light of your heroic actions in the face of battle, and the bravery and intelligence you showed afterwards, I am proud to officially grant you a promotion from Lieutenant Commander to Commander of the Marines. Congratulations," she said with a smile, extending a hand. Alara shook it. "I'm more than proud of you, Alara. Now, these should fit you. I don't think you've changed that much since you last got new uniform," she stated, walking to a wardrobe tucked in the corner of the room and opening it.

Alara stared at the Commander's uniform in awe. It was nearly identical to her own, only white rather than grey. She had always envied Commander Vao's and now she had her own. "Hopefully next time we have a conversation I can give you a black one, but I hope you like it. Also..." Cassandra stated, reaching inside her desk and pulling out several bright, almost glowing, red highlights to fit in the uniform. "If you'd do me the honours, I'd be proud to have you sailing the colours of my fleet."

Alara nodded, changing quickly into her new uniform, before letting the Admiral add the highlights. As Alara went to put on her boots, the Admiral stopped her, pulling out a new red pair. They fit perfectly. "It looks good on you," she said, gently adjusting the uniform before taking hold of Alara's blue pearl. She frowned as she looked at it, before gently tucking it inside Alara's jacket. "With that out of the way, I suppose we should talk about the next step."

"Officially, you should be placed under a Captain, however, I have a better idea. I want you to lead your own ship and crew. There is a hunter-class corvette, called the Sole Survivor, currently getting retrofitted. It is slightly smaller than the Lone Wanderer, it's crew capacity is one-hundred and twenty. You've shown

ability to handle a crew of that size and I have also personally ordered an increase in the ship's armaments. It's designed for patrols and escorts, however I would like you to hunt specific targets. Your mission is simple: explore and track down Pirates and other renegades, and then bring them to justice. You would have freedom to operate anywhere, and at your own discretion, in a manner not too dissimilar to the New Era."

"My own ship and crew? Are you certain this is wise? Surely there's better people for the job. I mean, I-I've only just really become a full Marine, and now I'm a Commander. Isn't it too soon?" Alara stammered, stunned by the proposition. "It is because you are new that I want you to do this. You will see things differently, and I think it's about time we start to break traditions again. There's no one I trust more than you. You will be ready for this. Trust me."

Alara nodded. "Given the situation your crew currently is in, there will be a lot of changes to make. Some will want out, others will be forced out due to injury. This means you have a lot of work to do. Here," Cassandra said, pointing to the large pile of documents resting on her desk. "I put out the word you would be assembling a crew. There have been applications from throughout the fleet, veterans amongst them. A lot of people want a leader who they can trust to keep them alive. You've shown you care. We've also had a boom in applicants from civilian and Navy alike. They view you as the next great hero. Don't let it go to your head. Take your pick, choose one hundred and twenty Marines, I'm sure many from your old crew will want to stay."

"All of these people want me as their Commander?" Alara muttered, as she stared in shock at the large pile. "No, we've already sifted out most of the applicants, these are the best of the best. The real pile is about five times the size." Alara's jaw fell open. "Take your time, the ship won't be ready for another three weeks. Anyway, I suppose now is an appropriate time to talk about your training. Rear-Admiral Otrera should have already introduced you to Focus. And given I've already sensed its presence, I'm glad to see you're ready for your duty. However, where Basic Focus is a necessity to be a Commander, it's really just the basics," she stated, walking to the door.

She pushed it open. An olive-skinned woman stood outside, with a large scar leading down from her exposed neck to her chest and a metal hand. She had black hair and dark brown eyes, a smile on her face. "Zenobia will take over your training, taking you to at least a Captain's level, or as close as she can in the next three weeks." Alara stepped forwards, hugging Zenobia tightly.

"You had me worried," Zenobia stated. "You've grown quick, Vanathur. I'm proud." Alara nodded in appreciation, turning back to Cassandra. "Make your crew selections as quickly as you can, tell me which of your crew need promoting so I can get their training underway. Work hard, I want to show you off at the Emperor's Ball," Cassandra concluded, nodding to Zenobia. Alara nodded. "I'll do my best, Admiral."

Zenobia took her away, congratulating her on her promotion before showing her her accommodation, a nice room with everything she could need. After dropping off her things, she was then taken away to a private training room. "Welcome to your personal hell, Alara," Zenobia stated, Alara's wide smile quickly fading. "Oh, you were thinking this would be pleasant. No way, we're combining months of training into three weeks... once again," she said with a sigh. "I doubt you'll succeed, and this time I mean it, but I will give you the tools to carry the training onwards."

"I will do my best," Alara stated, bowing her head. Zenobia waved it off. "Technically, this is my holiday time, so I'm going to enjoy this as much as I can. We'll take breaks throughout the day, where we will analyse your applicants. It'll take a few days to get the results back from your current crew as to who is staying, but that doesn't mean we can't start eliminating now. Right, let's get to work!" Zenobia stated with a big smile.

Seize the Seas Tales: Ticket for One

"Your Father?" Jayce questioned, sitting back down on his stool in the Emperor's Rest. Holli nodded. "I thought you didn't want to meet him. He abandoned you after your Mother died, right?" Again Holli nodded, her expression falling slightly. "Yeah... you're right, as usual. I thought he wanted nothing to do with me, so, fuck him, right. Hehe." She shook her head. "He was writing to Pops and Na, I found letters. Hundreds. He wanted to know everything that went on. My hobbies, books I was reading, our misadventures, our first kiss... I think he's visited before, but I don't have any photos, I don't have anything to tell me who he is."

"Our first kiss?" Bjorn chimed in, raising an eyebrow. Holli grinned mischievously as Jayce glanced away. "Yeah, Jayce and I used to date. Well, and Alara. Not many people our age, so... yeah," she said with a smile, placing two fingers together before connecting a third. Marisha and Bjorn stared at Jayce in surprise as he suddenly took extreme interest in his shoes, his face a deep red. "I understand why he didn't tell you, since I got dumped," she said snarkily.

"You think your Father is in the Capital," Jayce interrupted. Holli laughed. "Yes. Well no, I think he's high up in the Guild. I've been making some connections, and I've hired some people to run the shop for me whilst I'm gone, so I'm going to try and make a case for myself. If I can stand out, he might make himself known to me. Otherwise, well, I think I'd know if I met him again." Jayce nodded. "I can offer you a lift, but you'll have to earn your keep," he said, extending a hand. She shook it. "Done. I'll pack my things. When are we leaving?" Jayce stared wide-eyed at her, before glancing towards Bjorn. "Tomorrow?" Bjorn suggested. Jayce nodded, getting to his feet and smiling at Holli. "Tomorrow it is. Let's go introduce you to the rest of the crew. I feel like there's a lot to catch up on."

Chapter 65: Burying the Dead

Zenobia wasted no time getting Alara settled. Within the hour, they had collected Alara's pay and grabbed some food to go, before Alara was dropped off in her temporary accommodation. Only to then immediately be dragged away to a large training hall built into the mountain. However, as Alara took out her glaive and assembled the weapon, she quickly noticed Zenobia sitting comfortably on the floor.

"We'll get to that. Sit," she instructed, patting the wooden floor. Alara nodded, glancing around the room as she mirrored her mentor. Several metal training dummies sat at the end of the large hall, a wall full of weapons next to them. There was an emergency medical station, as well as - to Alara's mild bemusement - what looked like a drinks bar. However, what really drew her attention was the haphazardly placed desk covered in documents.

"Until your ship and crew are ready to sail, this is your home. Apart from sleeping, and maybe eating - depending on if you've appeased me, you will spend your entire time here. From dawn till dusk, you are mine, and will only leave if given permission. You will work harder than you have ever before, and during your rest breaks you will focus on building your crew. Am I understood?" Zenobia asked, extending her metal hand towards Alara. "Yes, Senior Instructor," Alara responded, grasping it tightly and shaking her hand in agreement. "Good, show me your best."

The first day passed quickly, Alara could only hold her Focus for a minute at best, and after continuous exertion she doubted that was going to change any time soon. As promised, with each break, the pair started to work through the large pile. There were more than six-hundred candidates; Alara needed to narrow down that number to one-hundred and twenty, and she hadn't even received confirmation as to which members of the Lone Wanderer wished to stay. Eventually Zenobia acknowledged it was not going to be a task solved in a day, releasing Alara from her duty and allowing her to stagger back to her room.

Everything hurt as Alara woke up in her bed, her legs still felt shaky underneath her from adjusting back to life on shore, but she knew she would adjust quickly. She splashed her face, staring at the somewhat hollow expression on her face glaring at her from beyond the mirror. She leant forwards, wiping droplets from her eyebrows only to jump backwards as her skin fell off, her face rotting with a bullet hole through her forehead. She blinked and her face returned to normal, her heart pounding in her chest.

She shook it off, stepping quickly away from the bathroom and heading back to her bedroom. Her eyes stared at the floor as she walked, only to glance up at a figure staring at her from in front of her bed. "Alara," gargled Axel, his skin pale, his face gaunt with his chin covered in blood, a large hole in his neck. "Axel," she gasped, stumbling backwards, only to sharply turn as a hand placed itself on her shoulder. "Why didn't you save us?" asked Lieutenant Hawke, one hand placed on the hole in his chest, the other reaching out towards her as she stumbled backwards.

"I couldn't, you were already gone, I'm sorry," she cried, backing away as Axel and Hawke approached her. She turned. "Commander," groaned Lieutenant Thorne, various other dead members of the crew rising out from the floor around him as they blocked the door. Axel grabbed her shoulders from behind, prompting Alara to scream as she threw him off her, backing away towards the safety of her bed.

She clambered on top, staring down at corpses of her crew, tears streaming down her face, her heart pounding in her ears. She continued to back away, only to stumble and fall over. She glanced towards the body laying in her bed. Onasi stared at her, his eyes missing and bloody. "I'll never wake up because you were too slow. Alara, you've killed me," he groaned, moving only his head as he stared at her. "Alara," groaned Vao, as she hung impaled to the wall above him. The voices echoed around her as she continued to crawl backwards, her bed endless as the crew swarmed around her, her heart continuing to pound in her head. Louder. Louder. Louder.

Alara bolted upright in her bed, sweat covering her body as she panted, a pounding echoed from her door. "Alara!" called a voice from the other side. "Coming!" she called out, only to choke on her words. She shook herself off, crawling out of bed with a crash before dragging herself to the door and pulling it open. Astris stared at her on the other side dressed in full uniform, a bemused look turning quickly into one of horror and concern. "Are you okay? What happened? You look like you've seen a ghost!"

Tears burst out of her, Astris opening her arms to hug her, only to quickly hesitate as she noticed how sweaty Alara was. As Alara opened her arms, Astris tactfully took her hands, leading her back inside. "Nightmare?" Astris asked, sitting Alara down before getting her a drink of water. Alara nodded. "The same one?" Alara shook her head, taking the water and draining the glass. Astris took it back and refilled it before sitting down next to her. "Tell me."

Astris listened patiently as Alara recounted the experience, eventually nodding and taking Alara's hand in her own. "Maybe three weeks is too soon. It might be best to talk to the Admiral, hell any one of the Admirals – apart from my Father. They could give you some counselling, they'll have all lost people before. You did the best that you could have done. There was nothing you could have done differently to save those we lost. The Captain... we'll just have to wait and see."

Alara shook her head before nodding. "You're right, but it's just a nightmare. The Admiral can't help me, I just... I just can't accept they're really gone," she admitted. Astris nodded. "That's what today is for: to put them to rest. Come on, Zenobia sent me to get you, so shower and get dressed, you stink," she said with a soft smile. Alara nodded, glancing towards Axel as he leant in the corner staring at her with a gentle smile. He nodded, tilting his head towards the shower before fading away into the wall. "Alara?" Astris questioned. Alara blinked, turning to face her. "Right, give me three minutes."

They departed Alara's accommodation, both in full uniform. Astris stared with a mild look of jealousy at Alara's new uniform as they walked, unconsciously raising Alara's mood as she showed it off. They made their way across the Isle of Duty to the main military courtyard, located adjacent to the main entrance to the Navy Headquarters. The survivors of the Lone Wanderer were trickling in as they arrived, as well as family and friends of the departed who could attend. Her crew formed up, Alara taking her position at the very front, Commander Vao right next to her as she sat in her wheelchair.

"The new uniform looks good, Commander," said Delta, glancing up at Alara with a gentle smile. "Thank you, Commander," returned Alara, with a smile of her own. "Ahem," cleared a voice in front of them. Alara turned her attention forwards to the collection of senior command stood at the front of mourners. "We gather today to remember those who fell in the line of duty, those lost souls who gave everything they had for our Empire," began Admiral Exarga.

Alara did her best to hold back her tears, but as she glanced away from Admiral Exarga to the memorial, a large black monolith covered in the names of fallen ships, they fell on their own, continuing throughout the entire speech. "Although they are lost to us, their memories live on, as does the spirit of the Lone Wanderer and its valiant crew. May we do everything we can to honour their sacrifice," concluded the Admiral. Alara bowed her head, raising it as she watched the various family members step forwards, laying items related to the fallen at the base of the memorial.

Eventually they approached, stopping in front of the two Commanders. "Thank you for bringing my son home," said an old woman, as she took Alara's hands, another figure quickly expressing the same, followed by another and another. Alara stood frozen as they all looked at her. "I'm sorry I couldn't more," she said with a sob. The old woman shook her head, looking up at her. "You did better than anyone else could have. Thank you, Commander Vanathur."

Eventually the group dispersed, leaving Alara and her crew behind. She glanced down at Commander Vao, who had remained silent the entire time, her head hung in shame. "What are your orders?" Alara asked her. Eventually she shook her head, glancing towards Alara. "You are no longer mine to command. The crew is yours, please look after them, and yourself, Alara," she said quietly, glancing over towards an attendant stood nearby and nodding. Silently the young woman approached, holding on to the back of her wheelchair and wheeling her away.

Alara turned around, her crew looking towards her. She glanced towards the senior crew, to her squad – Delex counted amongst them, his leg mostly healed, and to the rest of the crew. "In all honesty, I don't know what to say. We've all been through so much, experienced something horrible, lost friends, our crewmates, our home... A ship is being prepared for me, I set sail in three weeks' time. I don't expect any of you to come with me. You deserve rest, to put this behind you and I will respect whatever decision you come to. But for those of you who wish to stay, please tell me before the end of the week. To the rest of you, good luck! May the seas be fair to you. Live long and happy lives!"

Alara nodded to the crew, turning around and stepping away. She headed to the memorial, stopping in front of it as she traced the newly carved name of the Lone Wanderer, before turning around. The majority of her crew remained stood in their positions, heads held high. Alara glanced towards the various members walking away, some faltering as they glanced back before turning and continuing onwards. With a sigh, Alara walked back towards the group. "You're dismissed," she stated. "No Ma'am!" said her Marines in unison, the senior command and her squad counted amongst the mass. "Refusing orders is not a great start to joining my crew," Alara said with a smile.

There were a few laughs, the group relaxing, but the sentiment remaining. "Okay then!" Alara stated, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a notebook and a pen. "Write your names in this, as much as I may try, there's no way in hell I will remember all of you. Thank you, all of you," she said, handing the notebook to

the person stood at the front of the group. "Was there ever any doubt?" Astris asked, taking the notebook and writing her name down before passing it backwards. "Of course not. Come with me."

They left the group to sign their names, glancing towards Zenobia as she stood waiting nearby, a nod of acknowledgment reaching the pair of them. "If you're going to cry, please give me some warning," Astris began, only to falter as Alara grabbed her in a tight hug. "Thank you," she said into her neck. Astris shut her eyes leaning into the embrace. "What are friends for?" she asked. Alara nodded, continuing to hold her, but pulling away. "Part of the job I've been assigned is choosing positions on my crew. I couldn't have got everyone home without you by my side. I'm lost without you, and I would be honoured, Astris Kai, if you were my right hand. Will you be my Lieutenant Commander?" she asked.

"Not Wulf, or Witchford, or Riley? Or someone who's been one already?" Astris immediately asked, her obsidian eyes wide with surprise. Alara shook her head. "Riley would start a mutiny, Wulf hates bureaucracy, and Witchford is too strict with the rules. There is no one I can think of who I want more than you," Alara stated, releasing Astris. Astris stepped back, nodding before letting out a large exhale. "I need to think this through. This is a really big choice, Alara," she stated. "Really?"

"Fuck no! I'm in, of course I'm in!" Astris said immediately. Alara grinned. "Good. We've got a lot to do," Alara said, waving over Instructor Zenobia. "I've got my Lieutenant Commander." Zenobia smiled as she nodded with approval. "It's good to see you, Senior Instructor," Astris said quickly, bowing her head to Zenobia. "And you, Commander Kai. I hope you're ready for some real training," she stated. Astris stared blankly at her. "Sorry, what?"

The days passed quickly with Astris as her sparring partner, Alara quickly progressing from only being able to hold Focus for one minute to three minutes by the end of the first week. Together they worked hard to build their crew, immediately prioritising internal promotions from their old crew. For Brett, Wulf, Riley, and Witchford, the news of promotions sparked immediate joy, until they were dragged kicking and screaming to the training hall alongside Alara and Astris by Zenobia. Now with the six of them, training only seemed to intensify as the four Lieutenants, the Lieutenant Commander, and the Commander were broken and rebuilt again and again by Senior Instructor Zenobia.

"That will do," Zenobia said to Alara as she lay flat on her back panting. Two weeks had flown by since their arrival to the Capital; Alara could now hold Focus for five minutes before exhaustion overwhelmed her. "I can... go... again," Alara panted. "No. Any other day I'd allow it, but today is the solstice and you need to be at your best for the ball this evening. I've given the others paperwork to do, take the day off and prepare yourself for the festivities," Zenobia stated, pulling Alara to her feet. "Thank you," Alara stated. Zenobia nodded, shooing her away.

Alara wasted no time, heading immediately to one of the many cafes on the island for a late lunch. She had a few hours until she needed to get ready, and excitement was running rampant through her. With her stomach filled she returned to her room, heading immediately into the bath to soak. Her eyes shut on their own, and she quickly fell into a slumber. No nightmares haunted her, she had been free since the memorial and she only woke as her chin dropped into the water, her bath cold. Startled, she clambered out, stepping into the shower to warm up and to actually wash her body and hair. After warming up, she checked her clock. She had napped for nearly three hours, her plans for the day had wasted away, yet she was grateful. She felt rejuvenated and once again excitement overtook her.

She sat there on her bed staring at the two options she had for the evening. Her uniform stared at her in pristine condition, yet a beautiful red and black dress also took her fancy. She sat for some time flicking between the two before eventually making her decision. Dressed in her usual uniform, the only logical choice for such a special event, she turned towards the medal sat next to her bed. It was simple bronze triangle with a blue ribbon, a medal given to her entire crew for surviving. She held it over her chest, deciding whether or not to wear it, but ultimately she decided against it. It felt too much.

Alara glanced at herself in the mirror, a brief look of pride flashing across her face before she nodded in approval. She adjusted the blue pearl hanging from her neck, its colour standing out against the red and white of her uniform and her matching ruby earrings. She then turned away and walked towards the door, stepping out into the corridor before swiftly making her way out of her accommodation. She was greeted by numerous Marines all the way along the bridge connecting the Isle of Duty to the Isle of Majesty, most giving passing compliments to her, a few simply staring with slightly agape mouths. She struggled to hide her grin as a pair of young sailors stumbled over each other as she passed.

However, the attention quickly transformed as she arrived at the Isle of Majesty. Numerous citizens had taken to the streets to celebrate the solstice, and to get a look at the numerous celebrities and high-ranking officials making their way through the city to the Imperial palace. Alara quickly found herself the centre of attention, several people asking for photos or autographs as she passed. As she smiled kindly to a pair of kids, she quickly began to regret not utilising her plus one.

She had thought hard about it: Wulf, as a baned, wouldn't have fit in, Riley would cause trouble or insult someone official, Brett was never considered, Astris had been before, and Witchford... probably was a good pick, now that she thought about it. Still, she had felt bad about choosing one person and was conscious as to how the others would have felt. After politely excusing herself, she carried on through the city, following the slope upwards towards the palace.

She had always admired the Imperial Palace, all the more since she had actually been inside. During the day, it stood bright and proud, its large blue hip-and-gable roofs decorated with huge pearls and jade giants, supported by large white arches. The endless waterfalls flowing off the edge of the palace over the rear of the island. Yet at night, it sparkled – the platinum and pearl decorating the building twinkling in the star and moonlight, with bright flames lining the walkways.

"What do you mean I'm not on the list?" demanded a voice, as she approached the main gates. A sizeable crowd stood around the entrance, invited guests funnelling through the crowd in order to approach the walkway leading up to the palace. "I'm sorry sir, no entry to those not on the list," stated one of the Emperor's Hands, a tall butler. A pair of Imperial Guards stood minding the entrance on either side, their bodies decorated in platinum and pearl armour, large spears in their hands. "My Father should have gotten me in. This is an outrage!" protested the young man, his head covered in well-styled blond hair, his eyes a familiar icy blue. "Move along!" stated one of the Imperial Guards, adjusting the grip on their spear.

The young man grumbled as he backed away, sneering before storming off. "Next!" called the Emperor's Hand. Alara got in the line for entrance, quickly finding herself in front of the trio. "Commander Alara Vanathur," she stated. The butler nodded, stepping aside to let her through. She wasted no time, stepping forwards and continuing the climb. Various Imperial Guards stood defending the walkway, most wielding spears, the rest holding riptide rifles.

Trees and gardens lined the walkway, illuminated by flaming torches, but it was as she turned to look behind her that the view truly stunned her. The islands of the Capital shone in the night, the moon bright over the surrounding ocean, and the countless ships glowing as they sailed to and from the Capital. A smile spread across her face, but she quickly turned away, continuing her climb. As she passed by guests catching their breath, or adjusting their aching feet, she quickly felt glad she had chosen her uniform. All the more so as she passed through the giant azure doors leading to the Imperial Courtyard.

Countless high-ranking Marines and Navy stood mingling with their dates and other guests, all dressed in their uniforms. Alara quickly recognised Marines and Navy of lower ranks, but presumably from notable families, dressed in suits and dresses, easily identified by their ceremonial badges or hats. A few eyes quickly glanced towards her, only to immediately get blocked off as a young maid stepped forwards, offering her sparkling wine. She took two, draining one before handing back the empty glass and continuing onwards.

The number of Imperial Guards was impressive, they all were stood to attention at the sides, alongside numerous members of the Emperor's Hand. However, given the sheer number of Commanders, Captains, and Commodores, Alara could help but feel their presence was almost entirely ceremonial. She made her way past the huge fountain in the centre of the courtyard, entering through the main doors of the Imperial Palace. Immediately a feeling of awe overwhelmed her as she stared at the long hallway leading to a large set of stairs going upwards, as well as a large set of open doors on either side of the hallway. Artworks lined the walls along with stone busts of previous Emperors, and a long red and gold carpet decorated the floor.

Alara glanced away from the sight towards one of the Emperor's Hand stood nearby. "Excuse me. Where do we need to go?" Alara asked the maid. She raised her head, smiling kindly. "Guests are permitted entrance to the first and second floors. Follow the hallway and up the stairs, the main hall is directly above us. Please do not attempt entrance to the doors at the middle floor of the stairs, the third floors and above are off limits this evening," she articulated. Alara nodded, handing over her second empty glass. "Thank you."

Following the maid's advice she continued onwards, glancing briefly at the large halls either side of the hallway, they appeared to be meeting rooms that seemed to lead to kitchens and other staff rooms. Slowly she climbed the golden bifurcated staircase, stopping on the middle level to glance at the pair of guards

guarding the entrance to the higher floors. She smiled to them before turning around proceed to the next floor. Immediately she faltered.

"There you are!" scolded Astris as she stood with her arms crossed by the edge. She was wearing a beautiful black and white dress, accompanied with a blue clutch bag. "We were beginning to worry you wouldn't show," stated Brett with a smile. He was dressed in a cream tuxedo, his medal and badge pinned proudly to his breast. "What are you two doing here?" Alara asked, approaching the pair. They both pulled a face at her. "My Father invited me," they both said, faltering as they looked at each other before back at Alara.

"Regardless," intercepted Astris, "where's your dress? Why are you in uniform?" she asked. "I figured this was the smartest thing I could wear," Alara stated. Astris frowned as Brett laughed. "If I had a Commander's uniform I'd wear it too," he stated with a smile. "Anyway, are you here alone?" he pried. Alara raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, do you two have dates?" she asked. They both shook their head, only to falter as they quickly realised that had been an option. "Oh," they both said. Alara stared at them both.

"We had three extra spots, didn't we?" Astris asked. Alara nodded. "I assumed you were going to invite Riley," she followed up with. Alara shook her head. "How could I choose one person? Had you two told me you were going we could have arranged this properly," Alara stated. Collectively they let out a sigh. "Next year?" proposed Brett, the other two nodding in agreement. "Anyway, we're wasting the evening!" Astris stated, stepping forwards and slipping her arm into Alara's. "It looks like I'm your date for the evening," she stated with a smile, only to falter as Brett mirrored her on Alara's other side. "What about me?" he asked. Alara rolled her eyes, shaking her head. "Two dates sounds acceptable, let's go meet the Emperor."

Seize the Seas Tales: Picking up a Stray

The remaining day on the island of Last Drop passed quickly for the crew of the Rising Aces. They packed, socialised, and prepared for their journey to the Capital. Jayce took some time for himself, wandering all over the place and taking in his old home. He faltered as he glanced towards the village hall, Yuthura stood outside with Dola and Marcia – the pair dressed in well-worn wedding dresses as she officiated. Jayce couldn't help but chuckle, greatly curious as to how the three of them had been introduced. However, eventually the time came for the group to leave, and, after some brief goodbyes to the islanders, they once more took to the open seas.

Jayce felt nervous as he sat opposite Holli aboard the Stacked Hand. He had introduced her to his crew, and bar a few curious and prying questions from Wicke, she had fit in well. She leant on her wrist as she sat cross-legged on his bed, whilst he sat in his desk chair, a big and cunning smile on her face. "What?" he finally asked. "Nothing," she stated, her smile remaining as she stared at him with her large green eyes.

"No, there's something. I know that look. What is it? Is there something on my face?" he asked, rubbing the stubble on his chin. She just looked down, continuing to smile. "You have your own ship, a big one at that. You have Mages, the biggest baned I've ever seen, a sky knight, a moving mountain... and I saw your treasury," she stated, her smile fading. Jayce raised an eyebrow as he tried to meet her gaze. "Why didn't you send a letter? Or call? Or... something. If it wasn't for Alara, would you have ever come back?" she asked. Jayce's face fell. "Holli, I-I... I'm sorry."

"I don't need an apology, I just thought I deserved more than a lukewarm greeting. I get it. I do. But, come on, did you really not think of me at all? Was I always just secondary to Alara?" she asked, leaning forwards. Jayce shook his head. "No, you meant more than that, but things changed, we agreed." "You agreed, I don't remember getting much of a choice. Alara still writes, talks. You left me to have her to yourself, that's fine. I wasn't deserving of your attention – that's okay."

She faltered, letting out a sigh before standing up from the bed and walking towards the door. "Once we get to the Capital, you never have to see me again," she said softly, opening the door and stepping outside. She faltered, hoping for him to chase after her, but the door just quietly shut behind her. Jayce shook his head as he leant back in his chair. He didn't have an answer for her. In very many ways he felt as strongly about her as he did Alara, and he knew Alara felt the same way for her, but they were no longer three friends trapped on an island together.

He shook it off, standing up and stepping outside into the open sea air. "Everything okay?" Bjorn asked as he stood by the ship's wheel. Jayce nodded. "Old flings are not my strong suit," he admitted, leaning on the railing and watching Holli as she spoke intently with Marisha on the main deck. Bjorn chuckled. "I know the feeling," he muttered, the pair eventually letting out a long sigh.

Holli made herself useful to the crew, helping out in any and every way she could, but she had found a strong fondness for Marisha, the pair often spending their days together chatting whilst handling their duties. Jayce did his best to keep out of Holli's way, he still didn't know what to say to her, but as he wandered into the living quarters he found himself alone with Marisha and her. "Oh, Jayce, perfect timing," Marisha stated, as she beckoned Jayce over to the sofas. Holli hardly glanced up from the large black box sat on the table.

"What is that?" Jayce asked, sitting down opposite the pair. The strange object beeped and whirred, a series of strange disks decorating the top with a large antenna. "It's called a transceiver, the Guild use it send and receive messages using more discrete methods," Holli stated. "It also allows us to intercept messages from the Navy, Church, and other groups." Jayce frowned. "It can spy on people?" he asked.

Marisha nodded. "Most Guild messages are coded, but sometimes if you're near a relay you can find out some really interesting things from the other factions," Holli muttered, turning a dial. "Mission has been a success," stated a man. "Package has been successfully dropped off. What are our next orders?" he asked. Jayce raised an eyebrow. "Do you have your map on you?" Holli asked, glancing up at Jayce. He nodded, pulling it out of his bottomless bag and unfurling it.

She took the map, placing it on the table next to the transceiver before pulling out a small pencil. "Hey, hey, what are you doing?" Jayce asked, as Holli marked a series of points on the map. "These are the nearest relays, using those and the response time we can mark out where the signal is coming from," she stated. "Message confirmed. Orders are as such: maintain course south, then loop west to return home. Maintain cover," responded a woman.

"Bingo," Holli stated with a smug smile, pointing to a small point on the map. "That's really close to where we should be," Jayce stated. Holli nodded. "The signal originated from a Navy ship. They dropped something off in the middle of the sea. Shall we go take a look?" she proposed. Jayce glanced towards Marisha, who eagerly nodded. He then glanced towards Holli. "Sounds like a plan, let's do it."

It was only a few hours away, during which Holli managed to narrow down the coordinates to an area only a kilometre wide. "So what are we looking for exactly?" Bjorn asked, as he scanned the horizon with binoculars. Jayce shook his head. "Absolutely no clue. It could be anything. But whatever it was it was clearly

something secretive." The other members of the crew were stood across the deck, all glancing across the horizon for anything that stood out.

"Captain," Falconer eventually called through his communicator. Jayce glanced upwards to the sky where Falconer sat flying through the air aboard Wren. "I see something in the water, one hundred meters northeast of your current position." Bjorn angled the wheel accordingly, only for a voice to reach to his ears. "Oi!" called out a gruff voice from somewhere overboard. It was a loud voice, passing even over the roar of the sea. Jayce and Bjorn stared at each other in alarm.

"Did you hear that?" Bjorn asked, dropping anchor and letting go of the wheel. Jayce nodded, glancing around: there were no ships in sight. Jayce vaulted over the railing, landing on the main deck as the voice called out again. He turned his head, glancing to the starboard side and slowly approaching. The others followed behind him, Holli included, as he peeked over the edge of the ship. A grunt reached their ears as a wrinkled hand slammed onto the edge of the ship, an arm swiftly following as a man stuck his head into view.

He looked up at the crew, a stern and serious expression on his face as he looked up at them. He had a somewhat blockish head, his black and grey hair had been shaved into a very short military cut. He had monolid brown eyes, that bore into the group with quick suspicion, wrinkles surrounded his eyes and forehead. "Huh, who the hell are you bastards?" he asked, pulling himself up. He was clearly in his late fifties, potentially early sixties, and as he stood up tall in front of Jayce, looking up at him, there was a clear size difference. However, despite his age, he was still quite muscular albeit under a decent layer of skin.

The crew stared at him with confusion, Caelie pointing in horror at him, in particular at his small, tight, white loincloth, which was the only thing he was wearing, apart from a pair of socks. The old man glanced upwards, staring at the jolly roger of the Rising Aces before back at the crew. "Pirates!" he snarled, reaching behind him and pulling a small dagger out of seemingly nowhere and pointing it at the group. "Woah, woah!" Jayce stated, stepping backwards and holding his hands up.

"Pirates we may be, but we're not going to hurt you. Put the knife down!" Jayce stated. The old man stared at him, water dripping off his mostly naked body as he pointed the weapon from crewmate to crewmate. "What's your name? My name is Jayce Exarga, and this is my crew," Jayce attempted. The stranger squinted. "Exarga? One of those brats?" he questioned, lowering the blade but still holding it.

"Brats?" Jayce questioned, Bjorn silently telling Marisha to go and get some water and food for the stranger. A soft laugh came from behind Jayce, the old man and Jayce both glancing at Zeta and Xander as they stood quietly laughing. "You sly bastard, I thought you were dead," stated the old man, pushing past Bjorn and Jayce with ease before extending a hand to Xander. They gripped each other's forearms. "You look closer to death than I do, Ordo," Xander chuckled.

Ordo laughed, placing his blade back behind him before holding his arms out wide to Zeta. She held her hands up, stepping away. "Maybe once you're dry and clothed," she stated. He nodded, chuckling as he rubbed his head. "Of course, my dear." Bjorn and Jayce stared at each other before back at the man known as Ordo, the rest of the crew relaxing. "Could someone please explain what's going on?" Wicke asked, as Jayce and Bjorn quickly realised just who had stepped onto their ship. "Holy..." Jayce exclaimed.

"Food and drink!" cheered Ordo, turning to Marisha as she stepped out of the living quarters. "What is going on?" demanded Wicke, turning to Jayce and Bjorn as they stood in shock. Ordo drained the pitcher, immediately handing it back to Marisha and requesting another. "Wicke, that is one of the Old Dogs," Bjorn muttered. Wicke only looked more confused. "What is an Old Dog?" she asked. Jayce gulped, glancing down at her as Ordo turned around and looked at Jayce with a big grin. "He's a Navy legend, one of the ten who trained the Admirals."

Chapter 66: High Society

With Brett on one arm and Astris on the other, Alara made her way up the main stairs. However, after Astris stumbled and nearly took out the three of them, they released each other, laughing as they approached the main hall of the Imperial Palace. A young man stood in front of the large doors, dressed in a butler's outfit. "Good evening, may I have your names?" he requested. The trio glanced at each other, subtly arranging themselves in the order they wished to enter.

They gave their names and he nodded, beckoning them forwards before opening the main doors. "Now entering, Lieutenant Anson Brett, Lieutenant Commander Astris Kai, and Commander Alara Vanathur!" he declared. They stepped boldly into the main hall, Alara leading the way in the middle, the pair one step behind her. Immediately the many heads in the colossal room turned to glance towards them.

There were at least three hundred people scattered around, a huge proportion wearing military uniform. The room hadn't changed much since Alara's and Astris' previous attendance, but the giant table had been moved to the side, now covered in a large array of expensive drinks and finger food. Giant paintings still lined the walls, crystal chandeliers hung from the high ceiling, and white marble pillars broke up the room - the wooden floor even looked freshly varnished.

"Well, shall we find something to drink?" Astris asked with a smile, as she took Alara's arm, glancing towards the various guests beginning their approach towards Alara. "Sounds like a plan," Brett stated, unobtrusively helping to guide Alara away from her incoming admirers. With glasses of very expensive red wine in hand, a cluster of eleven figures drew Alara's and Astris' attention. Astris handed Alara her wine, walking swiftly across the room to one of the corners, straight into the open arms of her older sister.

"Tris!" squealed Cyrenna Kai, her brother and the other New Era stood nearby. "Cyr, you're here!" Astris stated, holding her sister at arm's length as she admired the dress she wore. "Of course I am! It's good to know you still share my style," Cyrenna stated, the pair wearing different but similarly coloured dresses of black and white. "Speaking of style," Beowulf Kai inserted, hugging his sister tightly before glancing towards Alara as she approached. "Congratulations Commander, your uniform is spectacular, and the promotion well-deserved!" he stated, dressed in his own uniform.

Alara handed Astris back her wine, shaking Beowulf's hand before accepting a rather sudden and surprising hug from Cyrenna. "Thank you for keeping Tris safe. You have our sympathies for everything you've been through," she said sincerely. Alara nodded. "Thank you, Captain Kai." Cyrenna waived it off. "Oh please, it's Cyrenna. You've more than earned it," she stated with a smile. "Thank you... Cyrenna," Alara said, nervously returning the smile.

One of the other New Era cleared their throat. "Right, of course, how rude of me. Alara, please meet the New Era. Some of course, you have already met," Cyrenna stated, pointing her hands across Captains Kask, Haros, Vemrin, Losa and Roose. Roose wore her green uniform, Haros, Kask and Losa were also in their uniforms; Vemrin wore a brown suit instead. The group nodded to her, extending their greetings, before Alara glanced to the four members she had not met before. "Please meet Captains: Amass, Soron, Xyrex, and Pirin," Cyrenna introduced, pointing at three tall men dressed in suits and a small woman in a blue dress.

Alara extended her greetings, receiving varying congratulations on her recent promotion. "Now entering, Vice-Admiral Philip Exarga!" declared the herald. Alara quickly turned, simultaneously remembering Brett's existence as he stood awkwardly behind her. "Oh right, uh, this is Lieutenant Anson Brett. Brett, please tell them all about yourself," she stated, pressing him forwards. "Please excuse me," she then added, turning around and walking quickly across the room.

He held his arms open as he noticed her approach, Alara stepping straight into his hug. "Hello Alara," said Philip, squeezing her tightly. She smiled as she looked up him. He was a tall, gaunt man, with neatly cut black hair and green eyes, covered with a pair of glasses. The Vice-Admiral of Intelligence wore his uniform: a black three-piece suit and tie, military boots, a matching black beret on his head and a cape that stopped at his ankles, traces of silver lining the inside.

"It's been a while, Vice-Admiral," she stated, stepping back and standing at attention. He held a contained smile, nodding in approval before breaking character. "The uniform looks good on you, and I see you're wearing Cassandra's colours," he stated, smiling proudly as she gave a quick twirl. The pair of them immediately noticed the eyes watching them from all around the room, Alara quickly paying attention to the various mutterings. "Speaking of, is Mother here yet? I haven't seen her, Father," she stated loudly. Philip chuckled quietly. "She's on her way, she had to make a quick trip to visit someone. Anyway, given this evening is designed for introductions, let me introduce you to some of my colleagues," he said, offering an arm to her. She took it with a nervous smile.

They made their way around the room, hunting down the eleven other Vice-Admirals one by one, each dressed in three-piece suits of varying colours. Alara hadn't initially noticed, but as she moved from Vice-Admiral to Vice-Admiral, some conversations shorter in length than others, she realised that each Admiral was showing their own allegiance by their choice in hat. Marines wore berets, Navy wore peaked caps.

As Philip placed Alara in front of a trio of Vice-Admirals, she finished the count in her head. Five Marines to seven Navy Vice-Admirals. "Admirals, I hope you remember my adopted daughter, Commander Alara Vanathur," Philip introduced. Alara glanced at the group, all of them Marines. The Vice-Admiral of Offence was the first to step forwards, the all-too-familiar figure of Freyr Yashiro smiling proudly at Alara as she greeted her in her scarlet uniform.

"It's been a while, Alara," Freyr stated. She had fair skin and smooth dark hair held in a high ponytail, her left eye was covered with a black eyepatch, her remaining brown eye staring intently. "And you Admiral, how have you been?" Alara asked politely, a slight feeling of old fear building up as she remembered the strict discipline of Freyr Yashiro. "Busy, unfortunately. Let alone with Myra debating her choice as to whether to follow my path or her father's," she stated. Alara nodded, thinking back to the timid girl she had met many years ago.

"I'm certain whatever she chooses she will excel in," inserted the Vice-Admiral of Recruitment, Hai Koga. He was a slim, not particularly tall, man, with similarly dark hair and brown eyes to Freyr. His suit was purple, and he also had a small goatee. "Agreed," said the Vice-Admiral of Biotic Science, Chika Blackwell. She was a very young, short woman, with shoulder-length brown hair cut into a bob, tanned skin, and bright green eyes. Her suit was a wood-brown colour.

Alara couldn't quite remember them, but she thought she recognised their smiles as they continued their conversation, inviting Alara to join in on the topic of finding an increasing number of magical artifacts in recent years. With little to contribute, she stood and nodded, until Philip politely excused them. Alara immediately spotted their next target as he towered over the various Marine Commodores surrounding him, dressed in their black and gold uniforms, adorned with a pair of shoulder epaulettes.

"Admiral," greeted the Vice-Admiral of Strategy, Marcus Barome, seizing on the opportunity to escape the group. He was a tall man, with dark brown skin and neatly cropped grey hair, a grey suit tight against his broad frame. The pair shook hands before Philip stepped aside. "By the Gods, a Commander already?"

exclaimed Vice-Admiral Barome, extending a large hand to her. "All thanks to you and the others that helped me get here, Admiral," Alara stated smoothly, shaking his hand. The giant man laughed. "I see she's copied your tactfulness, Philip. Good. If you can become anything close to either of your parents, or either of the Exarga's, then the Marines will have a powerful Admiral in the future," he stated. She smiled at him.

"Now entering, Admiral Cassandra Exarga!" announced the herald. Both Alara and Philip perked up, turning away from Marcus. "I see I have been replaced," he stated with a chuckle. "We shall catch up later," Philip stated. Barome nodded, turning around and walking away. Cassandra wasted no time finding the pair. She kissed her husband, before hugging Alara. "You look nice," she stated, looking at them. "Thank you," Philip and Alara both said in unison, glancing at each other before back at the Admiral. Cassandra shook her head, smiling softly. "I was speaking to Alara, dear," she said softly, leaning slightly into him. "Do I not look good as well?" he queried. Cassandra kissed his cheek. "Always. I was simply talking about Alara's new uniform."

Alara rolled her eyes. "Anyway, have you introduced her to everyone?" Cassandra asked, changing the topic. "Only the Vices. The evening is young, there's no hurry," he said, drawing her gaze. They exchanged silent words, before Cassandra seemed to give in, holding up her hands. "True, true. I need a drink. Alara, best behaviour this evening. You are going to be one of the main attractions, act accordingly. I believe the New Era may be your allies this evening," Cassandra hinted, taking her husband's arm and dragging him away.

Alara returned to Astris and the New Era, Brett no longer present. "Where'd Brett go?" Alara asked, as Astris glanced towards her. Astris pointed off in the distance towards one of the pillars. Brett stood with two young women, one slowly reaching out and touching the burns on his face. "Of course," Alara muttered, turning her attention back to the New Era as they invited her into the conversation.

After reciting her experience of the attack and the days that followed, the sound of shouting interrupted the conversation. "Not again," sighed Cyrenna, as she and Beowulf turned pale, quickly rushing off in the direction it was coming from, only for Astris to quickly follow after them. "Hold, your, tongue!" yelled Cassandra, her angry voice cutting through the air. "Oh no," realised Alara, hurrying off in quick pursuit of the trio. She found herself in the middle of the hall, a large, empty, platinum throne placed in the centre. Admiral Kai and

Admiral Exarga were both stood in front of it, equally red-faced as they shouted at each other.

"Am I wrong? That renegade of a son of yours continues to run free, is it just coincidence that orders seem to point nearby forces away from him whenever he is sighted? Maybe if you and your husband put as much effort into raising the boy as you do cleaning up after him he wouldn't have turned out such an embarrassment!" stated Admiral Kai. Cassandra ignited, flicking out her left hand, a colossal red and gold greataxe forming in her hand. Philip and Alara rushed forwards, stepping in front of her as the Kai siblings rushed in front of their father.

Admiral Kai cracked his knuckles, a pair of grey, spiked gauntlets forming over his hands. "Once again rushing straight into violence, Cassandra. No wonder they call you a 'Barbarian', and no wonder your son acts that way with your bastard genes running through him," he yelled, Beowulf and Cyrenna trying to drag back his arms as Astris stood in front of him with her arms wide. "Fear and respect go hand in hand, yet people only fear a man like you, even your own children. I don't fear you. Back up your words, let's go a few rounds! I beat you last time, and the time before, and the time before that, all without taking a scratch, you sick, twisted, pathetic fool!"

Alara stared at Cassandra, her eyes burning with anger, yet - given she was being held back - there was still clear restraint as she looked at the crowd forming around them. Alara glanced back, looking at the cold eyes of Admiral Kai, the restraint shattering as he threw off Cyrenna and Beowulf, shoving Astris aside. She yelped as she hit the floor, her siblings immediately rushing to her side. As Admiral Kai stormed forwards, raising his fist, the world turned grey.

Everything froze. The music in the background silenced. The chatter died. Alara's heart even slowed in her chest. She could only move her eyes, even as her body instinctively entered into Focus to protect itself. The silence was absolute. It was only broken by a loud clack that echoed through the air. It was slow and deliberate, only to be followed slowly by another. Alara couldn't move, but she could see Admiral Exarga and Admiral Kai calm down - the pair being the only people in room able to move, apart from Admirals Truth and Cynane stood nearby.

Alara gulped as they both put their weapons away and bowed their head, the clacking of a pair of canes on the floor continuing to echo, one after another, as a figure approached. Silence remained as the Fleet Admiral walked through the

centre of the room, a pair of young girls walking in tow, one with green hair, the other white. As he passed by people, they regained the ability to exist in his presence, unfreezing and immediately bowing their heads in respect. His platinum canes remained the only source of sound in the room as he walked, Alara's own body unfreezing and colour returning to world as he passed by her.

He was an old man, in his eighties or nineties at least, and he was hunched forwards over his canes, his back shaped like a spoon. He had wrinkled, fair skin, and was very skinny, and - although his head was covered with a white, black, and gold peaked cap - his head was mostly bald, with a ring of short, grey hair around his head. His eyes were mostly obscured by his wrinkles and a pair of bushy grey eyebrows, and he was clean-shaven, with a somewhat pointed chin. His uniform was identical to the Admirals, with a tight-fitting coat, smart trousers that tucked into knee-high boots, and a cape that ran down to his ankles. However, his uniform was white, with gold and black highlights, as well as a pair of large gold epaulettes on his shoulders. His chest was covered in medals.

Alara continued to watch him as he walked onwards, directly towards the Emperor's throne, eventually handing his canes to his granddaughters before slowly turning and easing himself into the chair. He cleared his throat, a loud and deliberate call for attention that signalled it was okay for people to raise their heads. The four Admirals remained with their heads bowed. To Alara's distinct horror, a strange look was present on Cassandra's face as she looked towards the floor, one Alara had never seen before – a look of nervousness, possibly even fear.

"It always brings me great pleasure to see the rivalries of old continue to prosper, after all, rivalry is about the continuation of shared growth. However, there are limits," he declared, with a cold gravelly tone. "In future, I would prefer to see declarations of competition performed in a manner fitting of the title, Admiral," he scolded. "Our apologies, Fleet Admiral," said the receiving pair. Fleet Admiral Lord Gamble dismissed their apologies with a slow wave of his pale and wrinkled right hand, a trio of rings on his middle three fingers.

The Admirals raised their heads. "It is my duty this evening to extend the Emperor's sincerest apologies. He is unable to attend this fair evening, and has graciously bestowed me the honour of leading the festivities," he stated, all eyes upon him. A twinge of disappointment ran through Alara, but it was immediately swept aside as Lord Gamble cleared his raspy throat. "Once more, this year has been favourable to our fair Empire. It has undergone its due

assignment of challenges, but I'm proud to see that our great Navy, and its Marine comrades, have risen to occasion."

Slowly he glanced across the room. "We continue to see a rise in dangers on our horizons, however, new enemies have also grown strong in our midst, waiting to seize opportunity to do us harm. New Pirates, new dark Mages, traitorous baned, all continue to pose a problem, but it is there on the frontlines that I am most thankful to see our own new stars shine so brightly. New Era, approach," he ordered. The New Era appeared immediately, kneeling before the Fleet Admiral in his borrowed throne.

"For another year, I am reminded of the excellence you all continue to contribute. You have dealt with more renegades this last year than in the last four since your creation. Be proud, you have served your Empire, your Navy, well. In recognition of your efforts I award these medals of dedication," Lord Gamble declared, waving a hand forwards. A cluster of Emperor's Hands emerged from the sides, bestowing each member with a silver star attached to a white ribbon. The New Era remained kneeling, holding the medals in reverence as the Emperor's Hand stepped away.

"Yet, even amongst excellence there are those who shine even brighter. As New Era, it is your responsibility to lead the way of a new age, an age where the seas are safe from the clutches of those who wish to do harm, who wish to disrupt the peace, who threaten our Empire. Some of you have shown exactly that. To send a Pirate Lord fleeing with their tail between their legs is no small feat. You seized upon opportunity, achieving victory against all odds. And for that, I bestow the six of you who took part medals of conquest." Once again, members of the Emperor's Hand stepped forwards, bestowing golden circles with black ribbons. "Continue to do the Emperor proud," he finalised.

The New Era stood up, bowing to the Fleet Admiral before stepping quickly away, a nervous feeling rolling through Alara. "Yet, it was not the ingenuity or the creativity of the New Era that brought about such a victory. Commander Alara Vanathur, approach." A hand pressed reassuringly into Alara's back, pushing her forwards as her feet refused to obey her. She stepped swiftly forwards, glancing briefly towards the Kai siblings as they smiled proudly at her.

She knelt before the Fleet Admiral, her head low, but - as she heard a groan as well as the soft sound of his shoes approaching her - she raised her head, looking up at him. "It was the actions of a Marine, one who had not even formally achieved her position. She saw the opportunity, taking control from her

incompetent Captain and lashing the New Era to her will, to her design. It has been some time since I have heard the might of the name Vanathur, and I'm proud to hear it again. You have displayed the excellence and duty of your parents, going beyond all expectations of you. Stand proud, Commander Vanathur," he stated, offering a hand to her.

Alara took it, his grip feeble as she stood in front of him, looking down at him. "In reverence of your tactfulness and your bravado, I am proud to personally bestow a medal of victory to you." A maid rushed forwards, holding a gold star attached to a blue ribbon on a pillow. He took the medal, pinning it to her chest, groaning as he raised his head to meet her gaze. His eyes were small, dark, and stern. He nodded to her, patting her on the shoulder before stepping past her to address the hall.

"And even beyond this, I am reminded why Admirals Truth and Exarga deemed the creation of our Marines necessary," he addressed, Alara standing behind him, perplexed as to whether to remain or depart from her spot. "In the face of true adversity, faced with death, failure of command, and inexperience, Commander Vanathur stared back into the abyss – refusing to blink, refusing to budge. The greatest duty our officers hold is to serve our Empire and protect its people. This is not limited only to its citizens, we also have a duty of care to the forces underneath us. In the Navy and Marines. To survive an onslaught by an unknown foe, to take command of a fractured and disabled crew, to do her duty to her people and bring them back home, is something no one bar the greatest among us could have achieved. Treat the Commander with the appreciation she deserves!" he ordered, slowly clapping his hands.

The applause echoed around the room, quickly getting picked up by the numerous guests in attendance. As he turned and walked back to stand in front of her, a butler approached, holding another medal. "It is my greatest privilege to bestow one of our highest commendations upon you. The medal of honour is reserved for only the greatest in our Empire. And it is with this that I proudly announce you our first Marine New Era. Congratulations Commander!" he declared, pinning a platinum eight-pointed star to her chest. The room cheered for her and Alara stood proud, only realising she had been dismissed as the Fleet Admiral's grandchildren helped him back to the chair.

Astris nudged her as Alara stood proudly next to her, a beaming smile of pride on her face. "With such excellence in mind, I am reminded of the risk we all carry. We have lost many brave souls this year, and, although I'm grateful they are in

the care of the Gods, I am saddened by their departure. Let us not forget the dangers our forces face and let us pray for them to continue to do us proud. New Era rise to occasion, perform as dutifully as Commander Vanathur. And with that in mind, let us be reminded of our Empire's Tenants."

Alara glanced towards the New Era, their various members staring directly at her. "Let honour guide us to a greater tomorrow!" concluded the Fleet Admiral. "Let the festivities truly commence!" Music sprang up from across the room, the Admiral gesturing loosely towards the large table, now renewed with expensive liquor and endless platters of delicacies. He met Alara's gaze, nodding in quick approval before beckoning the Admirals closer.

"Congratulations!" Astris grinned, admiring Alara's two new medals. Alara opened her mouth to speak, only for an immediate mob to form around her, quickly separating Astris from her. They bombarded her with questions from all angles, overwhelming her as she stood trapped in the group. A hand reached to her from amongst the mob. Hoping for a rescue she took it, getting pulled strongly through the crowd. She and her rescuer emerged out onto the main floor where several couples had begun to dance to the music.

"May I have this dance?" requested the tall rescuer. Alara glanced up at him with quick curiosity. He wore a mask: it was owl-like with a fading pattern of blue, white, and black. He wasn't the only one wearing a mask, the majority of the Guild guests were as well. He was wearing a black suit, a clearly muscular form covered underneath. "Of course," Alara said gratefully, seizing on the chance to flee the mob.

He led her onto the floor, taking her hand and placing one hand on her waist. "Thank you for rescue, mister...?" she queried, trying to analyse him. His eyes were mostly obscured by the mask – she could see where he was looking but nothing more. A scar stuck out from his collar, rising up the side of his neck. He had fair skin, black hair. "Call me Jay," he said with a soft chuckle, leading the dance. "Thank you, mister Jay."

"Just Jay will do. You're quite the centre of attention this evening, Commander." "Unfortunately, it seems everyone wants a piece of me. I just want a drink," she said with a soft but honest laugh. "I get the feeling, everyone wants to find something to help themselves even at the cost of others. Nothing's free." "You sound like a merchant. I assume you're with the Guild?" Alara questioned, their movements smooth and fluid. "Something like that. More of a personal contractor."

“Ah, do you work for anyone I would recognise?” she asked. He shook his head. “Self-employed. I have and run my own ship.” Alara stared at him, his arms guiding her movement. It was hard to tell how old he was. “Wow. I’ve just been given a ship of my own. Any tips?” she asked. He laughed, a loud and genuine laugh. “Put in the work. Lead by example – something I’m sure you already do,” he answered. Alara tilted her head, eventually nodding.

The music picked up in pace and so did they. He continued to lead, adjusting to fit her slightly less confident steps. Before long, numerous eyes glanced towards them as they took the centre. Despite her attempts not to, a quick sense of comfort overtook her. He was gentle, firm when it was needed, and reassuring as the music continued to pick up in pace. He span her, bringing her back in before finalising as he led her into a dip, holding her supportively as she looked up at him in a move that she had practiced many times over whilst bored, back home. He looked down at her, her eyes meeting his from behind the mask, his smile hidden as she rested a gentle and surprised hand on his mask. “Hello Alara,” said Jayce Exarga.

Seize the Seas Tales: A New Member

“What do you mean he trained the Admirals?” asked Wicke, as she stared at the relaxed group in shock. “Exactly that, little girl. You could say we were the last generation,” Ordo stated, still in his loincloth, dripping wet, but now with a sandwich. “Jayce,” muttered Wicke, backing away and hiding behind him. “Don’t worry your little head about it, I’ve decided not to kill you all,” he clarified, much to the reassurance of Bjorn and Jayce, and the abject horror of Wicke.

“Well, first of all, thank you Captain for stopping and letting me on board. It’s a miracle anyone came across me, let alone some familiar faces,” Ordo stated gruffly. “We were in the area following a signal. Someone dropped off a package and we were looking to steal it,” Jayce admitted, Wicke immediately pinching him. Ordo laughed. “Ah, well I suppose that ‘package’ would be me. Those traitorous bastards made their move at last.”

Jayce raised an eyebrow. “What exactly happened to you, sir?” Bjorn asked. Ordo glared up at him in bemusement, Jayce and Wicke also looking at him curiously. “Well, orders came through from the Fleet Admiral, requesting that I provide some assistance down south. Not exactly like I could say no to that prick, so off I went aboard a Navy ship. They drugged me and threw me overboard whilst I was asleep. Probably figured stabbing me would look bad if somehow someone

found my body. Unfortunately for those clowns, I'm a little harder to poison than one would think. So, after taking off that anchor they call a uniform, I've been trying to stay afloat for the last couple of hours."

Jayce just shook his head staring blankly over the edge of the ship in disbelief. "Are you sure the orders came from my grandfather?" asked Zeta. Ordo nodded. "The only way I'd have gone. Figured he'd try to kill us sooner rather than later." "Us?" questioned Wicke, glancing towards Zeta as she stared at the floor shaking her head. "The Old Dogs. Kex and Sherruk died a few years ago of natural causes, and the rest of us have always been a little critical of the traitorous prick up top. He was one of us after all. Anyway, Captain Exarga, I wish to request transportation to the Capital."

Jayce nodded. "Sure, we're heading that way anyway. But if they tried to kill you once before won't they try to do so again? And won't a report have gone out declaring you dead as well?" Jayce questioned. Ordo rubbed his head, nodding in acceptance. "I'm not one to clutch to old habits, so yes, Captain, I admit my time is over with the Navy. But I want to collect some personal effects and send a warning to the other Old Dogs. Get me to the Capital, help me get my things, and I will join your crew as an Instructor."

There was a quick change in attitude from the rest of the crew, the many eyes widening as they glanced from Ordo to Jayce. "You want to join our crew?" Bjorn questioned in shock. "I gave my life to the Empire and its Navy, they've thrown me away. They've become too intertwined with those Church bastards, and I'm still young, plenty of fight still left in me. Following an Exarga is not the worst thing I could imagine doing, and given - the amount of trouble you've caused and will continue to cause - you little pups will die without someone to train you. Food, water, my things, and someone to punch, that's all I need."

Jayce extended a hand. "Welcome on board." Ordo shook it. "Xander, can you please get Ordo some clothes, put him up in the guest room and add him to the crew list," Jayce stated. Xander nodded, guiding Ordo quickly away. "Is this how you recruit all your crew?" Holli asked, looking at Jayce with a bemused expression. "Near enough," Bjorn said with a chuckle. "An Old Dog of the Empire. We should start checking off a list," He said, looking at Jayce. Wicke pulled Jayce's arm. "He's Navy! What if he's a spy or this is a trap or-or... he trained the Admirals, would he really join a group of Pirates on a whim?" Jayce smiled. "What's the worst that could happen?"

Chapter 67: New Wolves of the Empire

It took Alara a moment to process what exactly she thought she was seeing, but the moment it clicked, the surprise changed to immediate anger. Her wide eyes glared at Jayce until he helped her up from their dip, the various onlookers clapping their performance before turning their applause to the musicians. Alara grabbed his hand, dragging him quickly away from the dancefloor, her ears red, her heart pounding.

"Alara," Astris called, her voice trailing away as she watched Alara drag her mysterious partner towards one of the balconies. Alara shut the doors behind them, providing an audible cue in case anyone intruded, before dragging him around the corner, obscuring them from the countless guests inside. Jayce pressed a hand to his face, releasing the mask before reattaching it to the top of his head. "Hello," he said with a smile.

Alara did not smile back. "Are you an idiot? The Jayce I know wouldn't be this stupid. Every Admiral is here!" she stated with a hushed mesh of anger and worry. Jayce held his hands up defensively. "That is the exact reason I'm here. No one would be stupid enough to break in, it's the perfect cover. My parents okayed it, that's how I got here," he said, reaching out and taking her hands. Alara bit her lip, shaking her head. "It's beyond reckless. Why? Why take this risk?"

"How could I not be here on your big day?" he asked, leaning down and kissing her. The world disappeared, only coming back as he pulled back. "It's good to see you. I've missed you," he said softly, his eyes glowing in the darkness. She stepped back, once again shaking her head as she glanced towards the doors. "I've missed you too," she admitted, glancing back towards him, accepting the risk and stepping into his arms.

They held each other in comfortable silence. "I'm sorry about everything you had to go through. Do you know why the Church attacked your crew?" he asked quietly. She looked up at him in shock. "How did you know it was the Church?" she asked. "Rebel Red wouldn't have, and Ruyn was nowhere near you. The only obvious red flag is that of an Inquisitor ship, but I don't know why," he answered. Alara glanced down, only for her head to quickly raise as Jayce lifted her chin.

She shook him off, stepping away and holding onto the railing of the balcony, staring out at the light of the Capital and the large moon in the sky. "They wanted

to kill my Captain," she said quietly. "He has history with them. We were just... in the way." Jayce sighed, nodding before he stepped behind her, placing his arms around her and tucking his head into her neck. "I'm sorry. I wish I could have been there."

Alara nodded. "I wish you were as well. But maybe I'd have lost you too. Where are you now?" she asked, turning her head and kissing his cheek. Jayce pointed vaguely off to the south. "Two weeks or so that way. There's a lot I need to tell you. Can you tell my Father to get the Old Dogs to safety?" he asked quietly. "The Old Dogs? What do you mean?" she said, frowning as she tried to read him. "We picked up--"

A cold feeling ran through the both of them. Someone cleared their throat behind them. Jayce immediately pulled his mask over his face, stepping to the side as Alara turned around. "Apologies for interrupting," rasped the Fleet Admiral, his approach silent as he leant on his canes. "Young man, may I borrow the Commander for but a moment?" Lord Gamble requested. Sensing no other choice, Jayce nodded, bowing briefly before heading quickly to the now-open doors. He glanced back at Alara, meeting her gaze before disappearing inside.

"Someone I would know?" pried the Fleet Admiral, glancing up at Alara. Alara shook her head. "An old friend from home," she said with a nervous smile, trying to control her rapidly beating heart. "I see," said Lord Gamble, slowly stepping closer before leaning onto the balcony railing next to her. "It is such a beautiful thing, our Empire. So vast and full of wonders. So mighty and powerful, yet built upon elements so fragile, such as trust and faith. Often I wonder just what our future is. Will we collapse to infighting? Or will we continue to prosper?"

Alara stared at him: he seemed frail, sad, as he looked over the Capital. "Whichever it is, I am thankful that I can count on such honourable and loyal members of our society, such as yourself, to put duty first. I can count on that, can't I, Commander?" he asked, looking directly ahead towards the south. "Of course, sir," Alara stated quickly, an unnerving sensation crawling under her skin. "Good, good. You stand on a precipice, Vanathur, one that - if balanced - could bring you even greater honours than those you have already achieved."

"I don't quite understand what you mean, Fleet Admiral?" Alara questioned, shaking off her feeling of discomfort. "Your parents were both loyal Vice-Admirals, to such an extent that they sacrificed themselves to take chase after a Pirate Lord into the unknown. They knew how to do their duty, something we should all dream of emulating. Before you, lies your Empire, as well as a sea of

opportunities. I am simply pointing out that, although you are a Marine, you should seek to broaden your connections before they become closed off to you."

Slowly he turned around, walking loudly away on his canes. Alara continued to stare at the view before her. "One last thing, Vanathur. The New Era are your greatest rivals, but as a new member of them, they could also be your greatest friends. The Navy and the Church look after those who provide results. Keep that in mind, the Exargas can only offer so much. Make the right choice, and good luck, Commander. May the seas continue to favour you."

He disappeared out of sight, Alara's nerves safely masked, but a terrified feeling running through her. After giving it a few moments, she turned around, returning to the ball and immediately scanning for any sign of Jayce. She couldn't see him, but she quickly spotted a somewhat irritated Admiral Exarga return from another balcony. They exchanged a look, Cassandra beckoning Alara over. Alara stepped over to her, wasting no time as she quickly spotted other guests notice her. Those that moved to follow immediately stopped as they spotted the Red Admiral.

"Your partner had to leave early," Cassandra muttered, guiding Alara over to a small group stood near the throne. Alara's eyes widened as they approached; the other three Admirals all stood waiting. "Commander, you have already briefly met Admirals Thorro Kai and Arthur Truth, but let me introduce you to Admiral Sycilla Cynane," Admiral Exarga stated. Alara bowed her head, the Green Admiral rolling her eyes immediately.

She was a slightly shorter woman than Cassandra, with long, smooth, black hair. She had fair skin and monolid brown eyes, with a cold intent behind her gaze as she analysed Alara. She was quite slim, with a runner's build and somewhat broad shoulders. However, what drew Alara's immediate gaze, as she raised her head, was the white ceramic mask covering a large portion of her face. It sat over her jaw, covering her right cheek, all the way down to her chin. A faint burn emerged from the top corner, overlapping the edge of her eyebrow. She also had numerous ear piercings throughout her right ear.

"I pray you're not another tight-ass, Commander Vanathur. Are you another tight-ass, Commander?" she asked, staring at Alara with a bored expression. "I try not to be, Admiral," Alara answered, briefly glancing at the other observing Admirals. "Good answer, but we'll have to see. Get me, and yourself, a drink," ordered the Green Admiral. Cassandra opened her mouth to protest. "Yes Admiral," Alara intercepted, glancing at the peaked cap on the Admiral's head.

Alara circumvented the crowd, heading directly to the drinks table. As she struggled to choose, uncertain on the Admiral's choices, a familiar hand grabbed her arm. "Who was that?" asked Astris, looking up at her, her face somewhat rosy and a slight sway about her as she stood. "A conversation for later. I need to choose a drink for the Green Admiral," Alara said quickly. Astris sneered. "Ugh, that bitch? Did you know she was originally best friends with the Red Admiral?" she said unsubtly. Alara frowned, somewhat surprised by the statement. "What happened?" Alara asked. Astris just shrugged, pointing instead to an unopened bottle of south-eastern spirits, with a few shot glasses sat accompanying the bottle.

Alara grabbed the bottle and shot glasses, turning to her companion. "Where's Brett?" she asked. Astris shrugged, vaguely pointing off towards the exit. "He left with some girls. Lucky him," she muttered. Alara let out a sigh, glancing down at her drunk friend before back at the bottle. "Okay, let's find your siblings. The Admiral can wait a few minutes." With Astris in tow, they made their way through the hall until they found the other Kais, neither of whom were in much of a better state. After repeatedly promising to return, Alara departed, returning to the Admirals with her chosen drink.

The Green Admiral laughed as Alara presented it, Cassandra placing a palm to her forehead before shaking her head, the other two had similar looks. "What's wrong with it?" Alara asked, with a look of horror. Admiral Cynane simply took the bottle and shot glasses, crouching down before pulling out the cork and pouring out sizeable amounts in the two glasses. "Absolutely nothing, it's a bit too common for their palette," she stated, handing the shot to Alara. They tapped their glasses together, drinking them quickly.

It burnt, but there was also a coldness to it, the effect fading almost immediately. Seizing upon the opportunity, the Green Admiral poured out another, handing it to Cassandra. There was a brief look of tension between the pair before Cassandra took it. "Ugh, absolute poison," she complained, much to the amusement of the Blue Admiral. "Pathetic," he muttered, sipping his wine. Both the Admirals turned to face him with unamused expressions before they shoved a shot in his direction. Alara couldn't help but smile as she watched Admiral Truth slink away. Alara also seized on the distraction, as Admiral Exarga and Admiral Kai began to challenge each other with shots, to make her getaway, but as she glanced back she spotted Admiral Cynane watching her. Cynane nodded in approval, turning back to the two Admirals.

With a steady buzz thrumming through her body, Alara made her way back to the Kais and the other New Era. Astris stood asleep as her brother held her up, his own eyes partially shut as they leant onto each other. "I think it's time to go," Alara said softly, glancing towards Cyrenna as she stood leaning against a pillar nearby. Cyrenna nodded in agreement, stepping forwards to help unravel Astris and Beowulf.

Together they made their way towards the exit, a sharp realisation coming across the pair as they faced the first set of stairs before them, a quick reminder of the many more facing them on their journey back. Cyrenna let out a sigh as she glanced towards her brother before back at Alara. "I don't suppose you've heard of Focus?" she asked, almost pleadingly. Alara nodded, entering into it before easing Astris onto her back.

She didn't get far, but it helped. A pair of kind Emperor's Hands helped escort them the rest of the way and before too long Alara found herself laying back in her bed, staring up at her ceiling. She lay there trying to remember the many names and faces she had been introduced to, but, as one face in particular continued to emanate in her head, a feeling of worry overtook her. "Did he know?" she questioned, thinking on the Fleet Admiral's words, struggling to think of them as anything other than a warning, if not a direct threat.

The morning swiftly came about. As Alara made her way into the training hall she felt all the more grateful that she had drank a lot of water before bed, her head free from a hangover. Astris and Brett had not fared the same, the pair both sat on the floor with exhausted expressions. "Good morning," Alara said with a smile, as she joined them on the floor - Riley, Wulf, Witchford and Instructor Zenobia also present. "Morning," they grumbled.

"Why do you two look so rough?" asked Riley as she stretched. Brett opened his mouth to answer, only to retch and bolt for the bathroom. "We were at the Emperor's Ball. These two went a little overboard," Alara answered. "What? Why wasn't I - we - I invited?" Riley asked with a shocked and disappointed expression. "We didn't get plus ones," Alara lied, Astris nodding along. Riley crossed her arms. "How did it go?" Wulf asked.

"Well, if exhausting. Look at these," Alara stated, pulling out her two medals. "Holy..." Riley muttered, staring in awe at Alara's medals. They admired Alara's prizes before handing them back. "Anything of note happen?" Wulf asked. "I met a lot of high command, spoke to the Fleet Admiral," Alara began.

"Oh yeah, who was that guy you were dancing with?" Astris asked, drawing Wulf and Riley's immediate attention.

"Oh right, uh, that was Jayce," she said quietly, the entire group freezing apart from Zenobia who continued observing from the corner of the room. "What?" Astris asked. Alara nodded. "Are you sure?" asked Brett, drawing a befuddled expression from Alara. "Hmm, let me think. Of course I'm sure. It was him," she said. "How did he get in? Surely the security was infallible," Witchford asked. "Admiral Exarga got him in. It was stupid and reckless, and I think we were caught by the Fleet Admiral."

"If you were, you would probably be dead already," stated Zenobia, approaching as the conversation drew her attention. The group quickly and nervously glanced at each other. "Oh quit it, don't think I'm not already aware. Alara's proclamation when she broke your nose wasn't subtle," Zenobia stated, pointing at Brett. "Ah," Alara muttered, glancing down at the floor. "Regardless, I think the Fleet Admiral gave me a warning. He spoke of duty, broadening my options, that the Church and Navy reward those who provide results. He told me to make the right choice."

"Well that's not ominous," muttered Riley. "What did Jayce say?" Alara thought for a moment, her eyes widening as she remembered. "Instructor, could you send Vice-Admiral Exarga a direct and private message? Jayce said to get the Old Dogs to safety. It seemed urgent, he said he picked up something or someone," Alara asked. Zenobia nodded. "Will do so during lunch. I take it the Old Dogs weren't there again." Alara nodded.

"Why weren't you there last night Instructor. I'd have thought you'd seize upon any opportunity to drink?" asked Riley. Immediately she was hit with a Focus-enhanced sponge ball, known to the group as Zenobia's punishment ball. "The first few are fun, the rest get really boring really quickly. I only go if the Admiral wants company," she answered, glaring at Riley as she sat rubbing her temple. "Where did you go last night?" Alara asked Brett. He turned bright red and began to stammer, answering the question. "Okay, I get it, I don't need details," Alara quickly said as he opened his mouth to answer. "Lucky for some," muttered Astris, drawing a quick sigh from Zenobia.

"Right, that's enough lazing around. You have just over a week until your ship is ready. Get to work. Alara, there's a folder on the table. Inside are details on any additional furnishing options you may want. Don't go too overboard or your crew will become too lax. Make your choices sooner rather than later," Zenobia

stated, heading over to her special bucket and filling her arms with her punishment balls as she threatened the group into motion.

Zenobia gave the group little-to-no time to breathe, each and every moment dedicated to preparing the group to lead their own ship. However, despite the group's constant complaining, they were all grateful for Zenobia's instruction, deep down, somewhere, when she wasn't yelling or throwing balls at them. Finally, as Alara woke up on the day of their deadline, she couldn't deny that the work had paid off. Alara could now hold Focus for ten entire minutes. It was less than Astris who could last for almost double that, but it was good enough to survive a fight.

She glanced around her room: all of her personal belongings were packed, she had made the bed, tidied up the bathroom, and now, as it sat almost barren, she couldn't quite believe how quickly the last few weeks had gone. She nodded to herself, picking up her backpack and travel bag, before stepping out of the door and walking quickly away. Her heart raced as she walked across the Isle of Duty to the docks; she was nervous, yet increasingly excited as she pictured her ship in her mind.

It was morning, not overly early, but early enough that those without a need to wake up at the crack of dawn were still in bed. Still, the various Marines and Navy around did pay attention to her as she passed, most standing at attention or giving polite greetings, bar a few that Alara spotted muttering under their breath. She ignored them, she had no time to waste on them. She continued onwards without faltering, until she saw it.

The Sole Survivor was smaller in length than the Lone Wanderer, but it was significantly bulkier. The ship she had been given had three square masts, each topped with a large, covered crow's nest. It had four decks, the top three of which all were equipped with cannons. The ship had a standard Marine finish, the light brown wood mixed with a matte grey that partially covered the hull. The name of the ship had been painted on the side in red.

Alara wasted no time, heading quickly to the gangplank and walking aboard. "Ah, Commander Vanathur, I assume," greeted a Shipwright, a few guards saluting as Alara stepped onto the main deck. "Yes, that's me," Alara promptly responded, staring in awe at her new ship. "Right, well, here you go!" he said. "Anything I need to do?" Alara asked, but he had already walked away. Uncertain as to where to start, Alara left her bags in the centre of the main deck.

She walked to the bow, before walking back, taking in the entire sight before flicking through the ship's schematics.

Like the Lone Wanderer, a set of stairs led upwards to the aft deck where the captain's quarters and the ship wheel sat. However, whereas Onasi's quarters had an area behind for Marines to man, Alara's were built into the rear of the ship. She was somewhat happy about that, it meant no one could peek in through her rear windows, however she was quickly conscious of the stairs leading up on top of her room and the gun emplacements that sat there.

She opened the door directly in front of her: a communications room sat fully fitted, as well an adjoining officer's lounge and quarters for her senior command. After exploring the inside, she headed back towards the bow, following the stairs downwards to the decks below. She made her way from room to room, checking out everything she had authorised. The walls were covered with furnishings, there were comfortable sofas in the common rooms, the canteen was well stocked and also equipped with areas for socialising, the beds were nice, comfy, yet firm, and a theme of red and grey persisted throughout the ship.

She stuck her head in the kitchens - they were state of the art. She peeked in the numerous bathrooms: they were clean, fresh, and well-equipped, but she knew that would only last so long. She checked out the hold and storages - they were spacious and already stocked with supplies. She poked her head in the armoury, picking up a clip of ammo, pausing as she inspected it. The bullets were silver, and she wasn't quite sure why. She put them back, continuing on with her inspection.

Alara returned to the main deck, her things still waiting for her, but she ignored them, her gaze quickly focusing on a figure walking towards the Sole Survivor. He walked with purpose, a large box held by his side, as the very important member of Alara's crew returned to her. "Greetings Commander," he stated, putting the box down before saluting, a soft growl coming from inside. "How has she been?" Alara asked, squatting down and opening the box. Tilly slowly walked out, the small tortoiseshell cat rubbing herself quickly against Alara's hand, purring softly as Alara picked her up. "She has been well looked after, if a little lonely."

Alara nodded, Tilly quickly pulling herself up to stand on her shoulder. "I'm glad she could remain with the crew, thank you, I have her from here," Alara stated. The courier nodded, stroking Tilly before departing. As he left, another figure walked onboard. "Morning," greeted Astris, glancing around with a big smile.

Tilly leapt from Alara onto Astris, before getting down and walking away to explore the ship. "Morning," Alara said, picking up her bags and Tilly's box before making her way to the aft deck. Astris followed closely, taking in the sight, as a few other members of the command crew arrived.

"So, this is really it? Our own ship?" Astris asked. Alara nodded, opening her room with the key she had been given. "All ours," she stated, stepping inside and looking around. The room was huge: it had a meeting table, a desk, a giant bed, its own bathroom, a wardrobe, as well as a fully stocked drinks cabinet – a small letter sat inside along with a red, black, and gold hand axe. "Safe travels, work hard, be sensible. Admiral Cassandra Exarga," it said, Alara smiling as she read it.

Finally Alara turned around to Astris. "Lieutenant Commander, get settled in, the others should be arriving soon," Alara ordered. Astris nodded, standing at attention. "Aye Commander," she beamed, grabbing her things and heading off to explore. Alara settled in, sorting out her clothes, her items, and Tilly's bed and toys, the cat eventually making an appearance and settling in quickly on Alara's bed.

Before too long the rest of the crew began to arrive, Alara watching them curiously from her room, but eventually, with everyone settled in and accounted for, Alara emerged onto the aft deck. Her command crew stood waiting, Witchford, Wulf, Astris, Riley, and Brett counted among them. She nodded to them, walking up the railing next to the ship's wheel and holding onto it, her crew excitedly looking up at her.

"Welcome aboard your new home," Alara said, looking out across the large collection of Marines. "First of all, I want to thank those of you who decided to stay with me, and those of you who have chosen to join me. Thank you all, I hope we all get along." She glanced towards Astris, who stood by her side, before back at the group. "Secondly, I want to state to you all that I will not ask any of you to do something I myself am not willing to do, and I hold my command crew to that as well. We are a team, a unit, a pack," she said, looking up towards the flags above the ship, one of which was a black wolf with red eyes on a grey background.

"We must work together, and I know we will. Our mission is a simple one: we have been tasked with hunting down the Empire's enemies - criminals, pirates, renegades. As Wolves, we will serve our Emperor, our Empire, and each other. So, get to work! To your stations, get this ship moving! We are headed to the

Gardens. Welcome to the Wolfpack!" Alara called out. The Marines familiar with her all rushed to their positions. "Oorah!" they yelled, the rest looking a little confused, but quickly dispersing as well.

"How was that?" Alara asked, looking towards Astris as the rest of the command crew headed off to do their jobs. "I'd give it a seven," she said smirking. "Well, you're doing the next one. Get practicing," Alara smirked back, Astris' face falling. "Please no." Alara just laughed, turning her attention back to the ship as the Sole Survivor began to move forwards. "We'll work on it. Anyway, there's a lot to do. So let's do it!"

Seize the Seas Tales: Building Foundations

"Is this everything you need?" asked Yuthura, glancing over the large pile of metal bars in the middle of the alchemy circle she had made. Xander nodded, looking towards Tempest as the djinn observed from the edge of the room. "Thanks Doc," Xander said. She nodded, walking towards the door leading out of the workshop. "Anytime, but I might have to start charging," she said behind her. Xander chuckled. "I'll have to rethink making those instruments for you," he called after her. She ignored him, continuing onwards down the corridor.

"What is it you wish to show me today?" Tempest questioned, floating towards the pile and picking up a bar. "Truthfully, not much. You're pretty proficient as is, Tempest. These are for some personal experiments," Xander stated, beginning to move the bars to more official storage. "I would be more than willing to assist, if possible," Tempest stated. Xander glanced towards the Artificer, by this point, they had worked with each other on many projects, and he was grateful for the djinn's continued help. "Very well, let's do this."

A few days came and went, the pair eventually setting their eyes on the results of their labour. "What exactly is it?" Tempest queried, looking over the large anchor sat on the central workbench of the workshop. "A weapon," Xander answered. He ran his hands along the metal chain attached to the anchor's head, before picking up the t-shaped handle at the end of the metre-long chain. "I don't quite understand. Am I misinterpreting your words?" Tempest asked.

Xander shook his head. "No, this is a weapon. One for someone at some point, maybe Bjorn - it's too big for a normal person," he answered. Tempest floated forwards, analysing the object. "I fail to understand its purpose, its design seems... irrational. Is it a flail, an axe?" Xander simply nodded, entering into Focus and picking up the heavy weapon, carrying it out of the room and heading

to the ship's armoury. He placed it amongst the other axes and swords he had made, the unique item sitting out of place.

"When you've made as many blades as I have, sometimes it's more enjoyable to craft something special. Even if it may take a century for someone to find some use out of it. Take the time to enjoy your work, even if others may find it strange or unusual. Someone will need this... someday," Xander stated, turning and looking at Tempest. The djinn nodded, writing down Xander's words in a notebook. "Then, with that in mind, would you care to look over some of my own unusual designs?" Tempest asked. Xander chuckled, nodding before shutting the armoury door. "Nothing you ever make is not unusual, my friend."

Chapter 68: The Weight of Experience

Although Jayce had little to no doubts about accepting Ordo into the Rising Aces, Wicke most certainly did. She couldn't wrap her head around it: why would an experienced member of the Navy so willingly join a group of Pirates? Her doubts continued throughout the entire day as she watched Xander get him clothes, show him around the ship, and introduce him to the full crew. "Is there something you need, brat?" Ordo eventually asked, as he lay on the guest bed, glancing at Wicke as she peeked around the corner of his open door.

"No!" she squeaked, flinching as she realised she had been caught before stepping out into full view. "Any reason why you've been following me all afternoon then?" he pried, picking his nose. She turned bright red, looking bashfully at the floor before shaking her head and steeling herself. "I don't trust you!" she stated, pointing a finger at him. "You're a spy, aren't you?" Ordo chuckled, rolling his snot and flicking it at her. "Of course. This is all a set up to lead you into a trap," he stated nonchalantly, to her abject horror.

Wicke backed away, Ordo slowly standing up from his bed. "Jayce!" she yelled. Ordo just laughed. "No, you moron, I did not plan on getting betrayed by the Navy I helped create. Distrust me all you want, in fact I approve of your distrust – it shows common sense. I won't cause you harm, I promise. Understood, brat?" She continued to glare at him suspiciously, but he just waved it off. "When's dinner?"

Wicke continued to glare at him suspiciously, even as the entire crew sat down for dinner. Tempest had wasted no time in creating an extra seat for the table, and Ordo had no hesitations when it came to eating, shovelling in everything that was placed in front of him. "Wonderful stuff!" he declared with a mouth full of food, as he slurped down beer to wash it away. A few of the crew found his disgraceful table manners amusing, the rest were disgusted. "You're welcome," Marisha stated with a broad smile, genuinely pleased to have another bottomless stomach at the table, alongside Jayce, Bjorn, and Caelie. Ordo let out a colossal belch, leaning back in his chair and patting his bulging stomach.

"Beautiful, I couldn't eat another thing. Hey, I could get used to this sort of thing," he said, giving a thumbs up. Marisha nodded in appreciation, standing up and picking up a cake she had made. "Ooh, hang on," he said shifting in his chair before picking up a spoon. "I hate him," Wicke muttered, Zeta and Holli laughing as the only two who heard. Finally, with the beast fully sated, Jayce spoke up. "Well, although I can't say this was how I was expecting the day to go,

I'm more than glad to have another face at the table. With luck, hopefully it will be a permanent one," Jayce said with a big smile, much to Wicke's dismay.

Ordo raised his mug. "Anyway, tomorrow marks the summer solstice. Although I wish we could be somewhere to celebrate it, I think we can take the day to relax. So, permitted we can add another day to our timeline, I suggest we look for some shallower waters to enjoy the occasion," Jayce proposed, Wicke's mood instantly lifting as he glanced towards her. She nodded eagerly, excitement racing through her. "It's Wicke's birthday tomorrow," whispered Zeta to Holli and Ordo as they sat slightly confused. "Ah, I see," Ordo said loudly. "Sounds wonderful. Anyway, I'm going for a slash, then I'm gonna hit the baths," he stated bluntly, standing up and walking out of the living room. Jayce just laughed. "Sounds like a plan, I'll wash up."

Wicke left the baths early that evening. Holli's talk of money management, investments, and business opportunities didn't exactly provide any sense of excitement for her, although, for some reason, Marisha and Zeta were entranced by the discussion. However, despite it still being a little early for bed, Wicke couldn't think of anything she wanted to do more than go to sleep. After tracking down Little Witch, before saying goodnight to RK, Tempest and Wren, she clambered into her bed, placing the cat onto one of her pillows before forcing her eyes shut. She didn't sleep for a while, but knowing she had a lay-in awaiting her, she was more than okay with it.

A banging startled her awake, the faintest glow of early morning shining through her window. "Wake up, get dressed and head to the training hall!" ordered a voice on the other side. She scowled, immediately picking up one of her pillows and wrapping it around her head before sandwiching her face with another one. To her distinct horror, the door slammed open, a strong hand grabbing her foot before dragging her out of bed.

Jayce was quite surprised as he wandered into the training hall, yawning as he shambled in, the last to arrive. "Morning," he said, a few other members glancing towards him with very mixed looks. "Jay-Jayce," sobbed Wicke. "H-he-he dragged me here. I thought I was going to get some sleep." Jayce glanced at her with sympathy, a quick look of anger flashing across his face as he glanced towards Ordo who stood in the middle.

"What's going on?" Jayce asked at last, crossing his arms as Wicke pathetically hung onto him. "Training," Ordo stated. "You've all grown lazy, and as your Instructor it is my duty to whip you back into shape. No excuses," he added,

glaring back at Wicke as she glared at him. Jayce turned down to look at her and she promptly burst back into tears. "I've got to protest, I train every day. And if you wanted us to do something like this, you should have asked, or given us warning," Jayce rationalised.

"Fine, you may go." Jayce shrugged, turning around only to find the doorway blocked by RK. Given the rokken was too large to have made it to the room on his own, Jayce quickly glanced back towards the rest of the crew. "RK who brought you here?" Jayce asked. The rokken gave no response, still refusing to move. Curiously, Jayce turned back to Ordo. "RK doesn't follow orders well, how did you...?"

Ordo simply shrugged. "Well, if you were training well enough, I'm sure you could move him yourself," Ordo goaded. Jayce turned and looked up at the rokken, eventually sighing as he turned back to Ordo. "Any more complaints?" Ordo challenged. Zeta opened her mouth to protest. "Good," Ordo interrupted. "As I was saying you've grown lax, lazy, weak." Jayce attempted to speak up, only to stagger as Ordo sent a wave of Panic through him.

"You should have known that was coming," Ordo stated, clasping his hands behind him. "How could I have?" Jayce asked, crossing his arms. Ordo laughed. "Because I've been using Focus since you arrived and you didn't sense it." Jayce's eyes widened, and he quickly entered into Focus: Ordo's body was encased brightly in blue flames. "You should have known, and the fact that you didn't means something has gone very wrong with your training. All of your training. So, as of today, you will follow my regiment until I am satisfied."

"Do I have to? I'm not a member of the crew," asked Holli, as she sat in her pyjamas on one of the benches. "No, I suppose not. However, if you truly do wish to enter the Guild it would be invaluable to learn," he said, Holli stopping in her tracks before heading back to the bench. "Right, who here can use Focus?" Ordo asked, heading over to one of the walls with a pen and drawing a series of columns, as well as everyone's names. Jayce, Marisha, Falconer, Xander, and Caelie all raised their hands.

He added a tick next their names on the walls. "Okay, you're free to go. Someone will bring you back later," he stated. Jayce glanced at the others, shrugging before heading to the doorway, RK moving to let them pass. "Jayce, you can't leave me!" Wicke pleaded. Jayce glanced back towards her, mournfully lowering his head before continuing onwards. "Well, what now?" asked Xander.

"Breakfast? I made some cinnamon rolls, they just need baking," Marisha suggested, the group nodding before heading off.

It was a while until Bjorn was sent to collect them, and, as they went back, he stayed in the living quarters. "You not coming?" asked Marisha. He shook his head looking down. "Apparently I'm the wrong type of baned. I can't learn Focus and need to work on learning to transform – as if it's that easy..." he muttered. Jayce and Marisha glanced at each other before shrugging and leaving him behind.

They found the rest of the group battered, most covered with bruises or small cuts. Tempest was floating in a corner shooting lightning out of his gauntlets. "Jayce!" cried Wicke. "He hit us, over and over again!" she sobbed, this time genuinely upset, her lip split. Jayce glared angrily at Ordo, silently demanding an explanation. Ordo just shrugged, turning away, a wooden sword in his hand. Angrily, Jayce stormed over to him. "Ordo, you said you would train my crew, not hurt them."

"Their injuries are minor: the faster they learnt, the less they got hurt," he stated casually. Jayce opened his mouth to protest, but Ordo hung his head, letting out a loud sigh. "Fine, it's your turn anyway. Wicke!" he called out. She flinched and slowly shuffled over to them. "Watch this," Ordo stated, swinging the wooden weapon before Jayce could react. Wicke flinched, bringing her arms up to her head - the sword bounced off her and she seemed unhurt. "Wicke!" Jayce said quickly, glancing in alarm towards Ordo. "Take a look," he said.

Jayce entered into Focus, a faint red flame enveloping Wicke's body. "They can all use Focus, and will enter it if attacked, or if provoked by someone else entering Focus. Whoever taught you Focus should have started with that. Now it's your turn." Jayce glanced with slight alarm at the rest of the crew as they began to depart, Yuthura making her way from member to member as she dealt with their injuries. Ordo turned to Jayce, his wooden sword in hand. "Hang on, wait a minute," Jayce attempted, backing up as he approached. He glanced towards Wicke, the young girl expressing no sympathy as she stuck her tongue out, stepping out of the training hall before RK sealed the room shut.

Eventually Ordo released them, now satisfied with the crew's progression. Jayce stood listening to the crew's complaints, but, as Yuthura healed his injuries, he couldn't help but acknowledge how much of an impact Ordo had made in less than a day of being on board. After a hot shower, Jayce joined the rest of the crew, the group bringing out the presents they had got or made for Wicke, the crew

celebrating yet another birthday together. The good food, drinks, and presents seemed to erase Wicke's foul mood, much to Jayce's relief, and they spent the majority of the day following her orders, but as it reached early afternoon, something drew Jayce's attention.

Caelie sat on the edge of the ship twirling a small hand axe. "Caelie, what's that?" Jayce asked. She handed it to him, sliding back onto the deck of the ship before rummaging in her pockets. She eventually took out a small note. "Dress up, be ready for eight," it said, in his father's handwriting. Jayce stared at Caelie with alarm, but she quickly pulled a wrapped sweet out of her other pocket and gave it to him as well as the axe, before wandering off.

A few hours later Jayce lay back on his bed, still dressed in his suit. "Well, how did it go?" asked Wicke, leaning forwards and looking over him as she sat cross-legged on his bed, a book by her side. "Good, I think. We were interrupted, but I don't think we got caught. It... it was good to see her – I'm sorry for leaving on your birthday." Wicke waved it off, shaking her head before crawling to the edge of the bed and standing up. "I had a birthday. An actual birthday! Thank you." Jayce nodded to her. "The first of many, I hope," he said. She smiled, nodding in agreement. "It better be, I've still got that bottle. Four more years until we can open it. Anyway, I'm glad you're back, goodnight."

Jayce locked the door behind her, washing up before climbing into his bed. He lay there unable to sleep, his mind processing everything he had witnessed. Alara was a Commander, she was getting her own ship, the Admirals, the New Era, everything he had observed as he mingled behind Caelie's mask. One way or another, he could not deny that Alara was drawing a lot of eyes, from a lot of very dangerous people. He turned over; there was nothing he could do from his bed.

The morning came all too swiftly, especially as Ordo once again slammed his fist against Jayce's door. "Get up, Cap', don't make me drag you out!" he barked. With a groan, Jayce obeyed, rolling out of his bed and pulling open the door. "Again?" Jayce questioned, yawning and rubbing the sleep dust from his eyes. "Every morning, until I'm happy," Ordo clarified, much to Jayce's dismay. It wasn't the time that was the problem, more that it wasn't of Jayce's own volition.

After putting on some workout clothes, Jayce made his way to the training hall. The crew were all present, apart from RK and Tempest, the attitudes varying amongst the group. "Why are you here?" Jayce asked Bjorn bluntly. The baned looked down at him with a perplexed expression. "Should I not be?" Bjorn asked.

"I can't learn Focus, that is true, but if I can learn how others use it, I can learn how to counter it," he answered, sensing Jayce's following question. Jayce nodded in acknowledgment, turning and glancing towards Ordo as he cleared his throat.

"Well done, It was much easier to get you all here this morning! I expect you to wake yourselves from now on. It is not my job to remind you to train. If you get killed or wounded because of your own laziness then that is on you," he stated, staring directly at Wicke. She stuck her tongue out at him before quickly hiding behind Bjorn. "Now, today's goal is to understand where you all are and to start pushing you in the right direction. Look at this," he stated, pointing to the wall he had previously drawn on.

It was now covered with additional writing, next to the names and the separating columns. Each name sat above a grid, ten in height, four in width. The vertical was marked with ten words: Gaze, Punishment, Endurance, Pursuit, Panic, Resilience, Blitz, Constitution, Sense, and Stride – the ten aspects of Focus. The horizontal was marked with four words: Basic, Advanced, Master, and Supreme – the levels of each.

"It is your goal to ensure that each and every one of you sits in this column," Ordo stated, pointing at the Advanced column. "This may take months, but if you wish to survive the Empire then that is the least you should be able to do. Now, those of you who were already familiar with Focus, I want to see which aspects you are already proficient with. Captain, you're first." Jayce stepped forwards, wasting no time as he demonstrated each advanced form. "Good." Ordo ticked the entire first column, Caelie going next and demonstrating she was capable with half of them, followed by Marisha, then Falconer, then Xander.

Pleased with the results, Ordo let Jayce go, but instead Jayce took a seat next to Bjorn, observing from the benches as Ordo began to run the crew through each form. There were five passive forms: Gaze, Endurance, Resilience, Constitution and Sense, each of which would be utilised subconsciously by the body. The other five were all active forms, each of which needed to be forcefully activated. However, as Ordo observed the group through his own Focus, he faltered, noticing something he hadn't before.

"Cap', have you all been exposed to poisons?" he asked, picking up his pen and ticking off every crew member as having Advanced Constitution. "A few," Jayce answered, thinking back to their encounter with the Willow. "The ship was poisoned, however most of us were immune," Wicke stated. Ordo glanced at the

group curiously. "Constitution protects the internal body from blows and impacts, as well as granting resistance to poisons and internal attacks. Why you all would have developed an advanced form, especially if the majority of you didn't know Focus is... odd. You'd have had to have been exposed to varying poisons for a long time."

Marisha flinched, her ears bright red in colour. "Alternatively, good Constitution is also built upon a well-fed and healthy diet. Good food could also have been the cause, it's why the Admirals all have personal Cooks on their ships," he explained. "Yeah, that makes sense, it's definitely not the former," Marisha squeaked, glancing at the floor. "Anyway, the Passives all develop with time. Endurance and Resilience will both improve by getting hit by physical and mental attacks. Gaze and Sense will come from practicing seeing things that you can and cannot physically see. We will be concentrating on the others, but first we need work on enhancing what we already have. Focus up, get running!"

Although Jayce could already hold Focus for nearly an hour, he joined in, leading the way for the others – to mixed results. Those eager to improve - Caelie, Marisha, Zeta - embraced the opportunity, whilst those on the other end - Wicke, Zeta, once she realised it was actually just going to be exercise, and Yuthura - mostly viewed it as an annoyance. Even Holli partook, eventually dragging Bjorn along as her sparring partner, although, as she repeatedly punched his stomach, he acted more liking a punching bag than a training partner.

"You're all as useless as a monkey's underpants but well done, we'll continue again tomorrow," Ordo said at last, a deep sweat emanating from most of the crew. With varying grumbles, the crew departed, heading to either their personal bathrooms or the communal baths to wash off. Jayce instead remained behind. "Ordo, can I speak to you for a moment?" he asked. The old sailor nodded, standing at attention.

"Thank you," Jayce said simply. Ordo stared at him, waiting for more. "That all?" Ordo asked. "Well, you're welcome, but I'm not doing it for thanks." "Why are you training us?" Jayce asked. Ordo laughed, relaxing before walking over to the wall. "Well, for one, I have to trust someone to guard my back. And because Exargas always have ambition. What is it you are aiming for?" he asked. "To be a Pirate Lord," Jayce admitted.

"Well, then this is where you need to aim to be," Ordo stated, pointing at the final column. "A Pirate Lord's only rival is an Admiral. The eight of them equal the four great Admirals, and the Admirals can all use at least one form of Supreme

Focus. Admiral Exarga is the most durable, Admiral Cynane is the fastest, Admiral Kai the strongest, and Admiral Truth is the most bestial. To fight them you need to be stronger than the Vices, you need to go beyond mastery. You're a long way from that, Captain." Jayce stared at the mountain he had to climb. He needed to reach the summit, or else he couldn't protect Wicke and find out what was at the bottom of the Dungeons. He also wouldn't ever be able to see Alara again without fear of execution. "What can I do to get there?"

Ordo's training became a regularity for the crew. Although he had promised not to drag anyone out of bed, he immediately found a work around by sending Jayce instead. Yet - despite the grumbings of the early mornings - most of the crew found appreciation for it, their determination to not let down their ever-eager Captain spurring them forwards. Although Bjorn, Tempest, and RK couldn't participate in training Focus, Jayce quickly began to notice that Ordo had created training regiments for each of them. RK had been given a strict diet of dense and heavy minerals, Tempest was continuing to utilise his lightning, and Bjorn found himself learning combat techniques. Ordo had emphasised the utility of his size and the danger that Bjorn's baned form provided, and Bjorn found new appreciation for his huge size as he threw Jayce around on a daily basis.

The days flew by, the Stacked Hand getting closer and closer to their destination of the Capital with each passing second. "Ahem," came a voice at Ordo's door. "Huh?" Ordo muttered, rolling over and yawning as someone disturbed his afternoon nap. Xander looked down at the old sailor, a thin sheet covering his naked body as he snoozed unashamedly with his door wide open. "If you need me to get you some more underwear that's not a problem," Xander stated. Ordo chuckled, sitting up and wrapping the blanket around him.

"Sometimes the boys need freeing." Xander nodded, a kilt not uncommon amongst his day-to-day outfits, when he wasn't smithing. "What do you need, Xander?" Ordo asked, standing up and searching for one of his loincloths. "It's ready," he stated. Immediately, Ordo perked up, putting on a pair of black cargo shorts and a loose, blue, short-sleeved shirt before slipping on his wooden sandals. "Let's go!"

They made their way across the ship, arriving quickly at Xander and Tempest's workshop. It was waiting for them, placed proudly in the centre of the room. Ordo looked like he could cry. "It's beautiful," he said, stepping forwards and grabbing hold of the long metal handle, a metal ring acting as the weapon's pommel, before picking it up. The weapon was as tall as Ordo was, if not slightly

taller. It was a spiked club, made entirely of a dark metal, with a large two-handed handle and a thick head covering more than half the weapon.

"I thought I would never get to wield one again after the earthquake of fives," Ordo stated, hefting the weapon. "A natural disaster?" Xander questioned. Ordo ignored him, admiring the large blunt barbs across the greatclub. "There are a few enchantments on the weapon, and if there are any problems tell me and I'll iron them out," Xander stated. Ordo nodded, practicing a swing with the weapon before resting it over his shoulder. "Thank you, I don't have any money on me." Xander waved it off. "Jayce's orders were to give it you. Welcome to the crew."

Seize the Seas Tales: Financial Advisements.

Holli found Ordo's addition to the crew bemusing, to say the least. And as much as she had tried to not get swept up in the crew, she found herself drawn to each and every member, wanting to learn more about them, to engage with them, to stay with them. Still, as the final night came and went and the day of their arrival to the Capital came about, she knew she had to leave, no matter how much Marisha wished she would stay.

"Right, I have something to show you," Holli said, dragging Jayce and Marisha away from the breakfast table. "I know you will be helpless without me," she stated. "We survived perfectly fine without you," Jayce said. Holli span on her feet, walking backwards as she swore at him. "Yeah, yeah, anyway. I spoke with Tempest and Xander and given how much of a pain it is whenever you guys make some actual money, we thought up this."

She pointed dramatically at a new vault built into the bottom deck, in the rear of the cargo hold. "Ta-da! Now, I know what you're thinking: a vault, why do we need that when we have magical bottomless bags? Well, it's more than a vault for one," she said, placing her hands on the metal and sliding the golden panels covering the vault door in a particular pattern. The door then glowed blue, melting away into the rest of the vault to reveal a white door.

Holli pushed it open, revealing an extradimensional room beyond. "It's a collection of vaults!" she stated. Marisha and Jayce stared at the neat rows of vault doors, each labelled with a name of a crew member. "Each one is personalised. Put your prized possessions within, and no crew member will be able to borrow them." However, it wasn't the golden vault doors that drew Marisha and Jayce's immediate attention, it was the giant clock-like device suspended from the ceiling in the centre of the room.

“Now, that is mostly for your benefit, Marisha. It’s a loot-sorting device. On the main deck is an input portal, the loot then enters the vault: anything that isn’t coin is removed and placed over there, but the coins, oh boy, the coins get counted and then distributed into everyone’s vaults. The two portions for the ship remain here until required, at which point the money is accessible through the bottomless bag already designated. It’s ingenious, and patent pending.”

Jayce and Marisha stood in shock. “I don’t know what to say,” Jayce said quietly. “You’re welcome! Now, I have taken a commission, of course. Something small, already signed for by Xander. So, thank you for the business. And thank you for getting me north. It’s been a pleasure, and I’ve really enjoyed my stay.” Marisha smiled. “Thank you, this is really helpful and creative. Can we test it out?” Holli nodded.

“Jayce, your coin pouch, please.” With a sigh, Jayce handed it over, Holli quickly walking over to the contraption before pouring in all of Jayce’s money. She then pulled a lever, the money dropping into a small void before raining down into the machine. With a loud ticking, the coins were counted, a visible number appearing on the device, before the wealth was distributed, the coins rolling away into the vaults, a sound akin to rain echoing across the vault. “Hang on, didn’t I just give away my money to the crew?” Jayce realised, as Holli handed back his empty coin pouch. “Oops,” she grinned. “My bad.”

Chapter 69: Back to the Old Days

The Capital of the Empire came into view late in the morning. An excited energy sparked throughout the crew, their visit a first for some, and a long overdue visit for all. Jayce let out a sigh of relief as they sailed past the outer defences. The Stacked Hand was not the only ship flying a jolly roger, yet the threat the numerous Navy and Marine ships, as well as the mounted cannons, posed was undeniable. The crew made their final preparations, their bags packed, and plans made, before they docked in the main harbour.

“Right,” Jayce said, looking over the crew. “Anyone staying here?” he asked. No one raised their hands. “Okay, fine. I’m not sure how long we are staying, but assume it’s going to be short – we are wanted after all. Usual rules: stay in contact, stay together. If and when we need to leave, our rally point is a small dock on the north-east side of the island. Bjorn, Wicke and I all know where it is, so if you get lost, contact one of us.”

The crew nodded in agreement, heading to the edge of the ship before climbing down the side. Jayce followed after them, standing on the dock below and glancing towards Holli as she said her goodbyes. Finally she turned to him. “Thank you, for... everything really,” she said, stepping into his arms somewhat awkwardly and burying her head in his chest. “I’m sorry for being shitty,” he said quietly. She stepped back, nodding. “Do better! I’m sure you’ll find a way to reach me.” Jayce nodded, and, after giving the ship and its crew one last look, she turned around and walked away. “Good luck finding him!” Jayce called after her. She raised her hand as one last response before disappearing into the crowd of sailors and dockhands.

Jayce looked back to his crew, the various groupings forming quickly. Marisha had partnered with Zeta and Yuthura, Xander had partnered with Tempest and Falconer, leaving Wicke, Bjorn, Ordo and Caelie with Jayce. “Stay safe!” Jayce stated to the other two groups as they departed, before turning to the Stacked Hand. Wren took to the skies and RK looked down at them before Jayce summoned the ship into its bottle, an approaching dockmaster stopping in their tracks before promptly turning around and walking away. “Let’s go already!” declared Wicke, Caelie sharing her excitement.

They headed northeast, directly across the island, through streets that felt familiar. “The Navy base is the opposite direction,” Ordo stated eventually. “We know, however, if there’s a problem there we’re probably going to have to leave, and quickly at that. So before that happens there’s a few places we want to

stop off at,” Jayce clarified. Ordo readjusted his club, nodding in acknowledgment. “Take your time.”

The streets were very busy: Caelie and Wicke did everything they could to not get separated, but fortunately Bjorn was always easy to spot. The numerous baned milling on the streets all glanced towards Bjorn, some antagonistically, others in awe at his huge size. “You okay?” Jayce asked him quietly, his unnerve easy to see beyond his usual gruff façade. “Yeah, some feelings don’t change.” “Good feelings?” Jayce asked. Bjorn shook his head, looking into an alleyway they passed before quickly turning his head away. “It feels like I’m being hunted. Watched. By something. By someone. Let’s not stop and find out what.” Jayce nodded, glancing towards a Sister looking at them, a blindfold across her eyes. He blinked, and she disappeared. “Yeah, I agree.”

It wasn’t long before a familiar sight drew their attention. A somewhat small yet busy tavern sat away from the main streets of the Capital, a sign hanging outside depicting a barn full of countless animals of various varieties. The Beast’s Pen drew a quick smile across Wicke and Jayce’s faces. The place was surprisingly quiet for lunchtime, only three other patrons sat inside as Jayce and his crew walked through the doorway.

The tavern hadn’t changed much since they had last been there: posters advertising the arena still marked the walls, but some newer editions showing the arena’s current roster had replaced the previous image of Bjorn fighting Vexx. The place also seemed brighter than Jayce had previously remembered; he quickly noticed the new lamps on the walls as well as the other small improvements that had been made. As he turned his head straight to the bar, a large, signed poster of himself mounted on the backwall brought an immediate grin to his face.

“Hi there, how may we... Jayce? Wicke?” asked Tau, the ox-baned barkeep, as he noticed the group. “Long time no see, Tau. How have you been?” Jayce asked, stepping forwards and gripping Tau’s forearm, Wicke giving a small wave. “Me? I’m good. What about you, Champion, Mister Rising Ace, Pirate Captain?” he returned with a look of admiration. “I’m good, thanks. Anyway, I just wanted to stop by and say hi. Anything new in the Capital?”

Tau thought to himself for a bit, eventually nodding. “Nothing good I’m afraid. Bjorn, keep your wits about you. Inquisitors have been harassing the baned around here recently, nothing has come from it so far, but just keep out of their way. Other than that, the arena’s been busier than ever,” Tau said glancing over

the crew, a quick smile flashing as Caelie stared at him from atop Bjorn's back. Until his eyes landed on Ordo.

"By the Gods, uh, Jayce – you do know who that is, right?" Tau asked nervously. Jayce nodded. "This is Ordo, my latest crewmate," Jayce stated proudly. Tau rubbed the stumps of his horns. "Crewmate? Is this true, sir?" Ordo nodded, placing down his club and leaning on it. "Relax bull, you have no need to worry." Tau let out a sigh of relief. "Good. Well, Jayce, Wicke, Bjorn, you always have a room here if you need it. You all hungry?" Tau asked. Caelie nodded eagerly. "Take a seat, I'll tell Lisa you're here." They devoured their meal, sharing stories of their adventures to Tau and the other patrons, before eventually getting back to their feet. "Well, it was good to see and meet you all. Stay out of trouble," Tau said with a smile, waving them off as they departed the tavern. "Right, on to our next stop."

They continued their exploration, heading towards the edge of the island. It took no time for advertisements to begin to flood the street, showing off the arena's fighters and the upcoming matches as they approached. The Imperial Arena had been nowhere near derelict, but compared to what Jayce remembered the new Imperial Arena looked majestic. Golden statues lined the walkway leading up to the arena, the red paint had been replaced with a jade green, and two new sub-arenas had been built on pontoons, connected by their own covered walkways.

"Woah," Wicke muttered as they approached, her jaw dropping even further as they walked inside the main gates. Three platinum statues stood proudly watching the atrium, one of a small man, his arms up in a defensive stance, the next of a large polar bear baned, and the last of a man holding two swords. They were all immediately recognisable as Vexx, Bjorn and Jayce. "Did we give permission for those?" asked Bjorn quietly, as Caelie poked his and Jayce's arms pointing at their statues. "I don't remember," Jayce said quietly, his gaze focused on Vexx's statue, his stomach twisting.

The place was quiet, but there were still various patrons wandering around, buying merchandise or placing bets on upcoming fights. The Rising Aces quickly spotted a few guards glancing nervously towards them, particularly at Ordo as he openly carried his weapon. "Let's try not to stay too long," Jayce stated, the others nodding in agreement as they made their way up the main stairs. A pair of guards stopped them at the top, both dressed in shiny armour and wielding large spears. "Halt, the viewing platform is closed."

Jayce simply pointed towards Bjorn and then at the nearby statue. Their faces were mostly masked, but Jayce quickly spotted a look of recognition. "Oh, our apologies sir. Please head on through," they said, one pulling a lever and opening the sliding doors. Jayce and the others continued onwards, pausing as they stepped into the main room, a strong sense of nostalgia hitting them as Bjorn, Jayce, and Wicke glanced around. "I never thought I'd say it's good to be back," Bjorn stated. "I'm going to go catch up with the boys," he quickly added. Jayce nodded. "Ordo, Caelie, go with him," he ordered.

Wicke glanced at him curiously as the trio departed. "I think Ordo might be a bit much for Ming," he answered, the pair walking around the ring to the owner's box unopposed, the various guards pre-emptively opening the doors for them. They quickly found themselves in front of a secretary, a young man sat behind a desk outside of the owner's box. "May I help you?" he asked. Jayce and Wicke glanced at each other. "Yeah, can you tell Ming that the Rising Ace is here to see him?" Wicke rolled her eyes as the secretary leapt up from his seat, bowing his head in apology.

Moments later they were let inside, heading past the lavishly decorated owner's box into the owner's office. "Rising Ace, I-I-I didn't think you'd return. Are you here to fight?" Ming asked quickly as he approached the pair, shaking Jayce's hand somewhat nervously. "No, we just came back to see how the place was doing. Is everything alright?" Ming let out a sigh of relief, shaking himself off and standing up straight. "Yes, no, right. It's fortuitous you returned, now that I think about it – yes," he clapped his hands together, turning around and heading to the safe at the back of the room.

"I have taken great care of the Arena since you left. I do admit it has not been easy, but after some tensions with the Guild were eased out and we accepted our new partner - the great lord Ogre - things have only been getting better," Ming stated, returning with a large bag full of money. "You re-signed with the Guild?" Wicke asked. Ming nodded. "It was necessary, and the Ogre sends us some of his mercenaries for special fights, as well as providing additional security. Our partnership has been very beneficial." Ming then placed the heavy bag of money into Jayce's hands.

"Business has been, as they say, booming. And I am not one to forget favours. This is possible because of you, and you deserve a reward as such," Ming stated with a smile. Jayce frowned as he looked at the thousands of pearl he was holding. "This is not-" Ming held up a hand, shaking his head before stepping

back. "Please do not misunderstand this. Technically, as the Rising Ace, the ownership is still yours, no transaction was made, no documents signed, so truthfully, I have been a little worried you would come and take this place back from me. In accepting this money, as payment for ownership, you free me from that concern. Please accept it," Ming stated, quickly and quietly.

Jayce sighed, nodding before placing the heavy bag away in his bottomless bag. "I see. The Arena is yours, don't worry. We'll, uh, we'll be on our way then," Jayce said disappointedly. Ming nodded. "It was good to see you, Ace, thank you, but please take the rear exit and try not to be seen. I was... treated harshly last time you left," he said, rubbing his wrists, and forcing a smile. Jayce nodded. "Understood, goodbye."

"That didn't go as I thought it would," Wicke stated, as they walked back across the ring, taking the path down to the fighters' quarters. "No, it didn't," Jayce admitted, a feeling of regret washing through him as the image of Ming being interrogated crossed his mind. "It wasn't your fault," Wicke corrected, sensing Jayce's thoughts. Jayce nodded, shaking off his thoughts and feelings as they stepped out into the large open area underneath the main stage.

"There he is!" called out a familiar voice. "The champ is back!" A few cheers echoed around, Jayce spotting several familiar faces clustered together around Bjorn. "Hey guys, good to see you all!" Jayce said to the numerous fighters. The many baned fighters, and the other humans, all looked considerably healthier than the last time Jayce had seen of them. "We were wondering what you were up to. The newspapers have gone quiet, it's good to see you are all okay," stated Lucas, the old leopard baned looking a little more muscular than last time.

"I guess that's good in some sense," Jayce said with a smile. "Anyway, we're not staying long. Are you all doing well? I don't see Onyx," he asked. The various fighters nodded. "Yeah, the place is really busy, Ming also makes sure we're well looked after, and paid well at that. Onyx went home. He tried acting for a bit, but realised he wanted the quiet life again. He's working on a farm in the Gardens: we get news every so often – he has a favourite ox!" Kiro the goat baned said, momentarily holding up a hand before pulling out a small stack of photos. He handed them over to Jayce, one of which showed the large ogre cradling a fully-grown ox in his arms as if he was holding a cat. Jayce grinned as he handed the photos back.

"That's good to hear. Well we've got some stuff to do, so it was good seeing you all. Stay out of trouble," Jayce said, glancing towards Ordo and Wicke, the pair

nodding. "Jayce, I'm going to stay a little longer and finish catching up, if that's okay?" Bjorn requested. Jayce nodded, glancing towards Caelie, she nodded stepping closer to Bjorn and clambering up his back. "Okay, that's fine. Caelie will stay with you. We'll try to be subtle, but if it goes wrong..." Jayce stated quietly to him. Bjorn nodded. "We'll be ready to get you out. Good luck!"

They said their goodbyes, heading quickly out of the arena before making their way west across the Isle of Majesty. "So, what is it we are actually getting?" Wicke asked at last, as she flashed a smile at a pair of patrolling Marines walking along the bridge connected to the Isle of Duty, the Marines not paying her any attention. "Some personal effects. Stay close, follow my lead," Ordo stated. Wicke glanced nervously up at Jayce. "Must be something really important..." she muttered.

They came to the main checkpoint, a portcullis gate stopping their approach to the Navy Headquarters. A Navy Lieutenant sat behind a desk, a somewhat exhausted expression on her face. "Identification please," she said pathetically, glancing at the trio. "At attention, Lieutenant," said Ordo, glaring down at her. She yelped, sitting up straight. "My apologies, Instructor Ordo, sir, please don't report me," she said quickly. He waved it off, and she quickly opened the gates. "Uh, sir, I need to report any guests you have with you. Sir? Sir!" she called after them as the trio quickly walked through. "See, no problems whatsoever," Ordo stated. "Let's hope it stays that way," Jayce said quietly, keeping his head down as Ordo led the way.

Ordo led them around the back, utilising one of the quieter entrances to sneak them inside. He led them quickly to a somewhat concealed wall. "With luck, news of my 'death' won't have spread too far. With even better luck, those fools won't have removed me from the system," Ordo muttered, placing his hand to the wall. Glowing runes spread out from his palm, the wall melting away to create a doorway. "Come on, quickly." Jayce and Wicke glanced at each other, stepping through before it closed behind them.

"Now would be a really bad time for him to betray us, wouldn't it?" Wicke said quietly to Jayce. "Wouldn't it just," Ordo said, prompting her to flinch as he grinned at her. "We really should have prepared disguises," Jayce muttered, as they passed a squad of Navy sailors, Ordo shrugging as he took them around a corner. "Wicke in uniform would be even more conspicuous. As long as I'm the biggest source of attention, the rest doesn't matter," Ordo said, clearing his throat

as a pair of Navy Lieutenants stood chatting in the corridor. They stood at attention, quickly backing to the sides as Jayce, Wicke, and Ordo walked through.

They arrived at a large room full of rows upon rows of personal lockers. "Here we are. Only Officers get one, which is lucky for the Marines since they're all automatically Warrant Officers. Come on," Ordo said quietly. He took them to an older part of the giant room, the lockers a little more rusted than some of the others, but eventually he paused in front of one in particular: locker five-zero-one. He forced open the locker, using Focus to shatter the metal lock, only to find the entire thing empty. "Dammit!" he yelled, slamming the locker shut before punching a hole through it. "Those grubby bastards, no hesitation about looting the still-warm corpse!"

Wicke and Jayce glanced around nervously as the numerous Marines and Navy around turned towards them. "We can worry about it later, let's go," Jayce said quickly and quietly. With a huff, Ordo nodded, picking up his club and once again leading the way. He took them out of a different entrance, the group finding themselves stood on a large spiralling ramp. "Where to?" Jayce said quietly, Wicke almost burying herself into him as her heart pounded inside her, her eyes staring at the endless Navy and Marines around them. Ordo pointed upwards and they began to climb all the way to the top, eventually arriving at a doorway built into the wall with no door. Ordo once again placed his hand to the wall, the entrance opening for them.

They found themselves in a long corridor, the sound of typing echoing down the passageway. "Ordo, where are we?" Jayce asked quietly, a deeply familiar feeling running through him as he glanced at the four coloured doors lining the walls. "The base is built with numerous passageways catacombing the site, one leads directly to the water intake below the base. It connects to here. The silent alarm has already triggered, with luck we just need to hope no Admirals are nearby."

"Who would be stupid enough to break into the headquarters of the Navy?" echoed a voice down the corridor. "Oh shit," Wicke and Jayce muttered, freezing as they stared at a pair of figures at the other end of the hallway. The figures quickly started walking towards them, Ordo sighing as Jayce and Wicke went into defensive stances. "Of course, who else but you?" said the Red Admiral, placing a palm to her forehead as she looked directly at Jayce, Sylvie Gamble stifling a laugh before opening the door to the Admiral's office and heading inside.

"Ta-da!" Jayce said, in an attempt to diffuse his mother's clear anger. She just scowled at him, glancing around before staring at Wicke. "I thought you were

smarter than this! Of all of the people, I thought you'd be the last to try something this reckless," she stated, Wicke ashamedly shuffling her feet as she looked at the floor. Finally, Cassandra turned and looked at Ordo. "And you!" she said. Ordo stared defiantly at her, before she grabbed him in a tight embrace. "I thought they'd killed you. I'm glad for once I'm wrong," she said quietly. He held her back. "Still kicking, Pumpkin. It takes more than a surprise attack to kill me."

She released him, nodding, before she snapped her head back towards Jayce. "Why didn't you tell me you had collected another legend? Didn't you think this was worth mentioning when I picked you up for the Emperor's Ball?" she asked. "I tried, many times, but you kept interrupting me!" Jayce retaliated, a loud whining alarm silencing his and his mother's quick argument. "Well, I think it's time to go!" Wicke stated, Cassandra nodding and quickly pointing to a nearby janitor's closet.

Ordo wasted no time, pulling open the door and opening a concealed hatch buried on the floor before climbing down. Wicke followed closely, but as Jayce went to follow, Cassandra grabbed his arm. "Jayce, Alara is in the Gardens, on a ship called the Sole Survivor. Also your father has arranged to meet you at some point soon, so keep an eye out for him. Good luck, don't die!" she said, kissing his forehead before pushing him forwards into the hole and slamming the door behind him.

Jayce slid all the way down with a crash, startling Wicke and Ordo as they were quietly peeking around a corner. They were in a somewhat spacious cavern: sea water was rolling in, softened by a barrier before falling into a water pool, quickly draining away into large pipes, before getting replaced by the next wave. "Who's there?" called a voice, from somewhere through the darkness, the only light given by the small amount of sunlight coming through the large entrance. Ordo stepped out. "Just me sailor, stand down."

A gunshot rang out, followed by a loud thwack and a splash. "So much for a clean getaway," Jayce said, grabbing the unconscious sailor as he floated past and pulling him out of the water. "Come on, come on, we need to go!" Wicke said, as Jayce placed the sailor on his side. Jayce glanced at him regrettably before following after Wicke. "This way!" she called to him, as Ordo stood readying a small rowboat.

Jayce wasted no time, leaping in and grabbing an oar before beginning to row along with Ordo. They managed to get about a third of the way along the bridge before anyone spotted them. "Down there!" yelled a voice from somewhere

above them. "Well this was definitely worth it!" Wicke called out over the crashing of waves against the nearby bridge supports, as she covered her head, bullets hitting the water around them. Ordo laughed, continuing to row, before eventually standing up and throwing the oar at a group of Marines aiming rifles at them. "I apologise for that Captain, but I appreciate the attempt to retrieve my things."

Jayce nodded, throwing his own oar like a javelin. "Yeah, well we got something out of it, at least. Come on, we'll have to swim!" he called out, diving into the sea. Ordo shoved his greatclub into his bottomless bag before following after Jayce. Wicke swore loudly before taking off her hat and coat and shoving them in her own bottomless bag, and diving in after them. They made it a little over halfway before a small dinghy sailed past them, a hand grabbing the back of Wicke's blouse and pulling her kicking and screaming on board.

"Woah there fighter!" Bjorn stated, Jayce and Ordo clambering on board moments later. "Thanks for the pickup," Jayce called out, the dinghy sailing quickly towards the Isle of Majesty as Caelie controlled the winds with her magic. "You couldn't have made a more subtle getaway?" Bjorn asked, sitting back down at the rudder and steering. "No, I guess not. Wicke, can you do anything about the people shooting at us?" Jayce quickly called out.

She nodded, standing up and balancing herself as she began to chant, black markings running across her torso and legs as the wind picked up and the water began to swell around them. "Devour my foes, mighty ocean!" she finalised, throwing a colossal wave that consumed a huge portion of the bridge. She adjusted the wave mid-throw, changing its direction and sending the tsunami barrelling along the top towards the Isle of Duty, the wave swallowing up countless sailors and Marines in a terrifying display of power. It shattered against the main portcullis, sending those caught in the waters into the bay.

Ordo stared at Wicke proudly, whilst Jayce looked at the devastation with absolute horror. "Wicke, that was too much!" Jayce called out. Ordo shook his head. "They shot at us, they got what they signed up for. Most will live!" he stated, pointing towards the quickly approaching dockyard. Jayce shook his head, staring back at the bridge, until their dinghy crashed into the dockyard. "Come on!" Bjorn yelled, grabbing Jayce's arm and shaking him out of it. Jayce nodded, following quickly after the others as they abandoned their getaway vehicle. "All crew, get to the rally point. We're getting the hell out of here!" Jayce ordered, racing after his group back into the Capital.

Seize the Seas Tales: Surprising Benefits of Friendship

Marisha, Zeta and Yuthura charged across the Isle of Majesty, their goals clear. "Here we are," Zeta said, somewhat nervously as the trio glanced up at the giant Imperial Hospital. "How long will it take?" Marisha asked Yuthura. The Doctor shrugged. "An hour at most. You have somewhere to be?" Marisha nodded, glancing between Yuthura and Zeta. "I'm meeting someone," she said quietly. Yuthura raised an eyebrow. "Who?" asked Zeta. Marisha looked shamefully at the floor. "My mother."

"Marisha, you can't possibly think that's a good idea?" Zeta stated quickly. Marisha just shrugged. "I've been writing to her... for a while. I'm not naively going to pretend she's a good person. She's evil, manipulative, driven, selfish... but she's my mother and I think as much as her encounter with us changed us, it changed her. I need to see her, away from the crew, away from Jayce... Bjorn." "Alright, go. Be back before we're done," Yuthura stated. Marisha nodded, glancing between the pair before running off. "You sure that was a good idea, she could be walking into a trap?" Zeta asked, turning back towards the hospital. "I doubt she's the only one."

Zeta and Yuthura peeked around the corner: there were a pair of Marine guards stood outside their destination. It hadn't exactly been difficult for Zeta to get the room number of their target and so far everything had gone smoothly. "Ready?" Zeta asked, Yuthura already launching a small sphere from her crossbow. The orb shattered at the feet of the two guards, a flash of bright light temporarily blinding them as Yuthura raced forwards using her Focus.

They slumped before they realised what had happened, a pair of syringes in their necks. "I could have used my magic, you know." Zeta stated, walking calmly towards Yuthura. "Better we're not seen at all." Both of their bodies entered into Focus defensively, a powerful presence beyond the door they needed to enter. "Ready?" Yuthura asked, only for Zeta to have already slammed open the door and raced inside.

The presence quickly faded, ending as a sword clattered to the ground, a stunned gasp coming from the wielder as she looked up at Zeta from her wheelchair. "Zeta?" questioned Delta, her face and hair colour nearly identical to Zeta's – the glasses and shorter hair the only real difference. "It's me," Zeta said, quickly bursting into tears as she tackled her sister. "Where have you been? H-how are you here? Why are you here?" Delta asked, completely stunned as Zeta cried into her shoulder as she sat curled up into her like a child.

Yuthura stood watching the touching reunion, until slowly Delta glanced towards her, her face frowning as she somewhat recognised her. "Zeta, who is this?" Delta asked, Zeta slowly standing back up before wiping her eyes. "This is Yuthura, the Doctor of the crew I'm with. We've come to help you." "Help me? How? The Church send Sisters and there was nothing they could do." "I really doubt that, but I can't imagine they tried particularly hard," stated Yuthura, reaching into her bottomless bag and pulling a small wooden case. Delta nodded in agreement, glancing towards the bed she was sat next to, Captain Onasi lying on top of it.

"First of all, I'll deal with you. Get on that bed," ordered Yuthura. Delta stared in shock, but, after Zeta nodded to her, she listened. Yuthura put on a pair of gloves, rolling Delta over onto her side before pulling out a very large needle attached to a syringe containing a green liquid. "What are you doing?" Delta asked nervously, Zeta taking her hand and sitting in front of her. "I can't regrow organs, or parts of organs, quickly. If you came with us, albeit it would take a while, I could regrow the parts of you that are missing. Don't worry, we've already stolen your and your Captain's medical files."

Delta stared at her sister with distinct alarm. "This will hurt." Delta screamed as Yuthura injected the liquid into her spine, her internal body contorting and twisting. It lasted only a few seconds, but it felt like a lifetime. "What... what did you do?" Delta asked weakly, a sweat across her brow. Yuthura wiped the needle, placing it into a small bag before putting it away. She then closed up the wooden case, placing it in front of Delta before they helped her back to her wheelchair.

"This will regrow what is lost. It takes away from the rest of your body so use this once every three months, only. Any more frequently and it will kill you. Over the next few years you'll regain everything. Give it time. I would do the same for your Captain, but because it's his eyes this won't work on him. If I had time, I'd regrow his eyes personally and implant them through surgery, but... well, anyway." Yuthura promptly turned towards Onasi, pulling out her philosopher's stone and beginning to chant.

"What are you doing?" Delta asked weakly, only to be hushed by her sister. A green spectral visage floated over Onasi, highlighting the damage, the majority of which had been done to his brain. Yuthura scoffed, shaking her head. "Yeah, too much damage to heal..." she muttered sarcastically. "Zeta, I'll need help getting out of here," Yuthura stated, pulling out some chalk and drawing an

alchemical circle under Onasi's head. "How long will it take you to recover?" Zeta asked, drawing a quick look of confusion from Delta. "A day or two. I'll be able to walk, I'll just be in pain with some auditory and visual damage. I can delay it until we get outside."

Zeta nodded, standing ready by Yuthura's side. Yuthura began to chant, the chalk circle glowing before dispersing into green fog, Onasi taking in a deep gasp of air as a look of pain built on Yuthura's face. She grabbed a needle, stabbing herself in the leg before shaking her head. A blindfold covered Onasi's head, but, where his eyes would have been, Yuthura felt Onasi look towards her. Slowly she leant forwards.

"Welcome back to the living, Captain Onasi. I've repaired almost everything, you'll be able to speak in a day or two - don't worry - but for now, listen carefully. Captain Jayce Exarga extends his greetings, and his thanks for taking care of Commander Vanathur. The Church tried to kill you, and were more than complacent in leaving you as a living corpse. Your recovery will be considered miraculous, and you will be a target once more, so bide your time, you will be of use in the future. Wait for your revenge, it will come. Until then, rest, Commander Vao is with you."

There was no verbal response, Onasi couldn't make one, but he lay back, nodding in acceptance before turning towards Delta, a distinct flow of Focus around the area where his eyes would have been. "He'll be fine, keep it quiet. Take the weeks of peace you can get," Yuthura stated, packing up her things before heading towards the open window. "Zeta, I don't understand. What have you gotten yourself into?" Delta asked with a look of concern.

Zeta just smiled, reaching into her bottomless bag and pulling out a money pouch. "This is nearly everything I have, take it and get out of the Empire, away from the Church. Stay safe sister, I'll see you soon," Zeta said, taking her sister's hands and placing the pouch in her palms before kissing her on the forehead. Zeta and Yuthura then leapt out of the window, disappearing out of sight as the doors to the room slammed open, a squad of Marines rushing inside.

Chapter 70: First Catch of the Season

Alara did her best to hide her unnerve as she led her ship across the seas. She couldn't help but feel underprepared; everyone looked to her for guidance and she knew she had to offer it. Yet, as she sat in her quarters looking over the route prepared by Witchford, analysing the list of potential targets prepared for her by Brett, she couldn't help but question if she was truly ready to lead. However, the choice to give in was not hers to make. No matter how much Alara could doubt herself, Astris remained ever-ready to shove and kick her in the direction she needed to go.

"Are we sure this is a good idea?" Alara asked nervously, chewing on her thumb as she held a bounty poster whilst sat on her bed. "Armed robbery, murder, arson, assault... the list goes on. Someone has to deal with this scumbag," Astris stated, snatching the poster away and offering Alara a hand. Alara took it, allowing Astris to pull her to her feet. "Why not us? The report says they were last seen near here. I'll follow your lead, as always, Commander." "Sometimes I really hate you Astris," Alara joked, bumping into her Lieutenant as they headed to the door. "Love you too," Astris replied.

They stepped out onto the aft deck: Witchford stood in his usual position by the ship's wheel as he acted as the ship's Navigator and Helm. "Status?" Alara requested. "We are still on course, Commanders. We should arrive at Petal Isle within the next two hours," Witchford stated succinctly. Alara nodded in acknowledgement, stepping next to him as she looked over the Sole Survivor. "Good to hear. Hogsaw Henry was seen less than a week ago, so we need to listen out for anything that could indicate his next destination. We'll leave the Quartermaster in charge of managing docking and resupply whilst we look out for clues. Understood?"

"Of course, Commander," Witchford stated, before faltering. Alara looked up at him curiously. "Permission to speak openly?" Witchford asked. Alara nodded. "I read your proposal for the ship's squads and the overview on battle strategies relating to on-land combat. I think they are mismanaged and too risky," Witchford stated. "How so? We built them with the aid of Riley and Wulf," Astris inserted, standing on his other side. "To be honest, Commanders, that is exactly why I think there is a mistake."

Astris and Alara looked at each other quizzically. "You've created a main force centred around the Commander. Putting yourself at the front in every engagement seems reckless. What if you were to get injured? What if... what if

you were killed? The Lieutenant Commander is by your side in every engagement, you both could easily be targeted and eliminated. I think this is a big flaw in your strategy," Witchford explained.

"I see your point, Witchford, but the reason we built it this way was to limit casualties. Very few of us can use Focus; it makes sense that we take the brunt and use the others as support, rather than as fodder to test our enemies' capabilities," Alara answered. Witchford thought for a moment, still unconvinced. "A small mobile command squad means we can move between platoons to offer support. We can trust our Marines, and this allows us to deal with bigger threats. If we are wiped out, the rest won't stand a chance, why wait until everyone else is dead to engage?" Astris rationalised.

"I see. I understand, and I appreciate your clarification – it has helped. But I still think leaving the other Lieutenants on their own is reckless. If they were attacked whilst the command squad was in operation, they do not have a leader able to use Focus, able to protect them – the exact reasoning becomes a weakness." Alara nodded. "I agree, but if everything is so reliant on us then there's no point having the rest of the crew. As Astris said, we need to trust our Marines to handle the fodder," she said before pausing.

"Thank you Witchford, I appreciate your insight. I'll see if we can establish leaders within the main platoons and teach them Focus, I think you're right that an enemy could target them as a means of weakening us." Witchford stood up slightly straighter, nodding in appreciation that his concerns had been heard and would be acted upon. "Of course, Commander. I'll inform you when we're nearly there," he said with a gentle smile, before adjusting his spectacles and returning his gaze on the seas ahead.

Alara glanced towards Astris, tilting her head towards the main deck, the pair leaving Witchford to his duty. "Nicely handled," Astris stated quietly as they made their way below deck. "He raised some good points. In a lot of ways I think he's right about the command squad, but in any on-land engagement it just makes sense for us to lead the charge and aim for the head, whilst the rest of the crew handle the body of our enemies. It's what Jayce would do."

Astris nodded. "Well, maybe we'll find Hogsaw on land and get to test our strategy. I'll run an assessment on the other Lieutenants, see who would be best fit for learning Focus. No reason not to have more of us who can use it." "Thanks," Alara stated, the pair stopping in front of the armoury door. They glanced at each other, before Alara pushed the door open. A loud clang, followed

by some swearing, as well as the rolling of bullets across the floor, quickly reached their ears.

"Commanders!" Riley quickly said, as she stood at attention. Alara grinned as Astris glared at her. "I knew we'd find you here, Riley. Did you get any more information on Hogsaw?" Alara asked, helping to pick up the sniper rounds Riley had dropped. "Uh, yeah, I did. Real nasty son-of-a-bitch," she stated, crouching down to help Alara, before Astris let out a sigh and helped as well. "What were you doing in here, again? More modifications?" Astris asked.

Riley looked away, kicking a pair of ammo clips that had been fused together to the side unsubtly. "Riley, this is illegal!" scolded Astris, but Alara waved it off. "Weapons remain locked away until needed. Any modifications you want to make need to be authorised. You could get in real trouble. You're the only one on the ship with a sniper rifle, it's not like it wouldn't be hard to tell who did it," warned Astris, picking up Riley's rifle from the workbench it sat upon and locking it away. "Fine, but I got permission," Riley scowled, pointing offhandedly towards Alara. Alara took quick interest in the ceiling as Astris glared at her. "Still illegal."

"Anyway, we came to get the report you wrote on this guy," Alara stated. Riley nodded, glancing briefly towards her rifle as it sat locked away, before she headed to the door. "He's nasty to say the least, but his name is mostly for show," Riley said as they walked through the ship, heading back up the stairs to the main deck before heading to her room. "He uses a mechanical saw, it grabs you and then starts cutting. Reports say he can use Focus, as can a few other members of his crew. His ship is also quite kitted out. Heavy cannons, rear-facing artillery – he's equipped for close quarter engagements as well as pursuers."

"Recommendation?" Astris asked, as Riley rummaged through her desk, eventually pulling out two pieces of paper. "Don't engage," Riley stated bluntly. "Let the Killers handle it. Admiral Cynane's assassins, a high-ranked officer, someone other than us. You'd need to jump them, get too close for their artillery to be effective, whilst in front or behind them to avoid their cannons. If we sank them then likely it would be fine, the survivors would probably surrender, but that's if we sank them. We'd need an advantage to win," Riley admitted, sitting in her chair and spinning around. "Damn," Alara muttered, reading Riley's report. "Well, let's see what we can find. I'll put in a request for reinforcements, see if anyone is nearby. Good work." Riley smiled, firing off a pair of finger guns.

They docked at the Petal Isle, the crew taking a moment to enjoy the quick break on land as Alara and her command squad set off to get information. "Well?" Alara asked, as Lieutenant Anson Brett returned. "Same as the others. Came here, got drunk, smashed some things, left - sailing northeast," he said, Wulf letting out a sigh as he sat next to a fountain. "How the hell do we track a ship?" Wulf asked. "What island is northeast?" Alara asked Witchford. He took a moment. "Root of Iris, I think."

"Anything noteworthy there?" Astris asked, watching Riley as she walked along the edge of the fountain, balancing precariously. Witchford shook his head. "Maybe they're on a pub-crawl? Gotta spend your money somewhere," Riley said. Alara perked up. "Did they trade anything? Where did they get their money from?" she questioned to the group. There was a quick change in attitude. "The Ensigns said they sold..." Astris muttered, trying to remember.

"Salt, right?" answered Brett. "Large pink crystals. Three crates full." Astris nodded in recognition. "Good memory. Where could they have got that from? That's not a normal commodity," Alara asked, eagerly pacing back and forth. "Sea caves most likely," Brett said, drawing the group's attention before they looked towards Witchford. "Are there any nearby?" Astris asked. Witchford shrugged. "I will need to look over the maps, but there is likely thousands." "Not if the salt is pink. Pink salt is less refined than sea salt: there will need to be more minerals present which implies that the caves have to be large. Most likely it's a large, mountainous, uninhabited island they're using as a base. There can't be that many of those within the Gardens," Brett answered. Alara nodded. "Right, back to the ship then. Good work, all of you."

They made their way back, taking their time to resupply the Sole Survivor before setting back off. "Here," Witchford said that evening, pointing to a somewhat unimposing island a few days travel away. Brett nodded in agreement. "I agree." "Set a course. There's some potential reinforcements nearby, so I'll call them. See if they can offer some assistance," Alara stated, nodding to the pair before making her way to the communications room.

"Get me in touch with Captain Kask," Alara ordered to the Lieutenants in charge of communications. A moment later a device was presented to her. "Well, well, well, if it isn't the Hero of the Marines," chided Captain Kask. "How may I help?" "Good to hear from you Kask. We're hunting Hogsaw Henry and have a lead on a potential base. I know how much you like to blow things up. You in?" Alara offered. There was a soft laugh from the other side. "The boys and I are just

recovering from our last fight, but I think we can come to some sort of deal." Alara raised an eyebrow. "Deal?"

"Yeah. I guess you're still pretty new to this. Kills earn rewards, bounties get paid to those who claim them. First of all where is this base?" he asked. Alara faltered. "Maybe I don't want to say." Kask once again laughed, a few moments passing. "Fair enough, you learn quick. I'll let you claim the credit, my crew get sixty percent of the pay-out, and if we take them alive we get that additional bonus as well. Sound fair?" he offered. Alara thought to herself. "Still there?" he asked. "Yeah," she quickly responded, she hadn't even thought of the bounty money. "Great stuff. Get me the details and we'll take this asshole down." The line disconnected and Alara briefly questioned whether she had made the right choice before she nodded to her Lieutenants and placed the communicator down on the table.

It was a few days before the Trigger, Captain Kask's ship, was spotted on the horizon. Their rendezvous was a stretch of open ocean half a day away from their objective and, for some reason, Alara could not shake a feeling of unnerve as the large Navy warship sailed closer and closer. "Relax," Astris stated, as she stood waiting next to her. "He's New Era, like you, we can trust him," she reassured. "It's not that I don't trust him... okay, maybe I don't trust him," Alara said quietly as the Trigger pulled up alongside the Sole Survivor. "He's Navy, he's a good guy," Astris said, reaching to her collar and pulling out a necklace that Alara hadn't seen before. It had a small cross with a crown at its top, the symbol of the Holy Imperial Church of Reclamation.

"I didn't know you were religious," Alara said. Astris flinched, quickly putting the necklace away. "Uh, yeah, it's more to do with my family than anything. I don't normally wear it," she said nervously, standing at attention as a pair of figures stepped on board. "Captain on deck!" Alara stated, the various Marines around all standing at attention. Captain Soho Kask laughed, waving it off as he stepped towards Alara. "At ease, please. Never thought I'd see any kind of respect coming from Marines. You must run a tight ship, Vanathur," Kask stated, stepping forwards and extending a hand to shake. Alara took it, nodding as she glanced at her crew, silently commanding them to get back to work. "I try. Thanks for coming, Captain, I appreciate it," Alara said.

Kask wore a blue Navy Captain's uniform, adorned with his various medals. He stood at Alara's height, at just under six foot. He had dark brown skin, with similarly brown eyes as Alara, and was relatively well-built. He had a tight

goatee, and the sides of his head were shaved. The rest of his medium-length brown hair was held in small dreadlocks and pulled back into a ponytail, with a few locks left loose and peeking out from underneath his peaked cap. He also had a small scar running across the bridge of his nose. A large riptide rifle sat across his back.

"Well, everyone has a duty to babysit their juniors. And as New Era, you may just be that. We'll do our best to lend a hand. Isn't that right, Briggs?" he called back to his Commander, who stood behind him. Briggs was a mean-looking man: very tall, very muscular, with a lot of scars across his face and a constant scowl. "Whatever. Let's go get paid. Are we taking him alive? If so I'll need to tell the boys. There's a prison nearby so it won't take too long to drop them off," he said.

"Your choice, Vanathur. I personally can't be bothered to carry anything more than his head, but more money is more money," Captain Kask stated. "We'll capture as many as we can. They're still people, they deserve a trial, and for those they've harmed to see them punished," Alara stated. Kask nodded. "How honourable," Kask muttered. "All's fair in battle. We'll take as many alive as we can, kill the rest. Sounds like a plan. Care to finally give me the location." Alara nodded, handing over a document. He glanced it over, before throwing it to Commander Briggs. "Right, let's get hunting!"

They sailed side by side to their destination, the sun beginning to set by the time they spotted the island. As they had hoped, Hogsaw's ship sat docked next to one of the beaches, the faint lights of an encampment visible at the base of the huge mountain that made up most of the island. "That's definitely them," Astris stated as she set down her binoculars, flashing the go ahead to the Trigger and its crew before turning to Alara. "Any changes to the battle plan?" she asked.

"No. We follow Kask's lead, he's a little bit more experienced. Hopefully they'll surrender once we've blown up their ship," Alara stated, before looking out to the various squads assembled on the main deck, as well as the gunners stood by their cannons. "Let's do this once, and do it right! Once the ship is disabled, we use the cannons until they surrender. Follow your orders, choose your targets," Alara called out to her crew. "Oorah!" they responded, getting into their positions, rifles loaded and ready for use. Alara watched Riley as she excitedly carried her sniper rifle up to the aft deck with a stupid amount of spare ammo. "Alive, right?" she questioned.

Alara let out a sigh. "Alive. Kill shots only if there's a risk to members of our crew." Riley nodded, taking the stairs up to the top of Alara's quarters. Alara

glanced nervously to Astris who simply nodded in reassurance. A loud siren echoed out from Kask's ship, the Trigger adjusting its sails to fully catch the wind and accelerating forwards. "To battle!" Astris yelled, the same siren echoing across the Sole Survivor as they did the same.

Both ships sailed forwards quickly, their enemy caught completely by surprise as the Trigger opened fire with its forward-facing cannons, the Sole Survivor following suit. As they continued to sail closer, readying to switch to their portside guns, Alara spotted a large group of pirates stumbling across the lands towards their ship. They were clearly drunk, some still holding bottles even as their ship was obliterated.

"I guess they weren't expecting to be found," Astris stated, a small smile on her face as she watched one of the masts collapse, the ship on fire. Alara nodded in agreement, a sense of reassurance filling them as the Sole Survivor turned and fired from broadside, assuring the enemy ship's destruction. A cold feeling of dread tore through the hot flames of the burning enemy ship, a figure racing across the top deck before leaping into the air.

Alara dove forwards over the railing of the aft deck, assembling her glaive as she ran in full Focus, shoulder-charging Hogsaw as he swung his chainsaw towards Wulf. She collided into him, sending him rolling backwards across the deck, the various Marines all leaping back and readying their weapons as he quickly got to his feet. "Hogsaw Henry, throw down your weapon and tell your crew to surrender! They will be treated fairly, and no further harm will be brought to any of you," Alara ordered, nodding to Wulf as she passed, her men creating a ring around her and the aggressor.

"Hmm, I know your face. The Marine Hero, right? Vanathur. How did you find us?" he asked, glancing nervously at Alara's crew as they surrounded him. "We tracked your goods. Pink salt crystals can't be found just anywhere," she answered, the cannons of the Trigger still firing at the island, even as Kask deployed his men. "Damn. Fair enough. Well, sorry, I'm not going down without a fight!"

As Alara stepped forwards to answer his declaration, a wave of cold fear tore her way out from within her. She staggered, her heart pounding and her vision of Hogsaw blurring as he stepped towards her. Several of her Marines fell to the floor, others dropped their weapons, stepping back in terror. He swung his saw towards her, only for a pair of shots to ring out. The feeling immediately disappeared as Hogsaw stared at Alara with wide eyes, a hole through the side of

his neck and a trickle of blood rolling down between his eyes, a hole through his forehead.

Hogsaw dropped to the ground, dead, Alara immediately looking around for who had killed him. Astris stood nearby, shakily holding her pistols, one clearly having just been fired. Alara then glanced behind her, spotting Riley crouched down as she looked down the scope of her sniper rifle. A quick feeling of relief flooded the crew, Alara lowering her head before nodding to those who had saved her life. "Good work. Let's finish this."

With Hogsaw dead and his ship destroyed, Alara returned to the aft deck, Witchford quickly steering the ship away to put the Sole Survivor in a position to assist the Trigger. Captain Kask stood watching the devastation, his men fighting on the beach, his ship firing their cannons at the battlefield. Once the Sole Survivor was close enough, Alara leapt aboard the Trigger. "Kask!" she called out. He turned and looked to her. "He's dead, we've killed him. Stop firing, your men are down there!"

Kask nodded in acknowledgment, turning back but not stopping. Alara reached forwards, grabbing his shoulder and immediately he turned on her, his eyes flashing with cold anger. "Give them a chance to surrender, Captain," Alara stated quickly, stepping back. Kask eventually nodded. "Cease fire!" he declared, the guns stopping immediately. "Go ahead," he stated, the Navy and the pirates still fighting. Alara headed to the side of the ship, climbing down quickly and racing across the sands.

"He's dead! Hogsaw has been killed! This is your one chance to throw down your weapons, live, don't throw your lives away! We promise to cause you no further harm!" she declared, walking through the middle of the battlefield. A pirate ran towards her, yelling as he wielded a sabre. A gunshot rang out and he dropped to floor, clutching his leg. Alara glanced back, Kask stood holding his rifle, gesturing for her to continue. "Last chance, or you will all die!" Alara yelled, her heart pounding in her chest. The remaining pirates faltered, glancing towards the Navy stood around them, before one by one they threw down their weapons, holding their arms up in surrender. Alara let out a sigh of relief, glancing back towards Kask and nodding to him. Slowly, he nodded back.

After escorting their prisoners into the brigs aboard each ship, their Captain's corpse placed in a body bag aboard the Sole Survivor, they set off, sailing quickly through the evening and the night to their destination. They arrived early in the morning at a large and well-guarded island. Numerous Navy ships were

patrolling nearby and a large prison was easily visible as they approached. Astris let out a large yawn as she leant next to the wheel, Alara stood next to her. "Last night I didn't get a chance to say thank you," Alara said to her. Astris waved it off. "I went for something that gave him a chance to live. Thank Riley, she killed him, but you're welcome. We cut it a little close, I'm just glad he didn't get the chance to cut Wulf in half." Alara nodded, resting a gentle hand on Astris' arm before walking down to the deck below.

They docked, several heavily-armed guards stepping onto the Sole Survivor before taking the prisoners, and their dead Captain, away. A lot of forms then found their way into Alara's possession. She filled out everything she needed to, before making her way off the ship and across the dock to the Trigger. "How many did you lose?" Alara asked eventually, as she handed over the documents for Captain Kask to sign. "A few. Always do," he said, without raising his head. Alara grit her teeth. "You fired on own men!" she said angrily.

Kask looked up apathetically. "They know the risk, they know our tactics. Push the enemy together, trust the gunners not to hit you. Works every time. Anyway, it was a pleasure, Commander. If you get any more tips, don't hesitate to call," he said, standing up and extending a hand. Alara looked down at it, before meeting his eyes. "Your crew always come first," she said, turning around and walking away. Kask watched her leave, shaking his head. "The mission comes first."

Seize the Seas Tales: Duty Above All

It had been a few months since Arthuria's return to the Capital. She and Morgana had continued their potion brewing sessions together, and with great results. Arthuria was learning lots: Morgana provided her a new book to read every week and each one gave her more and more insight into Demon's Tongue and the language of Arcanum. Morgana seemed to be appreciating the company and the opportunity as well: every week she would walk in boasting of some new achievement or piece of praise she had been given.

Which made it all the more surprising as Morgana stood balling her eyes out at the door to the convent. "What's wrong?" Arthuria asked quickly, pulling Morgana through the door before closing it behind her. Morgana said something, almost entirely consumed by a laboured sob, as Arthuria guided her through the convent to their study room. She shut the door behind them, a feeling of genuine concern pressing through her, only to be overwhelmed by the concern that something had occurred that would ruin Arthuria's mission.

"I-I-I killed someone," Morgana sobbed, sitting down on a chair and holding her head. "You killed someone? Who? How? What happened?" Arthuria pried, an uncomfortable feeling continuing to exist as she manipulated the girl before her. "One of the other Serving Girls. I killed her..." Morgana said, wiping her eyes and looking up at Arthuria with an almost-hollow stare. Slowly Arthuria knelt in front of her, looking up at Morgana and taking her hands. "Tell me what happened."

"The progress we've been making. I... She fell behind. She killed herself. I killed her. She was my friend and I left her behind. I need to leave," Morgana confided. "No!" Arthuria yelled, startling herself and Morgana as she stood up. "What?" Morgana asked with wide eyes, stunned by Arthuria's quick outburst. "You've come this far," Arthuria quickly said. "Your friend couldn't handle it, but you're still here. To give up now would make her death meaningless. You can't give up now. Are you the top of your group now?" Arthuria said, forcing the words out of herself, each syllable feeling like glass in her throat.

Morgana nodded, a soft smile breaking through. "They want to progress me. I leave today for the Mysts to get a familiar. I came here thinking you'd tell me to leave. But... you're right," she said, wiping her face and shaking her head. "I can't quit now. Thank you, Arthuria. Your friendship means everything to me." The words tore Arthuria apart from the inside, her heart twisting as she saw the sadness disappear, replaced by an eagerness to continue. "Of course," Arthuria said softly.

"I'm going to be gone for a while. Months at least. I'll write to you, when I can. Look after yourself, Sister," Morgana said, standing up and hugging Arthuria before she could react. "Take care of yourself. Work hard, remember to be better than they are," Arthuria stated. Morgana released her, stepping quickly towards the door, glancing back before disappearing through it. The moment the door closed and Arthuria was sure Morgana had left, she slammed her fists down hard on the workbench. She grabbed an empty glass bottle and threw it against the wall before she collapsed into one of the chairs and took hold of her hair underneath her habit, biting her lip until it bled as she held back a scream. Eventually the feeling of anguish and self-loathing faded. "What have I done?" she asked herself. "I'm so sorry, Morgana."

Chapter 71: On the Road Again

"Move, move!" Bjorn called out in front of him, as he, Jayce, Ordo, Wicke, and Caelie barrelled their way through the Capital. There were countless citizens going about their late afternoons, an obstacle in their way, mostly – as Jayce ploughed through a couple. "Sorry," he called back. But also definitely a benefit, as the group noticed the various Marines, Navy, and Paladins on patrol kept back by the masses.

Jayce glanced back, scouring the mob for Ordo as he ran. "Ordo?" Jayce called out. "Keep running!" called a voice from above. Jayce glanced up, quickly spotting Ordo running across the rooftops in parallel. "Halt!" yelled a voice to Jayce's immediate left, a shield slamming into him moments later. Jayce staggered, his Focus absorbing most of the blow, and carried himself onwards. Another Paladin Knight stepped in between him and the others, a longsword in one hand, a shield in the other. "Stop, or I will strike!" she warned.

"Not today!" Jayce yelled, leaping forwards and landing on the shield, springing off of it and aiming for an onlooking balcony. He caught the edge, pulling himself up before leaping for the edge of the roof. He grabbed it, swinging with one arm to narrowly avoid a bolt of golden light shot by the Knight below, her sword covered in golden fire, before he pulled himself up over the top. Wasting no time, he ran along the top, leaping from rooftop to rooftop in pursuit of his crew, Caelie and Wicke both using Bjorn as a plough to get through the crowded streets.

He weaved to the side, narrowly avoiding a splatter of bullets as Navy shot at him from the streets below, but eventually he managed to catch up to Ordo. "Thought we'd lost you, Captain!" he laughed, an exhilarated look on his face as they ran. "I don't go down that easy. How'd you get up on the roofs so quickly?" "I jumped. Focus only helps if you use it. Look for vantage points, routes others will struggle to follow you down. Make their home territory a detriment," he said. "Right. Next time then!" Jayce stated. Ordo laughed, glancing up as a shadow flew down towards them. "Next time indeed!"

"Captain," called Falconer, as he flew down on the back of Wren. "The others are accounted for and are waiting at the rendezvous." Jayce nodded, reaching behind his back and pulling out the Stacked Hand from its holster underneath his backpack. "Catch!" Jayce called out, throwing the glass bottle to Falconer. He caught it with no problem, nodding to Jayce before flying quickly away. "Why didn't you go with him?" Ordo asked. "Wren can carry at least two people." "I don't leave people behind, I'll always be the last one on board!" Jayce declared.

"Aye, Cap'!" Ordo responded, leaping across to the other side of the main streets and watching Bjorn and the others running below them.

A squad of Navy had blocked the road ahead, Bjorn, Wicke and Caelie unaware as they ran straight towards the barricade. "Bjorn!" Jayce called out through his communicator, only to falter as Ordo leapt quickly down to the streets below, landing in front of the Navy squad before Bjorn and the others could arrive. Ordo did not hesitate, hefting his greatclub. The weapon erupted into cyan flame as Ordo slammed it down onto the road, the stone cracking and shattering underneath as the ground shook. He then angled his club, sending the debris towards the squad. The Navy scattered, desperately avoiding the large pieces of rock sent their way.

Jayce grinned as Bjorn, Caelie, and Wicke charged through the remains of the barricade, Ordo leaping from the streets to the walls of the nearby houses before he pushed off the wall and landed back on the roofs. "Initiative, Captain. Don't hesitate!" Ordo stated, Jayce nodding in agreement as they continued running onwards. Several large sails came into view some distance still ahead, Ordo and Jayce picking up the pace as they called out directions to Bjorn, Wicke and Caelie.

Until finally, they leapt free from the rooftops, landing to the ground below and rolling as they displaced some of the impact. "Get on board!" Jayce ordered as Wicke, Bjorn and Caelie rounded a corner, a look of relief on their faces as they spotted the Stacked Hand. "Right!" Bjorn stated, grabbing Caelie and throwing her up the side of the ship before doing the same with Wicke. Jayce then nodded to him and Ordo, the pair quickly making their way up the ladder with Jayce behind as the ship began to move away from the docks.

"We're not out of this yet!" Bjorn stated, as he ran to take the wheel from Zeta. "Navy ships are moving to block your escape," Falconer called through the crew's communicator. Jayce glanced up, quickly spotting him flying high in the skies. "Jayce, where to?" Bjorn called out, as Jayce headed quickly over to him. "Southeast, the Gardens," he answered, chanting quickly as he cast Gust on the sails. Wicke and Yuthura did the same, the Stacked Hand tearing quickly away from the Capital on a wide arc as Bjorn turned the ship east.

A shimmering barrier built up around the ship, as Tempest floated in the middle of the deck with his arms stretched out to the sides, just as a barrage of cannonballs hit the ship. The Stacked Hand lurched but remained otherwise undamaged, the barrier beginning to fade in small areas. "Two Inquisitor ships, southeast," Falconer called out. Bjorn glanced towards Jayce, looking for a

command. "Maintain course. Falconer, at our current speed will they intercept?" "Uncertain," came the response.

"Jayce, we need to attack," called Wicke through the communicator, Caelie nodding in agreement as she stood on the deck below. "No," stated Xander. "Trust the ship, we'll make it. There's no need to fight. Not yet." Jayce hesitated, glancing towards the various members of his crew waiting on his decision. He thought back to the bridge and the tidal wave they had sent against it, to the countless Marines, Navy, and others caught in Wicke's spell. "What would she do?" Jayce asked himself.

"Captain, we need a choice!" Bjorn stated, interrupting his thought. "Xander's right, trust the ship. We'll make it. Ordo, Caelie, Marisha, Zeta, Xander, use the cannons to deter them!" Jayce ordered, his crew moving to fulfil his commands. As the cannons roared for the first time in actual combat, the two Inquisitor ships turned, aiming their own guns towards the Stacked Hand. As the large array of cannons, only a few hundred metres away, faced them, Jayce's stomach dropped, a feeling of regret filling his mind as they fired. Tempest concentrated his remaining shield to absorb most of the blows, but a few cannonballs slipped through, the Stacked Hand shaking as holes were blown in its hull.

Tempest immediately floated away to assess the damage, the second volley landed just behind the Stacked Hand as the ship continued to pull away. "Status?" Jayce called out, Tempest returning moments later, giving a shaky thumbs up. "Holes on the higher decks. The ship will not sink, however it is necessary that we find somewhere to stop and make the required repairs," Tempest stated. Jayce let out a sigh of relief, a few members of the crew disappointed with the outcome, but all of them glad to have made a successful getaway as the pursuing ships sank further and further behind them.

"Tell me the good news," Jayce said at last, later that evening as the crew sat around the dinner table. Tempest floated in the doorway. "The ship is still damaged, until there is daylight I will not be able to make full repairs. I can make temporary patches to the hull, however I can not be certain that this will be sufficient in the case of a storm, or another attack," Tempest stated. Jayce nodded in acknowledgment. "Okay, that's not good news."

"We didn't get a chance to restock, so food supplies are low, as well as other daily items. We also didn't get a chance to sell any of the goods we found in Nowhere, so we still have a bunch of paintings and gemstones laying around collecting

dust," Bjorn stated, glancing towards Caelie as she sat sulking at the other end of the table. "Also not good news..." Jayce muttered. "Anyone got any good news?" he asked, glancing towards Marisha, Zeta, and Wicke.

Zeta glanced towards Yuthura. "Captain Onasi and Commander Vao are grateful for our aid. Vao will regain use of her legs over the next few years and Onasi will recover from his head injury. We achieved our mission," Yuthura stated. Jayce nodded appreciatively. "Jayce... Thank you," Zeta said quietly, catching his eye. "Of course, that's good to hear." Zeta then turned towards Marisha, who had been quiet the entire meal.

"Not now," she said quietly, looking down at her lap. Jayce frowned but let her be. "Well, we survived. Looks like we need to find somewhere to lay low for a little bit whilst we make repairs and resupply. Falconer, can you look into that?" Falconer nodded, collecting his empty plate before making his way around the table. "I can..." Marisha attempted as he began washing up, but he ignored her. "Right, get some sleep. Today wasn't perfect, I'll admit, but we survived, and that's what matters."

The crew separated, some heading to train, others to the baths, and others just to get some personal space. "Caelie," Bjorn attempted as she stormed off, drawing Jayce's attention. Bjorn went to follow her, but Xander stepped in front of him. "What happened?" Jayce asked as he approached the pair. Bjorn let out a sigh. "Caelie has been multiple times to the Capital before, thanks to the Red Admiral, and there's a few shops she's really fond of. I promised we'd go and get enough goods to supply the whole crew with her favourite treats, so she could show us how much we meant to her. Well, we never got a chance and she's a little bit upset," Bjorn explained.

"Caelie grew up mostly alone, she's not used to sharing," Xander explained. "She's also still a child, well, teenager. She probably built up expectations as to how the day would go and none of them have been reached, she just needs some space to accept that she's not going to get what she wanted. She's upset at the world and you're just the face of that for today," Xander reassured, placing a hand on Bjorn's shoulder. "Can you go talk to her?" Jayce asked. "Today was hard on everyone and you know her best." Xander shook his head, much to Jayce's surprise. "She'll have gone to her spot," Xander stated, Bjorn nodding in agreement. "Her spot?" Jayce questioned, hearing mention of such a place for the first time. Xander and Bjorn looked at each other with surprise before back at Jayce.

It wasn't long after that Jayce found himself stood outside a small door, it was half his height in size and far too small for Xander or Bjorn to squeeze through. "Caelie's spot," Xander stated, Jayce nodding in acceptance as he looked at the strange entrance. They were stood on the middle deck, right next to the Navigator's room, an area Jayce must have been to a thousand times over already.

"When was this made?" Jayce asked. Xander shrugged, holding up his arms. "Tempest was asked to make it a while back, I believe it was during our time in Nowhere. It's quite a marvel, I do admit, however I have no idea how the Djinn did the inside given the entrance is too small for him," he explained. Jayce thought for a moment. "Maybe he made the entrance large to begin with and then made it smaller?" Jayce proposed. Xander pondered to himself, eventually nodding in agreement. "Aye, that makes sense. Anyway, best of luck."

Jayce watched him leave before he crouched down and opened the door. He stuck his head inside, uncertain as to what to expect. The first thing that hit him was the breeze: a warm, comfortable wind flowed out of the doorway. The next was the smell: a somewhat sweet and flowery scent that invited him in. Shrugging, he crawled inside, the wooden planks of the Stacked Hand giving way to grass-covered dirt.

Jayce stood up as soon as he passed through the extradimensional doorway, pleasantly surprised to see a high ceiling above him. He was stood in a flower meadow, the warm breeze rolling across the large area. The flowers were of all kinds of different varieties, resulting in a multitude of colours and shapes. Whoever designed the meadow had clearly planned out the colour coordination, the colours flowed into one another in spiral pattern, all revolving around a small patch of flattened grass in the centre.

Caelie lay in the middle of the patch, her eyes open as she looked up at the ceiling of the room. Jayce glanced up as he carefully made his way towards her. The ceiling was designed to emulate the night sky. Stars sparkled brightly and a colossal moon floated near the middle. She glanced towards him as he approached, carefully following the path made as to not damage the flowers. Silently he stood over her, meeting her gaze until she rolled her eyes and turned onto her side.

Taking it as not an immediate rejection, Jayce sat down on the grass next to her, looking around the meadow as he took in the various scents. "I assume Falconer helped make this," Jayce eventually said, placing his hand to the floor and feeling

a faint pulse of magical energy underneath. Caelie gave an apathetic thumbs up, still facing away from him. "It's nice, I wish I'd learnt of this place sooner." Caelie sat up, angrily turning her head towards him and glaring. "Right, right, secret place. Of course. Sorry, I'm being dumb today."

She lay back down, this time facing upwards. "I know why you're angry at Bjorn. But it wasn't his fault, and you know it. Can you forgive him for breaking his promise? He feels really bad about it, and I'm sure he'll make it up to you," Jayce said quietly. "Hmph," came the response, Caelie once again rolling onto her side and turning away from him. "Caelie," Jayce chided. She gave the same response. Jayce let out a sigh, laying back and looking up at the stars. He recognised a few constellations, but they were out of position, let alone the fact that the moon was way too big.

Eventually Caelie copied his sigh, rolling onto her other side and looking at him, her yellowish-hazel eyes waiting expectantly. "It wasn't his fault. Sometimes things don't go our way. Things happen that are out of our control. It's okay to be upset, but it's important that we move on. That we look for other ways to get what we want, or we come up with different goals. What was it you wanted from the Capital?" Jayce asked.

The somewhat irritated expression in her face faded as she thought. "Cupcakes," she whispered. "Well, Marisha knows how to make them. Ask her, help her to make them how you wanted," he proposed. She thought for a moment, eventually nodding before sitting up, her chestnut brown hair now down to her ribs in length. She reached into her bottomless bag, pulling out a small blue hair brush before giving it to Jayce and turning away from him.

Jayce let out a sigh, chuckling softly as he took it. "You don't need me to do this," he stated. She glanced back, glaring at him until he relented. "Fine," he said, relenting as she scooted backwards. "I thought you liked having shorter hair," Jayce said, beginning to brush out the countless knots buried within. Caelie nodded, taking hold of a clump and miming a pair of scissors at a length just above her shoulders. She glanced back towards Jayce, waiting for his thoughts. "Yeah, go for it. Zeta or Yuthura are the ones who have any expertise, just ask them to give you a haircut. It's what I do."

Caelie nodded, turning back away before reaching into her bottomless bag and pulling out a notepad and a pen she had received for her birthday a month prior. She scribbled away inside, eventually tearing out a sheet and passing it backwards. Jayce stopped brushing, only for her to quickly mime for him to

continue. "I can't read and brush," Jayce scolded. Caelie huffed childishly. The note contained a list of everything she had wanted from the Capital. It was not short, and as Jayce read through the items, most couldn't really be replicated by Marisha.

"The island we're heading to next is quite a big trade hub, they might have some of these things. I can't promise anything, but we'll try. Okay?" Caelie nodded, leaning back until she rested her head on his chest. He put his arms around her, the pair staring up at the sky above. "You're going to have to forgive Bjorn. You know that, right?" he asked eventually. She let out a sigh. He flicked her temple and she immediately hit him with her brush.

They returned to the living quarters a little while after, the pair realising that it had been quite a while since they'd spent any time together just the two of them. It was something Jayce was somewhat relieved by; he was glad she wasn't being constantly haunted by spirits anymore, thanks to her mask. Yet, at the same time, he quite enjoyed having her by his side. Even if she disturbed his sleep by breaking into his room, to steal his bed, or his things, her presence was comforting.

Marisha was the only one present in the room, so Caelie departed to go find Bjorn. She was sat on one of the sofas, writing a list of ingredients she needed, but she sat up as Jayce sat opposite her. "Everything okay?" Jayce asked. "You were... quiet this evening." Marisha nodded, looking down before she raised her head, tears in her eye. "I met with my mother," she said quietly. Jayce's eyes widened and she quickly held up her hands.

"Today, in the Capital. Whilst Zeta and Yuthura were treating her sister, I went to a restaurant, a very expensive one. Holli put me in touch with her, I reached out and she responded. We've been writing to each other, and she asked to meet," she explained. "Marisha..." Jayce said quietly. She shook her head, taking off her eyepatch and rubbing both eyes. "It went well, really well. You always said that people deserve a chance to redeem themselves, no matter what. I know you meant that about Vexx, but..."

"She's your mother. I understand completely. But it was reckless going on your own. What if something had happened?" Jayce asked. Marisha shook her head. "She wouldn't. She may be evil, but as much as we learnt from her, I think she learnt from us. She... said she believed in me," Marisha said, tears streaming down her face, a conflicted expression staring at Jayce. "She's probably just using you. Trying to find a way to still get you to replace her," Jayce said bluntly.

Marisha shook her head, reaching inside her bottomless bag. She pulled out a heavy book filled with loose documents and notes. "What is that?" Jayce asked, taking it as she handed it to him. "It's a cookbook," she said with a soft laugh. "It has recipes from countless restaurants across the world. Handwritten notes by some of the greatest chefs to ever lived. She called me Marisha, the entire conversation, and I don't know what to do."

Jayce sat back into the sofa, rubbing his forehead. "She's your mother. Do what you feel is best. We'll support you either way, but why do think she's changed?" "She said that plans have changed. That... I will always be a part of her, but the opposite isn't true, and she wants to be a part of my life. No matter the cost." "Sounds ominous." Marisha nodded, carrying the cookbook over to the kitchen before returning and pulling out another item.

Marisha placed a transceiver down on the table between them, Jayce's eyes widening as he stared at it. "She gave me this, as a means to talk to her, but also as a 'tool for victory', whatever the hell that means," she stated. Jayce stared at the item before back at Marisha. "Can you use it?" he asked. She weighed her hands. "Yes and no. Holli taught me how, but there's a lot more to it than what she showed me. With time, yes - but I am also tempted to throw it in the sea."

Jayce laughed, nodding. "Do you want her to be in your life?" Eventually, Marisha nodded. "Then keep it. Make her earn those conversations with you. If you think she's using you, use her back. Use that cunning she boasted you had." "Thank you, Jayce," she said, putting the device away. He nodded, standing up and heading to the fridge. "Now that you've shown me it, I expect you to use it. Spying on enemy frequencies is now part of your daily duties."

Marisha swore quietly, before nodding in acceptance. "I didn't make the meeting free, just to clarify, I had no idea she would give me the book and transceiver, so I asked for something else." Jayce raised an eyebrow. "I got Zeta a chance to record a few songs. So maybe we'll hear her on the radio from now on." "Oh no," Jayce muttered, immediately remembering that most of the songs insulted the various members of the crew. Marisha laughed, standing up and heading to the door. "We'll have to wait and see. Goodnight, Captain." Jayce nodded to her, turning back to the fridge and looking for a snack.

Seize the Seas Tales: The Next Step in the Mission

A few days had gone by since Morgana had left the Capital and Arthuria felt miserable. Not just because she had convinced the young girl to step on the suicide of her friend as a means of motivation, but also because she now had no means of getting further information from the Daughters of Shade. She had balled her eyes out over the first two days and sulked the rest of the week, only stopping as Sister Meredea stuck her head into her room early in the morning on the eighth day.

"Come on, you've got work to do," she stated. Reluctantly, Arthuria followed behind her, the pair making their way to the locker room. A few other Sisters glanced towards them, quickly departing to give them privacy. "Your mission still remains. You've progressed, that's great, but what have you achieved? You know the layout of the Witches' crypts, and what resides there. You still don't know the purpose of their ritual circle. You've learnt the basics of God's Tongue, and Arcanum. You've got a lot still to do."

Arthuria nodded in agreement, letting out a sigh as she sat down on one of the benches. "I've done something evil... horrible. How can I live with myself?" she asked. "Was it to further your mission?" Meredea asked, sitting next to her. Arthuria nodded. "Then doesn't the means justify the end?" Arthuria frowned, shrugging before shaking her head. "I-I don't know." Meredea looked at her sympathetically, eventually reaching out and tucking a strand of blonde hair back into Arthuria's habit. "Your leader is counting on you. Will you let her down?" she asked. Arthuria thought back to Elder Jeanne d'Arc, to the look of worry and fatigue on her face. "No, no I can't. What comes next?"

Arthuria followed Meredea quietly through the Holy Palace, to an area she hadn't been to before. Warlocks glanced at them as they passed, but otherwise ignored them, their minds elsewhere. They stopped outside of a door, Meredea knocking quietly upon it until it opened. A tall figure stuck his head out. "Yes?" he asked with a raspy voice, dressed in crimson and purple robes, black veins visible through his skin. "High Mage Brackus, I have brought today's assistant. This is Arthuria. Treat her well, or there will be consequences," Meredea warned.

He turned his head towards Arthuria, a cold feeling passing through her, the hairs on her neck standing on end as she looked up at the gaunt figure. "Very well. I hope you follow orders well and aren't squeamish. Thank you, Meredea. I shall make the appropriate donations," he stated, nodding to her before opening

the door further to invite Arthuria in. "May the Gods save your blackened soul," Meredea muttered, nodding to Arthuria before walking away.

He simply chuckled and Arthuria stepped forwards into the room, the very air feeling as if it wanted to consume her. She glanced up, sensing something watching her. "The Goddess is watching, that is what you feel. Behave, follow my instructions, and all will go well," warned High Mage Brackus. Arthuria gulped, turning her attention to the room before her, all manner of jars mounting the walls, full of strange abominations. "Well, let's get to work shall we?" he proposed, multiple eyes bursting out of his skin as he stared directly at her.

Chapter 72: A Titanic Break-in

Jayce sat in the sunlight on the deck of his ship, the day after their adventure in the Capital. The banging of hammers echoed from the side of the ship, Tempest and Xander hard at work as they repaired the Stacked Hand. With the ship stationary for at least the day, the crew had decided to enjoy the sunlight and the warm weather. Cocktails were being passed around, games were being played, and some members had gone swimming.

The morning flew by, a familiar shape flying towards them early in the afternoon. "Mail's here!" Wicke called out, Tempest and Xander taking a break from their work to join the others as she fed and dismissed the Guild albatross. She set aside the newspaper, taking out the letters and handing them to their recipients. Jayce was normally the only person to receive any, however this time Zeta and Marisha had both also received letters of their own. Wicke handed them over, before heading back over to her newspaper.

Jayce put one of his letters away, Alara's handwriting more than recognisable to the rest of the crew by this point, and then glanced towards the other letter he had received. It was Holli's handwriting and, as much as he resisted looking at Zeta and Marisha as they read their letters, he recognised Marisha had also received one. Zeta nodded to herself, tucking her letter into her bikini before going back to her deckchair. "My sister is grateful for our help," she stated to the numerous curious faces.

With that answered, Jayce opened the letter from Holli. "Hey Jayce, I found him." "Already?" Jayce stated in shock, shaking his head before reading through the rest. "Well, I know where he is and how to get to him. It'll just take time and money. I've signed up officially with the Guild, so maybe I'll see you on the seas. Anyway, thank you for your help. I really appreciate it, and it was nice to meet your crew. Stay safe. Love from Holli xx."

He nodded to himself, tucking the letter away before turning to Wicke as she sat grumbling to herself holding the latest newspaper. "Everything okay?" Bjorn asked her. "Well, no. Our bounties have gone up, everyone who had one has pretty much had theirs doubled," she stated, handing out the new posters. Zeta nodded proudly, holding up the poster to the light. Jayce glanced at his, also with a look of pride. His bounty was now worth three thousand pearl. Even Little Witch was now worth four hundred pearl.

"I'm not sure this is something to be proud of," Xander stated, as he held his own poster. "I agree, this is only going to cause us more and more problems," Bjorn added. "What more problems could it cause? The Willow and the Ogre have both already expressed interest in us, as have the Navy and the Church. Our total is, what, twenty-five thousand pearl?" Marisha estimated. "Not to undersell, but our ship is worth at least a hundred times that - Kitty Deliver is worth three million! We're nothing."

"Exactly why it is a problem," Bjorn stated. "We're now what the world would call a 'nuisance'. Our bounties aren't new, they're not small, but they're not big enough to really be worth tracking down. Our first ship, the Small Catch, cost four thousand. It was an old cargo ship, no armaments, not particularly fast, nothing extraordinary. A ship capable of hunting will cost a lot more. So this means we'll get hunted, but only out of opportunity."

"I'm struggling to see a problem," Jayce stated, handing back his poster to Wicke as she went around collecting them. "We'll get embargoed, people will refuse to sell or buy from us. We're not big enough to be feared or respected, not really, and Guild agents can't claim they were coerced into working with us if we're not worth at least ten thousand each," Bjorn concluded. There were a few murmurs amongst the group. "Then the solution is simple," Ordo stated. "Make them give a damn!"

"What are you proposing?" Xander asked, crossing his arms. Ordo shrugged, but Wicke brightened up. She rummaged through the stack of bounties eventually pulling out one in particular: a silhouette of a large bird, flying high in the air. "Everyone's bounties changed, even Wren received one. Apart from you," she said, pointing at Ordo, his image distinctly missing from the rest of the crew. "You attacked a Navy squad, resisted arrest, broke into the Citadel, and helped us escape. You're well known. How the hell did you not get a bounty?" Jayce asked. "Why do you think?" Ordo asked.

"Because admitting you're one of us is a colossal failure on the Navy's behalf," Jayce realised. "Bingo," Ordo stated. Zeta sat up from her deckchair, clicking her fingers. "So if we force them to admit that we have an Old Dog as part of the crew, our bounties should sky-rocket, right? The only reason they know of Caelie, Xander and I is because Wicke leaked us to the Guild for money before anyone else could. They have no idea who Xander is, who I am, both of our names could definitely help increase the amount."

"We're not seriously thinking that inflating our bounties is a good idea, right?" Bjorn asked. Falconer and Xander both seemed to agree with him. "Why not?" Jayce asked. "What if they send an Admiral, a real Admiral who won't eat our food and drink our booze?" Bjorn countered. "There's no way we're ready." "Growth can only be achieved by challenging oneself," Ordo chimed in. "Ordo is right," Jayce said.

"We still have no idea where the last two Dungeons are, and we haven't stepped inside one since the Ice Floes. We saw no evidence of one in the Capital, but the history books say one is there, somewhere. We need to get strong enough to reach the bottom, strong enough to potentially break into either the Holy Palace, or the Imperial Palace, strong enough to become a Pirate Lord. We can't achieve that by fearing those stronger than us."

"I'm not saying fear, simply precaution," Bjorn clarified. "We only just survived the Capital, we're not invulnerable." Jayce nodded in agreement, glancing across his crew as they thought to themselves. "Well, what's the plan?" Wicke asked. "Well, first of all, the ship needs fixing, and resupplying," Xander stated. "Yuthura, have you tried transmuting food using your alchemy?" Zeta asked. "It doesn't work that way," Yuthura and Wicke said in unison. Yuthura immediately gesturing that Wicke should go ahead and explain for her, as she went back to applying suncream to her body.

"You're the expert," Wicke attempted, realising she was explaining for Yuthura. "No, go ahead, since you know everything," Yuthura said snarkily. Wicke bowed her head in apology. "Alchemy requires exchange. Organic matter is a lot more complex than simply the parts that make it up. The exact reason why I can't just cover you in sea water and use that to replace lost blood and seal wounds. I can exchange the injury onto myself, but I can't make a new organ," Yuthura stated. "I thought you could," said Jayce.

"I can grow one and then implant that into you, but that takes a while. I have to cultivate the cells and... whatever. The point is, hypothetically I could make vegetables and meat from saltwater, but it's very hard to do so. Metals and cultivated wood are nowhere near as difficult. So we need to buy or grow them ourselves," she concluded. "Any more questions, class?" When no one spoke up Jayce drew the attention back to himself.

"Right, well, let's patch up the ship and tomorrow we'll start sailing for the nearest place to buy some supplies. If we can't buy anything we can worry about raising our bounties using the means we have available," he stated. As Bjorn

opened his mouth to speak, Jayce stopped him. "We won't search out trouble, and we won't artificially raise it. We'll see what comes our way as we sail. Okay?" "Aye Captain," echoed the crew.

The repairs were finished, and the following day the Rising Aces set sail southeast once more. Afraid of potential attack if they went to any of the more heavily patrolled islands of the Imperial Heart, they sailed straight for the Gardens, their supplies slowly dwindling. But, as Bjorn had suspected, the first supplier they went to turned them away. With no other choice they departed for the next island, the outcome the same.

"I'm sorry, I will not do business with you," said the sixth vendor they had gone to. "We understand," Bjorn said, bowing his head. He turned back, glancing towards Jayce before shaking his head, the other crew around him letting out their disappointment in varying manners. "Well, looks like we're screwed," Zeta said, as Bjorn walked back over to the group, Caelie nodding in agreement. "How many more days of food do we have?" Jayce asked.

"A few days, a bit more with rationing," he answered. Jayce bowed his head and crossed his arms. "Are there any underworld sellers we could buy from?" Zeta asked. "How many underworld sellers do you think trade in fruit and veg?" Marisha asked. "Sorry, just trying to help," Zeta retaliated. "Do we need to steal?" she then asked. Jayce and Bjorn both shook their heads, both in agreement. "I'm not stealing from people who haven't done anything to us."

"We could raid a Titan," proposed Marisha. Jayce and Bjorn looked at each other before back at her. "That's suicide, that's like taking directly from the Emperor," Bjorn stated. "Is there one on route to the Capital?" Jayce asked. Marisha nodded. "I only mentioned it because one is a few days away. It's finishing collecting its tithes before it makes its final delivery to the Capital. It will stop for a little bit whilst they make their last collection on a larger island nearby. We could sneak aboard, take what we need, and then get out," she proposed.

"A Titan has a fleet guarding it. Even Pirate Lords would think twice about attacking one," Zeta stated. Caelie raised her fist determinatively, Jayce nodding in agreement. "We're not attacking it, and we're not taking everything. We're not raiding the vaults, so the food supplies won't be as protected," Jayce stated. "The moment we're discovered, the nearest Navy Admiral will be coming for us," Zeta stated.

"Then we make a distraction, something that forces them to focus their attention away whilst we board. Two teams. One distracts the Commodore in charge and makes it look like a failed attempt, the other steals. They won't realise anything is missing until they arrive at the Capital, by which point we will be long gone," Marisha proposed. Jayce nodded in agreement. "How will the second team get out? The minute an attack is suspected the Titan will set sail, it's fleet acting as guardians," Bjorn stated.

The group thought to themselves, before Caelie headed behind Jayce, reaching underneath his backpack to pull out the bottle that normally contained the Stacked Hand. She pointed to it, before then pointing to the small boat, the Last Card, they had attached to the back of the Stacked Hand. "Jump off, wait for them to leave, sail away. That could work," Jayce stated. "Let's talk with the others, make a proper plan, but that could work."

Unsurprisingly, the rest of the crew weren't overly thrilled by the plan, but of all the voices who the group had expected to speak against the mission, Ordo was not among them. "Why the hell not? I say let's do it. It'll solve our food problems, and it will boost our bounties, long after we've gotten away, if done properly." "But surely if this was an easy thing more people would have done it already?" Yuthura countered. "There's no way this could work. Has this ever worked?" "In my many years of service, the Titans have always remained on schedule and have fulfilled their roles. The only people to have changed that were Pirate Lords."

Yuthura immediately leapt on his sentence to carry on her point. "However," Ordo intercepted. "As has been mentioned, our target is not the main vaults but the food supplies. We're not taking the ship, we're not touching the hoard. In and out. This could work. I trust your abilities to get this done," he stated, a few hesitant faces changing their minds as they listened to him. "Then that's settled," Jayce stated. "Two teams, one will distract and will make it look like a botched raid, the others will break in. Who should lead each team?"

"Captain, it makes most sense for you to lead the away team," Ordo stated, the others agreeing. "Then I'll manage the home team," Bjorn declared, Jayce nodding in acknowledgement. "The away team will need those capable of moving sneakily and someone will be needed to disable locks, magical and otherwise," Marisha mentioned. Wicke volunteered herself but Ordo shook his head. "Your Focus is lacking, you're also not subtle," he said bluntly. "The hell does that mean?" she asked loudly.

"Wicke, you're better suited for creating big distractions, plus if something goes wrong, you stand the best chance at rescuing us," Jayce salvaged. Reluctantly, she agreed. "Tempest needs to stay with the ship in case it gets damaged," Bjorn stated. "Then I'll handle the locks," Xander inserted, the other members agreeing. "Ordo should come with me, his knowledge of Navy routine will come in handy," Jayce then said. "Zeta's magic could also get us out of trouble." Bjorn nodded. "Okay, the rest will stay with the ship and help make the distraction. Let's figure out the finer details as we sail. We do this properly and solve all our problems," he stated.

A few days later they arrived at their destination, a large trade island known as Poppy Field. It was late in the evening, the sun a faint glow on the horizon and their target sat directly ahead of them. It had been months since Jayce had seen a Titan; the colossal, pill-shaped ship still took his breath away. Although the Stacked Hand was by no means a small ship, it was tiny in comparison. The colossal Titan's decks were so large and so high up that cargo had to be loaded onto cranes on board the vessel, before then being manually loaded throughout the ship.

"It's not too late to back out," Bjorn muttered quietly, as he sailed the Stacked Hand around to the far side of the island. Jayce shook his head. "We only have a few hours until they finish loading everything that has been collected here from the other islands. Once it starts its final voyage, that's it. The fleet will lock it down. Buy us the moment we need to slip aboard. Let's get this done!" Jayce stated. Bjorn let out a sigh before chuckling quietly. "Aye, Captain."

Jayce gave one last glance towards Bjorn and the home team as he and the away team stood on the island. "You have one hour to figure out a way on board," Bjorn reminded them, tapping his watch. "Then there's no time to waste!" Jayce called back. "Good luck!" Wicke called after them, as Jayce, Ordo, Zeta and Xander headed through the streets towards the centre of the island. "This region is under the Admiral of the East," Ordo clarified. "If I remember correctly there are workers alongside Navy on the ship, so if we can get uniforms for either group we should be able to blend in."

"How do we get the uniforms then?" Xander asked. Ordo pointed ahead towards a large building off in the distance. "The Town Hall normally has an official station nearby, either we ambush a Navy patrol, which could set off an alarm, or we steal several from inside there," Ordo stated quietly. The others nodded in acknowledgment. "If we can get onto one of the barges carrying cargo to the

Titan, I can convince whoever is there to let us on board. We just need to get to that barge,” Zeta suggested, looking towards Jayce. He nodded, picking up the pace as he glanced at the watch he had been given, the clock counting down.

They found the Navy station as Ordo had stated, but to their surprise only one person was inside. “Hey there, how may I help you folks... this... evening?” he questioned, his words slowing down as he looked at the group with a vague semblance of recognition. “Oh no, please don’t hurt me,” he quickly began to beg, holding his hands up in surrender as he looked up at Xander from the other side of a counter.

“Anyone else here?” Xander asked, picking up the young man with ease by the scruff of his uniform as Ordo, Jayce, and Zeta hurried inside to find what they needed. “N-n-n-no sir. J-j-just me. E-everyone else has gone to the docks to help with the T-t-titan,” he immediately provided, Jayce and the others returning moments later. “We’ve got it,” he said to Xander, holding up two sets of blue Navy uniform. “Hey, you can’t just-“. The Navy sailor immediately quietened as Xander glared at him.

“What do we do with him? Kill him?” Zeta asked. Before they could answer, the young man, no older than nineteen, wet himself and fainted. “Glad to know I’m still intimidating,” Xander muttered, dragging the limp body of the sailor behind the counter before tying him up and gagging him. “It may be a little small on you, Xander,” Jayce said, handing him a uniform as the others quickly stripped and changed. “Better not look, you pervs,” muttered Zeta as she stood facing away from the others. “Same to you,” laughed Ordo.

They stuffed their clothes into their bottomless bags, Ordo giving the group a once-over as he made sure their uniforms were on properly before they departed the Navy station. “Zeta, stand tall. Pretend like you’re performing,” Ordo muttered as they walked tightly in two rows of two, heading straight to the docks. “The other sailors are there already, we need to ensure we don’t get seen coming from this direction and blend in with those who are visiting the island,” Xander stated. “Great, just great,” Zeta muttered.

The docks were bustling, workers were rushing around taking crates out of nearby ships before loading them onto barges that were going back and forth, as Navy sailors stood guard. From the looks of panic, it was clear a deadline was rapidly approaching, something the group were grateful for as they managed to slip in behind another patrol, following the marching path through the centre of

the docks straight to a barge that was nearly full. No one stopped them, no one paid them any attention.

It was only as they stepped on board that someone questioned them. "Hey, what are you doing?" asked the Barge Captain, as they walked up to him, past the workers. "We're expected on board," Zeta stated to him, two rings glowing on her neck, her tongue and gums also glowing. The glow quickly faded, the eyes of the Captain narrowing slightly before briefly becoming vacant. "Well of course you are. You don't need to tell me. Honestly, you Navy, must you be so damn rigid. I'm not your babysitter, you don't need to tell me everything you do or every time you need a piss. Just take a seat, we'll leave in a minute. Have you got your badges? They won't let you on board otherwise."

The group faltered, Zeta's magic convincing the Captain to rationalise their presence, but another problem immediately facing them. "Uh, we weren't given any," Zeta said, desperately thinking of a backup. The Barge Captain let out a sigh. "For fucks' sake. Honestly, must I do everything around here? You're as bad as these bone-idle workers. There was some extra cargo, so we needed more workers. They didn't turn up, so there are some spares in a box by the wheel. I expect a commendation at the end of this, Lieutenant," he said, glaring at Zeta. Zeta glanced down at her uniform, quickly realising what rank she was. "I'll put in a word. Thank you for your service," she said.

He nodded, grumbling as they headed to the ship's wheel and found the box of badges, the quartet standing quietly and out of the way as they waited for the barge to finish loading. "So far, so good," Jayce muttered, only to get elbowed by Xander as a few workers passed by. "Sorry," Xander followed up with, only to get interrupted by a colossal fireball in the distance that lit up the night sky. Alarms immediately began to ring out. "Right, we're not losing our pay! Cut the lines, last run!" yelled the Barge Captain, the workers rushing around to the release the barge. "Go! Go! Go!" yelled a Navy Captain stood on the docks nearby, countless sailors rushing off to investigate the fireball.

The barge was slow, but as it was at the front of the queue the group found themselves with more than enough time. The barge pulled up next to the Titan, the top deck as tall as the Stack Hand was long. A giant platform was waiting for them, floating on top of the waves, the workers wasting no time to unload the cargo. Jayce glanced at the others, the group quickly stepping on board. A few Navy glanced at them curiously, but otherwise shook off their thoughts. The

loading was quick and before long the crane above them began to lift up the platform.

It was about midway up that one of the Navy guards approached the group. "Uh Ma'am, we weren't expecting anyone else. Why are you here?" he questioned, as he looked towards Zeta, his ranking indicating he was a Warrant Officer. "Did you not see that fireball?" she immediately countered, flashing a look of annoyance. He bowed his head immediately, stepping back. "Apologies Lieutenant. We just weren't expecting any additional members on board," he quickly stated.

She rounded on him. "Do you think any of this was expected? Not only are we behind schedule, someone has just launched an attack. Follow your orders, do not question mine!" she yelled. He nodded, quickly backing away. "So sorry, Ma'am." Zeta turned away, returning to position as she clearly held in a smile, the other three nodding in approval as the crane lifted the platform onto the main deck. "Let's go," Jayce said quietly, the group stepping off.

The four of them marched quickly in the direction the workers were carrying the cargo, and, by the time they made it down to the first cargo hold, they felt the ship begin to move. They headed to the side, weaving through large stacks of the crates stacked all the way up to the ceiling, some ten metres above them, before they stopped and assessed their situation. "Well, we made it," Zeta said quietly. "Well done, Zeta," Xander stated, resting a hand on her shoulder. She nodded to him. "You didn't think I'd fail, right?" she asked.

"What next?" Xander asked, swiftly changing the conversation. She glared at him, insulted. "We need to find a manifest. There has to be some method to this place, it's too large to just explore and hope we find what we're looking for," Jayce stated. "Let's split up, we have all the time we need. Look official, and take note of where things are. Ordo, is there anything you can tell us?" he asked. "The bottom deck is for the crew. There should be four main cargo holds. The Vaults will be the bottom two," he stated. Zeta shook her head, her eyes wide. "Just how much treasure are they transporting?" she asked, glancing between the others. "Tithes from every island between here and the Mysts. Islands pay to be in the Empire. Running a Navy, medical care, and everything else isn't cheap," Ordo said. "Aye, we can talk about it later. Let's get moving," Xander stated.

They split up, heading in multiple directions with purpose to search out their objective. Workers continued to carry and sort out cargo, following some plan of some sorts as they headed between decks. Eventually Jayce spotted markings on

the walls of the cargo holds; the lighting was so dim it was initially hard to notice. Materials and minerals were placed on the second level. He relayed it to his team using his communicator, only to hear nothing on the other end. "Antimagic. Makes sense," he muttered, continuing downwards.

The air changed drastically, becoming much drier. He also quickly spotted large metal containers lining the room. Cautiously he placed his hand to one, after avoiding another guard. The metal felt icy cold: a freezer. He entered into Focus, the antimagic giving him a quick headache but otherwise not interfering. The walls indicated this level was for storage of food and drink. It was only then that he realised the anti-magic would stop his bottomless bag from capturing their intended loot. "Shit," he muttered, their plan immediately becoming worthless.

Seize the Seas Tales: A New Mission

"Another one?" asked Warden Isolan, as Alara handed over another Pirate Captain, her crew escorting the other prisoners along. Alara nodded. "Only doing my duty," she said vigilantly, standing at attention. Warden Isolan nodded. "More than fair, but this is your sixth catch, you and your crew might as well become bounty hunters at this rate," he said with a chuckle. Riley nodded in agreement. "It's not a bad idea, Commander," she stated, a few other Marines laughing as the Pirates scowled at them. "I disagree," Alara returned. "Anyway, we'll be on our way. Keep some cells empty for us, I'm sure we'll be back." The Warden chuckled. "Aye Commander, fair sailing!"

Alara and her Marines made their way back to the ship. "Well, what next?" Riley asked as she walked alongside Alara. "I don't know, we're out of tips, so I guess it's back to patrol. Where do you think we should go?" Alara asked her. "Hmm, tough choice. I could use a holiday, so let's find a pleasure isle and get wasted," Riley proposed, with all the grace and dignity of a Marine Lieutenant. "Let's not do that. I was thinking of the Keeps, or we could head to my home. Show you and the crew around the island of Last Drop?" Alara proposed. Riley nodded. "That sounds nice, I'd like to see your home. I bet there's some adorable pictures of you as a baby somewhere," she stated with a mischievous grin. "On second thoughts, maybe not."

As soon as they stepped aboard the Sole Survivor, Astris came rushing up to them. "Commander, urgent report. Riots have broken out not too far away from our position. Navy have been dispatched, but I think they'll need assistance. It's across multiple islands," she reported. Riley let out a sigh, bowing her head to Astris' confusion. "So much for a vacation. What's causing the riots?" Alara

asked. "I don't know, all I know is they're hunting and lynching baned," she stated. Alara grit her teeth. "Then let's get moving, we have some people to save!"

Chapter 73: A Dirty Getaway

With the discovery that their plan was now worthless, Jayce immediately began to think up a backup. He had no means of contacting the rest of his team, or the rest of his crew outside, for help; the antimagic field prevented the use of his magical items, and the others would still be searching the ship somewhere. He glanced around, he now knew where to find the supplies they needed, they just needed a means of countering the antimagic field. And to do that, he needed to find its origin.

Nodding in acceptance, he glanced back towards the large freezers around him, the goods sealed inside. He then set off, searching the countless rows of crates to find grains, seeds, and other supplies that he thought they should steal. With their locations memorised, he followed the marked routes to the next floor below, pleased to quickly notice a familiar figure skulking around. "Zeta," he whispered, prompting her to bolt upright as she searched through a crate. "Fuck me, Jayce! Don't scare me like that," she whispered angrily, slapping his arm for startling her.

"Have you seen the others?" he asked. She shook her head, reaching into her uniform and pulling out her communicator. "The comms are all dead and I couldn't find the supplies, it's too dark," she said quietly. He nodded, glancing towards some workers as they passed by. "It's the floor above, there's markings on the walls. But there's an antimagic field, so we can't use our bottomless bags." "So that's that then. Mission failed."

Jayce shook his head. "If we can find the source of the field and disable it, we could still complete our objective. We just need to find it, and have a group ready to get what we need before the alarm is raised. So we need to find the others," he stated. She let out a sigh. "Is that all? This place is huge. They could be anywhere." Jayce nodded in agreement, but she took his hand and pulled him quickly down a pathway. "Follow me. I saw something I think you should see."

She took him to a more secluded area of the cargo hold, the crates getting larger and taller in size. "What did you want to show me?" he asked her, as she finally stopped. Zeta pointed at a large crate, nearly seven feet in height. Glancing around, Zeta carefully pried open an already damaged crate. "I saw them accidentally knock one over earlier. What do you think it is?" she asked, stepping back and looking up at the strange statue inside.

It was six-and-a-half feet tall, and made entirely of dark stone. Armour had been carved into the body, and the statue was holding a pair of stone axes. The statue resembled a figure, a man, a soldier. He looked nearly identical to a Royal Guard of the Emperor. He stared down at the pair, unmoving, a cold, unsettling feeling passing through both Jayce and Zeta. "I don't know. It's too well carved to be just a statue, right? And why so many?" Jayce asked, glancing around at the numerous other crates of similar sizes. "Do you think those contain them as well?" Zeta asked, pointing at two other crates, one nearing eight feet, the other nearing fifteen. "I don't know. Maybe Xander will know?"

There a muttering somewhere in the distance, Jayce and Zeta immediately rushing to reseal the box. "What are you doing back here?" asked a Navy sailor, his rank indicating he was an Ensign. He immediately noticed Zeta. "Oh, my apologies, Ma'am," he corrected. She waved it off, and the sailor glanced curiously between Jayce and Zeta. "Just looking, sailor. Back to it. Keep an eye out for intruders," she stated. He stood at attention before quickly walking away.

Jayce and Zeta let out a sigh of relief the moment he disappeared. "Too close," Jayce muttered, Zeta quickly nodding in agreement. "We need to find them, and quickly. We can worry about whatever these statues are later," he then said. "Where do we start?" Zeta asked, glancing around nervously. "We have no way of guessing where they've gone. They could be anywhere." A voice cleared itself through a speaker. "This is a shipwide announcement, could Lieutenant Vao please make her way up to the main deck," stated the easily recognisable voice of Xander. Jayce and Zeta glanced at each other. "Gods I love him," Jayce stated. "Let's go. I hope Ordo heard that."

They made their way quickly up to the main deck, and, to their immediate joy, they found Ordo and Xander waiting for them. "Nice idea," Jayce said quietly, the group moving quickly to a quiet area of the main deck, out of sight of the many workers and Navy. "Fortunately the crew were most amenable. In case you haven't noticed, there's an antimagic field covering the entire ship," Xander stated. "We noticed," Zeta replied.

"We also found the supplies," Jayce said. "The second cargo hold, more than enough, but we can't use our bottomless bags. Did you find its source?" Jayce asked. Xander shook his head, glancing towards Ordo. To all their joy, Ordo pulled out a manifest from under his shirt. "No, but I have a clue. It's only in the worst spot we could hope for," he said, opening up the book to show an outline

of the ship. He pointed straight to the middle of the ship, in a special room marked as 'classified'. "Well that makes things easy," Jayce muttered.

"Doesn't it just," Ordo said with a grin, handing the book to Xander. "Given it has to cover the entire ship, it makes the most sense for it to be in the direct centre. It's probably very heavily guarded. And the item itself must be immensely powerful to have a such a radius," he said. Jayce nodded in agreement. "Well, the antimagic field prevents Zeta from charming us inside, so I think we should split up again. One team gets ready to grab as many supplies as possible, the others disable the antimagic field," Jayce suggested.

"The moment it goes down there'll probably be an alarm, we won't have long," Ordo stated. "I'll go with Zeta, just in case there are any locks that need cracking," Xander said. "Okay, that leaves us to find a way in, take out the guards and disable the system. Once you have the supplies, we'll meet at the base of the stairs to the first cargo hold. If you can avoid detection, do so. If you have a way out, take it," Jayce stated to Xander and Zeta, before glancing at Ordo. The group nodded in agreement. "Good luck."

Following Ordo's map, he and Jayce headed quickly along the top deck to a small set of stairs leading downwards. They walked close together, Ordo leading the way with a gruff and official look on his face. The few workers wandering around quickly disappeared as they got deeper inside the belly of the ship, replaced by an alarming increase in patrolling Navy sailors. Still, no one stopped them, or questioned them, as they passed.

The entire journey went uninterrupted, their destination quickly arriving in front of them. They found themselves in a long corridor, alone, apart from two guards stood outside of the metal door they needed to go through. The corridor was quite cramped, neither tall nor wide, and the guards were clearly very bored. Ordo and Jayce glanced at each other, Ordo giving a nod of a reassurance before Jayce took the lead.

"Evening," said the guards as Jayce and Ordo walked past them. Jayce nodded to them, stopping in his tracks, a few paces after passing them. Ordo stopped a little further away and looked at him with a confused expression. "Hey, did you two see what caused that explosion?" Jayce asked, stepping closer towards them. "No, but we heard it even in here. Captain's been waiting for something to happen."

"Ah, I see. It's been a pretty boring assignment, I was hoping to get to see some action," Jayce stated. The guards both nodded, relaxing slightly as they stood. "Tell me about it," muttered one, glancing away to look down the corridor. The moment he did, Jayce threw a Focus-enhanced punch to his jaw, Ordo leaping on the signal and doing the same. Both guards crumpled, Jayce wasting no time to open the door before stepping inside, Ordo close behind him.

A large, blue, glowing orb, the size of a head, floated in the middle of the room. It was made of a strange bronze, with rings that span around it, a clear handle exposed at the top that acted as a sort of lever. Wasting no time, Jayce stepped towards the device, only for the door to slam shut behind them, a loud sigh coming from the corner. "You know, as much as I love my gut to be right, I would have preferred a nice smooth trip," said a figure, emerging from the corner of the room.

He was alone, a blue Captain's uniform covering his body. "But, I must admit, of all of the people I thought would try to attack a Titan, I was not expecting you, Senior Instructor," he said, looking directly towards Ordo. He held a pistol in one hand, pointed at Jayce, a sabre in his other. "Do I know you?" Ordo asked. "Hmm, I guess you've had a lot of students over the years," he stated, disappointedly. "Anyway, on your knees. Both of you. You may be an Old Dog, and you may be an Exarga, but I'm a Navy Captain. You don't stand a chance against me. I don't blame you for forgetting me, Instructor, I never really paid any attention to your lessons."

"I'm not surprised," Ordo stated, his weapon stored in his bottomless bag. "All of my students call me Chief. Now!" he yelled, lunging forwards towards the Captain. Jayce leapt towards the device as a gunshot rang out, grabbing the handle at the top and slamming it down into the device, the rings contracting and the glow subsiding as the device turned off. He glanced back towards Ordo, blood dripping down his legs as he backed away holding his side, the Captain's pistol thrown across the room.

"Ordo!" Jayce yelled, the old man narrowly ducking under a swing of the Captain's sabre. He threw the antimagic generator to Ordo, Sola and Luna extending out into a pair of longswords as he took his place. "You okay?" Jayce called back. "Hurts like a bastard! But yeah, I'll live," he answered quickly, tucking the antimagic generator into his bottomless bag, before grunting as he pulled out his own weapon.

"For now," stated the Captain, standing between the pair and their exit. "I've got this, worry about yourself," Jayce stated, advancing cautiously on the Captain. Ordo nodded, putting his weapon away before he began to fish inside his wound for the bullet. The Captain's eyes widened with horror as he spotted Ordo digging in his wound, Jayce taking the opportunity to swing. The Captain blocked one strike, ducking away from the other, before swinging with a flurry of quick slashes.

As he watched the blade come towards him, his entire body feeling light as he fought in Focus, he noticed the Captain glowing, his blade covered in blue flames. Jayce blocked a strike, pushing back against the blade and temporarily throwing the Captain off-balance. He seized upon the chance: shoulder-charging the Captain. He then swung, Sola and Luna merging together into a copy of Ordo's club, carrying the heavy weapon through the Captain. The Captain slammed against the wall, crumpling, his sword bouncing across the floor.

"Well done," Ordo stated, patting Jayce on the shoulder as he went to the door, opening it and peeking outside. The guards were on the floor groaning as they rubbed their jaws. "Come on, we need to go," Ordo stated, snapping Jayce out of his Focus as he stood panting over the Captain's unconscious body. "Right," Jayce responded, Sola and Luna melting away back onto his wrists before he hurried after Ordo.

They ran to begin with, slowing down as an alarm began to bellow throughout the ship. Using their disguises, they blended in as they stepped onto the main deck, only for Ordo to falter as they walked, a sizeable amount of blood soaking his trousers. "Hang on," Jayce said to him quietly. "Zeta, Xander, Ordo's injured, come to us. Left side, heading towards the stern," he said into his communicator, throwing Ordo's arm over his shoulder as they began to limp in the shadows towards the back of the ship. "Right, we've got what we needed. On our way," came a response from Zeta.

The darkness of the night helped hide them from the rapidly searching patrols. Searchlights scanned the ship and the waters around, but due to the large amount of machinery on the top of the Titan there was more than enough cover to hide behind. "How bad is it?" Jayce asked Ordo quietly, taking a moment to check over the hole in his side and helping to put pressure on it. "Not great, I'll live, but blood loss is making me woozy. How pissed will the Doc be if I use a potion?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Are any organs hit? Scar tissue could cause more problems than it'll solve."
"I know, I know. I don't think any have been hit, I'm going to take one," Ordo said, reaching into his bag and pulling out one of the many healing potions that Yuthura had brewed for them. "Bottoms up," he said quietly, chugging the drink before pointing at two figures moving quickly through the shadows. Ordo grit his teeth as his flesh knitted together to seal the hole, nodding to Zeta and Xander as they joined the pair.

"You okay?" Xander asked Ordo, helping him to his feet. Ordo nodded, looking at his new and fresh scar. "Bloody antimagic field. First time I've been shot in decades! On your lead, Jayce, I'm good to go." Jayce nodded in acknowledgement, pointing to the nearby edge of the ship. "We jump, swim until they're out of sight and then get on the Last Card," he stated, taking his bottomless bag off his belt and shoving it inside his backpack. Zeta groaning before nodding and doing the same along with Xander and Ordo. "Strip off once you hit the water, Navy uniform is designed like an anchor," Ordo warned.

"Let's go!" Jayce ordered, running quickly for the edge before leaping over it. The wind rushed past him as he fell, the ocean below was invisible in the darkness of the night, and he shut his eyes unconsciously. His feet hit first, the coldness racing through him. Immediately the air raced out of him, his body desperate to take in a breath as he found himself underwater, in complete darkness. Three other splashes echoed around him, but as he fought to get control over his panic, his clothes dragged him downwards.

He couldn't breathe, he couldn't see, he could only feel coldness, but a sharp pain quickly filled his head as Sola and Luna began to complain. Their chitters bought him a moment to regain himself and he commanded Luna to change into a copy of Vexx's knife. Using the blade he cut open his belt, dropping his anchor-like parachute trousers and kicking off his boots before he pulled himself to the surface.

Jayce took in a huge gasp of air, shock racing through his body as he immediately released it and went for another breath, but a feeling of fear met him from below. Fighting against his body, Jayce dove back down, entering into Focus and using his eyes to spot Zeta as she sank. He dragged his way to her, cutting her free and pushing her upwards with his body before moving over to Xander and then Ordo. As he went to follow them, his body froze up, unable to fight against the lack of air and the deep coldness around him. As he began to sink into the darkness, a hand grabbed his backpack from behind, dragging him upwards.

With another deep gasp of air, Jayce glanced towards Xander, his rescuer, as the others began to float, allowing their bodies a chance to adapt, as the Titan and the fleet sailed onwards into the night. "Too close," Zeta chattered, once the shock had settled. "Agreed," Xander chuckled. "Next time we strip before jumping." "Next time?" Jayce questioned, fighting against the waves to keep afloat. There were a few laughs as the group realised they had succeeded.

Once happy that the fleet was well and truly out of sight, Jayce reached underneath his backpack, pulling out the glass bottle containing the Last Card and releasing their escape ship. They clambered on board, adjusting the sails and getting the ship moving east, before stripping naked and burying themselves in the countless blankets onboard. Once they had warmed themselves up, Jayce reached inside his backpack, all the more grateful that it was waterproof and sealed as he pulled out his dry bottomless bag and took out a map from within. After guessing their rough position by tracing the route the Titan would have taken, Jayce angled the ship towards their rendezvous point before locking the wheel.

"Do we know the range of our communicators?" Zeta asked, as she sipped a cup of tea, now wearing her original clothes but still buried underneath her blankets. "Still untested, but at least a few kilometres. We'll only be able to reach the others once we get close to the rendezvous," Xander clarified, handing Jayce a cup of mint tea with some honey in it. "Well, get comfortable, we have a few hours at least. I've turned the lights off on the main deck apart from the forward-facing ones so we should remain relatively undetectable. Get some sleep, I'll wake you when I need to switch," Jayce stated, dressing into his clothes before carrying his blankets towards the stairs leading to the main deck.

"I'll take next watch," Ordo said, sitting up from the bench he was laying on. "Piss off," Jayce said with a laugh. "You got shot, you've earned your sleep. All of you have. I'll wake one of you when needed." They nodded in acknowledgment, getting comfortable on the benches in the small cabin of the Last Card. Jayce returned to the wheel, pulling up a seat next to it and turning on a torch as he pulled out a book and glanced up at the stars.

Jayce let his crew sleep long into the morning as they recovered from their previous escapades, but eventually, one by one, they trickled out onto the main deck. The seas were open, only a few islands visible in the far distance as they sailed. "How far are we?" Ordo asked, taking the wheel from Jayce as he yawned

and went to have another cup of coffee. "I assume those are the Daisy Chain Islands," Jayce yawned as he returned, rubbing his eyes. "So another hour or so."

"Should we look at what we stole?" Ordo then asked. Zeta and Xander glanced at each before looking at the main deck. "Probably not," Xander stated, Jayce and Ordo both frowning. "We stole so much that we'd probably sink the ship," Zeta grinned. "How much did you take?" Jayce immediately asked. Zeta and Xander exchanged a few silent words. "Well, we split up. Xander raided the fridges and freezers, whilst I looted the grains, fruit, and veg. I got a little more than twenty crates, give or take. How many did you manage to break into?" she asked Xander. "I cleaned out six. Lots of meat, lots of cheese, and other things. They're going to be pissed once they realise what we took." Jayce burst into laughter, holding his mug to the sky. "To a successful raid and a future feast!"

"Hello, hello? Jayce, Zeta, anyone?" came a voice through their communicator a while later, the Stacked Hand barely in view on the horizon. "We're here!" Jayce responded, angling the Last Card towards them. "We've heard the good news already. Welcome home!" Marisha stated. Jayce and the others glanced at each other with surprise, but they decided to leave it for later. They pulled up alongside the Stacked Hand, putting everything they had used away before attaching the winch to the back of the Last Card. The Stacked Hand reeled the small vessel back into its usual position in the nook near the rear of the ship as Jayce and the others climbed on board.

"Welcome home!" Bjorn stated, slapping Jayce on the back as the crew gathered around excitedly. Zeta and Xander headed to an open area of the deck before they emptied out their bottomless bags, the deck immediately getting covered by large stacks of crates as well as their other personal possessions. "I think it might be a nice idea to have loot bags, or something similar," Jayce suggested to Tempest, Ordo reaching into his own bottomless bag and pulling out the antimagic generator. "I shall get to work, Captain," Tempest stated, immediately getting distracted by the strange device they had retrieved.

RK slowly began to move the large crates one by one to better positions across the deck, Bjorn, Xander, Ordo and Jayce helping as well, but having to share the load between them. "How did you know we were successful?" Jayce asked as they moved a crate. "The transceiver picked up a distress signal from the Titan, as well as a response. It said one of the Navy Captains aboard had been injured and defeated by Jayce Exarga, and that Old Dog Ordo had been spotted aiding him. I doubt we are the only ones to have intercepted it, so prepare for a news

report later today. Now let's take a look at what we've got," Marisha said excitedly.

They pried open the crates, looking inside at the countless food supplies before moving over to the large bags of meats, cheeses, and other fresh goods that Xander had taken. As Marisha went back and forth with a checklist, Jayce spotted Yuthura scolding Ordo as she looked over his injury. He looked almost bashful as she told him off before dragging him away for a proper examination. "This'll do. This will more than do us!" Marisha declared, the crew cheering - until she selected volunteers to help move the supplies to proper storage.

"Bjorn, probably best we head as far east as we can, if a Rear-Admiral has been sent to investigate we should probably not be anywhere nearby," Jayce stated. Bjorn nodded in agreement. "On it. Go get some rest. You've earned it, Jayce." Jayce smiled, walking with him to the wheel before stepping onwards into his quarters. He clambered into his bed, a strong sense of relief rolling through him. As he thought about the consequences, he couldn't help but grin, inevitably picturing the scolding he would get from his mother, and from Alara.

Seize the Seas Tales: Rewards in Many Different Forms

Jayce was awoken a while later by a soft knock at the door. "Come in," he groaned, rolling over and untinting the windows with his ring. Wicke stuck her head through the doorway. "Hey, lunch is ready. I think the Capital's news report is also about to come out," she said softly. He nodded, rubbing his eyes before standing up. "Okay, I'm coming. Thank you." She smiled, shutting the door behind her.

After splashing his face, he made his way down to the living quarters, only to find Caelie and RK sat outside the door, staring at a red, black, and gold axe on the floor. There was a spark of red lightning, the axe disappearing only to be replaced by a wide selection of sweets, ice cream, and other desserts. She grinned to herself, only to immediately spot Jayce observing her. "Is that everything you wanted? I can write another letter," Jayce told her. She nodded, grabbing him in a tight hug, and Jayce wasn't quite certain as to what she actually meant by that.

He just smiled, helping to pick up the goods and carry them into the living quarters, before winking to RK as the giant rokken sat observing. Marisha had created a feast, using all manner of vegetables, meats, and cheeses to create an assortment of platters. "Dig in," she told the drooling crew, Tempest absent as usual. The food tasted beyond spectacular, a sprinkling of success only making

it taste even better. The conversation flowed as always, but eventually Wicke called out for the group to quieten as she turned up the radio.

"Last night's daring raid on the Eastern Titan has been confirmed to have been orchestrated by the Rising Aces. Details are still being revealed as to exactly what they took and as to how they managed to successfully rob such a well-guarded ship. It has been confirmed that the Rising Aces injured multiple members of the crew, including Captain Visco, a Navy Captain assigned to escorting the ship, during the break-in."

"After the Ace's raid on the Navy Citadel, and their subsequent violent escape, many have been left wondering as to how the group of Pirates were able to enter such a well-guarded facility so unopposed. New discoveries have come to light, presenting an answer that we were all afraid of. The Rising Aces have been aided by an inside figure, one who has previously served the Empire for many years. They are now joined by Vance Ordo, a member of the Old Dogs. We reached out to the Navy for further word as to why he could be aiding the group, but they declined to answer."

Jayce glanced towards Ordo, nodding to him. "Well that's sorted that out," Ordo said, only to be immediately shushed. "Due to the Rising Aces increased criminal activity, and the fact that they were able to defeat a Navy Captain, new advice has been given out. Follow their demands, and report any sightings to the authorities. They are armed and dangerous, do not engage. New bounties have also been declared."

The crew listened to their new bounties, once again sharply increasing from their previous amount across the board. It now also included Ordo, with the highest amount amongst them at twenty-five thousand, with Jayce sitting just below that at twenty-two thousand. "You weren't wrong about a sharp increase," Bjorn muttered, astonished by his amount at twenty thousand. "We were severely undervalued, protected by Jayce's parents most likely. We attacked the Capital, and stole from the Emperor, this seems about right," Marisha clarified, rubbing her head.

"In other news, riots have broken out on the islands near Lavender Grove. Warnings have been issued, but the riots are continuing, with the local baned being the mob's main targets. Avoid the islands at all costs," continued the news anchor. Jayce raised an eyebrow, glancing towards Bjorn as he sat growling. "Is that the first we've heard of this?" Jayce asked. Marisha shook her head, before indicating for Wicke to turn off the radio. "I intercepted a message this morning.

Church and Navy are being dispatched to the islands, they're locking them down."

"Locking them down?" Ordo questioned. "A riot has a cause, a trigger, it only needs isolating. There's no need to lockdown multiple islands, let alone to do so using the Navy and the Church. It's standard for the Marines to go." Jayce frowned. "Could it be a disguise?" he questioned, Bjorn raising his head. "Potentially, I wouldn't be surprised if they're using it as a distraction," Ordo stated. "Jayce, if they're lynching baned to hide something, we can't just sit by," Bjorn stated.

"Agreed," stated Xander, several other members of the crew nodding in agreement. "I agree. If they're hiding something this desperately it must be important. It could be another Warlock. If it is, we can't let them repeat what they did in Deadman's Run. How far away are we?" Jayce asked, looking towards Falconer. "We are already on route, it is on our path to the Mysts, but we are at least a week, if not more, away," he answered, stroking his chin as he thought. "Then we speed up. People are dying. If the Navy's not going to do anything then it's down to us. Let's find out what the Church is hiding and stop whoever is creating the riots," Jayce declared.

Chapter 74: A Crossing of Blades

Jayce awoke to a loud banging on his door. "Jayce, I've intercepted another message. The riots moved on to Lavender Grove yesterday. Shall we alter course?" asked Marisha, through his door. It took Jayce a moment to process what she had said, but after wiping the dust from his eyes, and scrambling to his door, he remembered what was going on. "Right, yeah, do it," he said, opening his bedroom door in his underwear. Marisha smirked before nodding. "Aye Cap'," she said with a mocking salute, before glancing towards Bjorn as he stood behind the wheel. "We'll be there early afternoon. Put some clothes on," Bjorn stated, spinning the wheel to the right.

Jayce struggled to concentrate throughout the entire morning. His mind continued to race, his curiosity unleashed, as well as his acknowledgment of the sheer anger that radiated off of Bjorn. As he wandered from room to room, he observed his various crewmates as they prepared for what lay ahead. Zeta and Marisha were listening out for information - Zeta on the radio, Marisha on her transceiver, Xander was making last minute modifications to weapons, Yuthura was brewing all manner of concoctions and putting them in vials and syringes. Even the ever-calm Falconer seemed on edge. The only person who wasn't, was Ordo.

"Take a moment to steady yourself," he advised, as he watched Jayce walk past for the third time, as he stood on the main deck. "This is our first potential encounter with the Church since Deadman's Run. We had Vexx back then, we don't have him now," Jayce stated, continuing to pace back and forth. "I've heard a lot about this Vexx guy. As much as you praise him, he seems to have been equally a loose cannon. I've only been told about your fight against the Church Warlock in Deadman's Run, but there is no question you're a lot stronger than back then. And there's more of us," Ordo rationalised.

Jayce stopped in his tracks, letting out a sigh before nodding and shaking himself off. "There is also no guarantee that anything is going on. Their activities are undeniably suspicious, but it could just be a baned purge. It wouldn't be the Church's first." Again, Jayce nodded in agreement; there was no telling what could be going on, only that they were sailing straight into danger. "Right, but we are going to put a stop to these riots, one way or another," Jayce clarified. Ordo nodded. "Are you certain you're ready to follow through with that? Even if it means killing?"

Jayce faltered. He had killed before, back in the arena, and as much as Yuthura and Marisha said otherwise, his unwillingness to make a decision killed the prisoners held by the Serpent. "What do you mean?" Jayce asked. Ordo stood up straight. "Mobs are usually just people. Normal, ordinary people caught up in a need to fit in. These people likely aren't thinking, or they're too afraid to stand out. Either way, there is a chance they will target us, target Bjorn, and you need to accept that you may be forced to kill in self-defence - that there won't be a choice."

"There's always a choice," Jayce stated, shaking his head. Ordo let out a sigh before nodding. "I envy being young enough to believe that. I hope you won't ever see that disproven, and I hope it doesn't take losing people you care about. Trust your gut, and don't let today weigh you down, regardless of what happens." "I hope so too, but I'm glad I can count on you to stand by me if I'm wrong." Ordo chuckled, a somewhat hollow expression clouding his eyes. "It's not my first time," he muttered. "Calm your mind, get ready. We're looking to you to lead us."

Jayce followed Ordo's advice, isolating himself in his quarters and concentrating on calming his mind, but eventually a voice snapped him out of his meditation. "We're here," Bjorn stated through his communicator. Jayce stepped out of his quarters, the various other members of the crew emerging onto the main deck to also take a look. Lavender Grove was a large island, mostly covered by a town, decorated by small stone houses. The island had a pair of large harbours, both lined with long piers. The rest of the island was covered in sprawling farmland, mostly hidden by a steady stream of black smoke rising from somewhere in the centre of the town.

"I see three Navy ships," Falconer immediately called out, hopping on to Wren and taking to the air. "Falconer, stay in the air, keep us informed," Jayce ordered through his communicator. A response of acknowledgement came quickly, the rest of the crew assembling as they waited for orders whilst Bjorn continued to sail them closer. "Right, we're going to split up again. One team will stay with the ship. I doubt anyone's going to take notice of us, but keep us ready for a quick getaway. The other team will investigate, we will find the source of the riots, put an end to it, and find out what the Church is up to," Jayce stated.

"All three Navy ships are waving Inquisitor flags, however it appears they are ready to sail onwards. Two have already begun to move, heading southeast and northeast. There is also a Marine ship docked in the distant harbour," Falconer

stated. "Acknowledged," Jayce replied, looking over his crew as he thought on who to choose. "Right, Bjorn, Wicke, Caelie, Yuthura, Ordo and I will go to the island. The rest of you, stay with the ship, Marisha you're in charge. If something goes wrong, get out of here."

The crew split off to grab their gear, Xander taking over from Bjorn at the wheel as they sailed around the island to the less active harbour. Jayce immediately noticed the large Marine ship docked to the side, a strong number of Marines guarding the vessel as others unloaded and loaded cargo. "Do we recognise them?" Bjorn asked Jayce, as the Stacked Hand was hidden away by the various other ships in the harbour. "I don't know. Who's flag has a black wolf on it?" "No idea, but I thought no Marines had been dispatched."

"They hadn't," inserted Marisha, checking the group over as they made their final preparations. "No Marines were dispatched, it's a rogue element." "Then we should treat it as one," Ordo stated, hefting his club over his shoulder. "Come on, let's go already!" Wicke whined, Caelie expressing similar opinions. "Good luck, stay safe," Marisha stated, looking in particular towards Bjorn. The group nodded, heading to the ladder built into the side of the ship and climbing down towards the pier below.

The harbour was almost entirely deserted; the few workers that were around kept well out of the way of the Rising Aces, their heads down, their eyes averted. "I've got a bad feeling about this," muttered Wicke, the excitement now completely erased as the group began to walk through empty streets. "Quiet," Ordo told her, glancing up towards the onlooking windows, most boarded up or with their curtains closed.

They passed by damaged doors, some of which had been broken in, fires in the streets, endless broken glass, but no people. Until they rounded a corner, the vague sounds of chanting echoing in the distance. A shoeless corpse lay in the streets next to a bench, a tree just behind. Jayce and Ordo glanced around, scanning for any onlookers, anyone plotting an ambush, as Yuthura and Bjorn rushed forwards. The body was a baned badger child, early teens at most. Yuthura shook her head, as she shut his eyes, before she glanced up at Bjorn stood next to her.

His fists were clenched, his nails digging into his palms as he growled, only for the creaking of the tree nearby to snap his attention away from the corpse, to another suspended from a rope. Wicke held a hand to her mouth in shock as Caelie grit her teeth. "My Gods," Jayce muttered, noticing droplets of blood on

some of the glass on the streets, clear markings indicating the dragging of bodies further into the town. "Bjorn," Yuthura said quietly to him, as he stared up at the young man in the tree. Bjorn ignored her, slowly stepping forwards and supporting the legs before he glanced back towards Jayce.

Jayce immediately ran forwards and cut the rope wrapped around the tree trunk using Sola, the mimic transforming into a copy of Vexx's dagger before liquidating. Bjorn lay the baned down, the group looking at the pair of corpses in disbelief, shock, and complete and utter anger. "They need to pay," Bjorn said with a deadly quietness, turning towards Jayce. Jayce nodded. "Others were dragged that way, let's hurry."

"These foul demons have been send to poison us, they have tainted the earth, ruined the crops, brought misfortune to us all!" clamoured a Priest, amongst a crowd in the town square, nearly a hundred in number. "We're going to need back up, Commander," Astris said, glancing towards Alara as she, Wulf, Riley, Witchford, Brett and a few other Marines stood facing the mob, their weapons drawn. "They're going to need backup!" snarled Wulf, Riley's face white with a similar fury.

"Even now they have summoned sinners to aid them! Look, one of the demons is amongst them! Will we let them continue to bring disaster?" asked the Priest to the crowd. "No! Death to the unholy!" yelled the mob, the crowd armed mostly with kitchen knives and farming tools. "They're turning on us!" warned Astris, Alara still frozen as she looked at the overwhelming size of the mob. "Alara, snap out of it!" Astris said, elbowing her.

Alara blinked, shaking her head, and steadying the grip on her glaive. "This is your last warning! Disband, throw down your weapons! We do not want to hurt you!" Alara yelled, steeling herself. A few members of the crowd glanced at the various weapons the squad were wielding, a few even backing away, but the Priest burst into laughter. A few members of the mob joined in, their laughter spreading into a mad cacophony. "Hollow words. This is a crusade! We are on the side of the Gods themselves," he yelled.

Alara's eyes widened as a figure slowly made his way through the crowd behind the Priest. He was huge, the many eyes widening as he strolled through the mob unopposed. The Priest frowned as the Marines stared in horror at the giant baned, his face twisted in pure hatred, his eyes burning with rage. "What are you-?" began the Priest, his words contorting into an ungodly scream. The baned

picked him up, resting the Priest's torso sideways onto his knee, before digging his claws into the Priest's waist and pulling in two different directions.

Bjorn threw the two halves of the Priest to the side, standing back up to full height and looking down at the terrified Marines in front of him. "I would get reinforcements, this is going to get ugly," he warned, drawing his axes. "Death to the unholy!" yelled a female voice from somewhere amongst the mob. "For the Pope, for the Church!" came another voice, the mob surging forwards as Bjorn roared, swinging with his axes.

Chaos erupted in all directions, the mob swallowing Bjorn completely before turning on the group of Marines at the edge. "Orders?" Astris asked. "Get reinforcements!" Alara ordered, pointing at the Marines escorting the command squad; they raced off immediately. "Engage!" Alara yelled, Riley's sniper rifle ringing out, Wulf yelling as he swung with his sword through a farmer wielding a hoe.

The group stuck close together, Riley and Witchford firing shot after shot with their rifles, but Astris stood frozen, unable to fire. These were civilians, riled up by a Priest. A Priest had caused this? She couldn't comprehend it all, her mind racing as she thought back to all of the kind people she had grown up with, people just like those in the mob. "Astris, cover me!" Riley yelled, leaping backwards as a group advanced on her. She shook it off, opening fire. Her friends came first.

Alara pushed back a pair of cultists, both wielding sharpened poles - they staggered back, but as she went to swing she caught herself: these were civilians, they weren't trained like she was. Then a young woman stabbed her in the shoulder. She screamed in pain as the blade pierced her armour plating, swinging her polearm with a thunk into the woman's temple. She dropped, immediately disappearing into the crush as others stood on her.

"Commander, are you alright?" Witchford asked, switching to his dromon and stepping forwards. Alara nodded, pulling the knife out and throwing it to the side before pulling out a bandage and wrapping it tightly over the wound. Her arm screamed at her as she took hold of her polearm with both hands again, stepping forwards to provide support. "Going wide!" she yelled, the other melee fighters falling back as Alara concentrated, Focus racing through her body as she began to sweep with her glaive.

She opened up the stomachs of a row of cultists in front of her, the group untrained to protect themselves from her sweeping slashes. Alara then began to push forwards, her Marines backing her up. She stepped over bodies, some still alive, the rest just corpses she had created, the stone slick with blood. She split a young man in two, her glaive slipping in her gloves as the weapon became coated in gore. "Swap!" she yelled, falling back and letting Wulf and the others take over.

Jayce concentrated as he cut his way through the cultists, extending his presence outwards as he searched. He could feel them, somewhere, a small group full of fear. Another cultist interrupted him, a young boy, sixteen at most, holding a pitchfork. He lunged at Jayce, but Jayce just slammed Sola and Luna together, the pair joining together and extending outwards to form a spear that the cultist ran straight into. His pitchfork clattered to the ground as he hung there, choking on his own blood with the spear imbedded in his neck. Jayce met his eyes: they were full of fear, uncertainty. "I'm sorry," Jayce said quietly through the chaos, the light fading from the boy's eyes.

More approached him, Sola and Luna transforming back into sword form as he turned to face them. They were endless, and Jayce continued to cut them down. His heart pounding in his ears as their strikes came closer and closer to hitting him. He continued to swing, to stab, to slash, yelling as he powered onwards through the chaos. "Woah!" Ordo said, as he blocked Jayce's swords. "Don't let it consume you, adrenaline is one hell of a drug!" Ordo warned, as they put their backs together, fighting in unison. "Right, sorry!" Jayce called back, charging forwards.

He steadied himself, concentrating back on the feeling of fear emanating from somewhere up ahead. He raced onwards, cutting a bloody swathe through the crowd, his enemies stampeding to get away from him as he emanated a feeling of Panic. Finally, he found them. The surviving baned sat bound near the centre of the square, eight of them in total, all manner of kinds, all manner of ages. They stared up at him in terror - blood covering his body, his eyes full of rage - but as Sola transformed into a small knife and he began to cut them loose, the sense of fear faded.

"Hey there," Jayce said, glancing backwards to ensure Ordo was covering his back, Wicke and Caelie emerging from the chaos to join them. "You're safe, we're going to get you out of here," he reassured, cutting the last baned free before standing up. A feeling of dread passed through him, and Jayce quickly stepped

to the side, a bolt of green light striking the stone behind him. "Wicke!" Jayce yelled, pointing to a feminine figure stood cloaked amongst the mob holding a broom and a wand. Wicke quickly began to the chant, the Witch's eyes growing wide before she took to the air riding a broom. She didn't get far - a spear of shadow impaled her from behind and she fell somewhere into the crowd.

"Nice shot!" Ordo yelled, giving Wicke a thumbs up before he sent a cultist flying. "Wicke, clear a path for these people to get out!" Jayce ordered, turning back to the group of terrified baned. "When you see an opening, run. Stay together and find somewhere to hide, then lock the door," he told them, the group nodding. As he turned back to his crew, a hand grabbed his arm. "Thank you," said a young woman. Jayce just nodded, pointing towards Wicke as she finished chanting, a ball of blue fire in her hands. "Hellfire!" she screamed, unleashing a stream of blue fire through the crowd. All caught in its wake were consumed, reduced to ashes in seconds, but a path was created, the baned charging forwards and running to safety.

With the baned free and fleeing, Jayce turned his attention to crowd, looking desperately for any signs of Yuthura or Bjorn. An explosion of purple smoke erupted in the distance, and Jayce could just barely see a pair of white, round, furry ears over the top of the mob, not too far from the explosion. "We're moving!" Jayce ordered, pointing in the direction. Caelie nodded, mirroring his pointing, her three black skeletons moving forwards to clear a path.

"Unholy demon!" screeched a woman as she charged at Caelie, wielding an axe. Caelie backed away, chanting quickly before she lunged forwards, pressing both palms to the woman's waist. The cultist fell to her knees, her mouth open, her eyes rolled back into her head. "What did you just do?" Jayce asked Caelie, stepping forwards to protect her side. Caelie just shrugged, chanting again, this time several of the various corpses stood up, picking up missing limbs or fallen weapons and turning on the crowd.

It wasn't long before they came to a somewhat open area of the square, a scattering of severed limbs, and foaming bodies indicating that Bjorn and Yuthura had passed through. Accepting this temporary area as a rally point, Jayce nodded to Ordo and Caelie, the three of them concentrating before unleashing a wave of unrestricted rage. Their combined Panic sent the remaining members of the mob scrambling backwards, revealing Bjorn and Yuthura buried within, both bloodied, Bjorn from other people's, Yuthura from her own.

"You two okay?" Jayce immediately asked as they joined up. The pair nodded, both looking exhausted. "Minor injuries, so much pointless death!" Yuthura groaned. Jayce nodded, but a whistle drew his attention, his body already reacting as he swung his sword, deflecting the bullet flying at him. A dark figure slammed him to the side, ploughing onwards into Bjorn, the pair rolling away. Jayce glanced upwards as he rolled to his feet, a glaive swinging quickly towards him.

He deflected it, a female Marine continuing to sweep her weapon towards him as she carried its momentum. Jayce backed away, ducking under the blade as he glanced towards his crew. Yuthura had engaged a woman holding a large rifle, in an instant she twisted to the side, a sniper round sailing past her as she pulled out a rod. The rod extended out into a crossbow, a dart embedding itself into the Marine's leg. She staggered and Yuthura charged forwards before stabbing her with another needle, lowering the Marine to floor and holding her as she began to convulse and foam at the mouth.

Jayce crossed his swords, catching the downwards strike before pushing the glaive upwards in a counter. Wicke had another Marine suspended in the air, her body constricted by invisible tendrils. Bjorn and the wolf baned were throwing fists at each other. The wolf caught one of his strikes, throwing Bjorn over his shoulder, but Bjorn reacted, twisting and putting the baned in a headlock before pinning him to the floor.

Alara continued to swing at the Pirate in front of her, her vision blurry, adrenaline coursing through her. Her strike was pushed upwards, and she staggered backwards, unable to react as the Pirate swung with his swords. He cut straight through her polearm, ruining another of her glaives before tackling her. Her head hit the stone and she lay there dazed, stunned as the swords crossed over her neck, her vision refocusing as she stared up at a familiar face.

"Jayce?" Alara questioned, as he squatted over her, his blades at her throat. Jayce laughed, realising just who he had been fighting. "Stand-down!" Jayce ordered, glancing towards his crew as they held Alara's squad at their mercy. Bjorn stood over Wulf, an axe in hand, his foot on his chest. Yuthura held a foaming Riley. Wicke had Astris bound and floating in the air. Brett sat on his knees in full surrender with three skeletons around him as Caelie stood victoriously in front of him.

As Jayce and Alara glanced towards Witchford, they were both surprised to see that he was stood talking to Ordo, the pair both with their weapons down. "I

don't understand," Witchford said. Ordo nodded, but instead of responding he pointed towards Jayce and the others as they stood victoriously over the Marines. Witchford stood stunned, surprised by the outcome. "It's okay, we do not need to fight," Ordo stated.

Jayce nodded, standing up before offering Alara a hand. She took it, immediately punching him hard in the arm. "You broke my glaive!" she scowled. He held his hands up in apology, Caelie and Bjorn both releasing their captives as well. Yuthura pulled out a syringe, injecting a substance into Riley's mouth. Riley rolled over, immediately throwing up a black viscous liquid, and Yuthura patted her back and gave her comforting words. Wicke remained holding her captive in the air at her mercy. "Wicke, release her!" Jayce ordered. Wicke glanced backwards, a look of irritation on her face before she dropped Astris.

Astris hit the stone hard with a crack, groaning in pain. "Wicke!" scolded Jayce and Alara, Yuthura immediately rushing forwards to check for any damage. "That was unnecessary!" Jayce told her. Wicke just huffed and looked away, crossing her arms before she glanced towards the remainders of the mob. Most had fled, but the few survivors had begun to rally. "Round two?" Bjorn questioned. Another whistle rang out as Alara's reinforcements arrived.

"Throw down your weapons! We will open fire!" echoed a voice in the distance. "Right, that's our cue to leave," Jayce stated, his crew nodding and beginning to leave. Alara grabbed him, stopping him in his path. "Where do you think you're going?" she demanded. "Come on, my people will handle this. We need to talk," she stated, pointing onwards to a street. "We can't be seen together," Jayce warned. "Commander, I don't think this is a good idea," Astris advised, pushing Yuthura away from her before clutching her wrist. "Let's go already!" Alara insisted, dragging Jayce away, his crew, and hers, following in tow.

Jayce stopped as soon as they left the square, Wicke taking the opportunity to clean the group of their blood and gore using her magic. Jayce and the others then took out cloaks from their bottomless bags, covering themselves with a quick disguise. "Brett, go tell our people we're okay," Alara ordered. He went to complain, but she glared at him, and he silenced, nodding before racing away. "Come on, this way."

Alara led them through the streets, the group uncertain of each other and splitting into two distinct halves, until she found what she was looking for. They stopped in front of an inn, surprisingly still open. Alara dragged Jayce inside, the pair heading straight to the main desk. "Two of the largest rooms you have,"

Alara ordered. The innkeeper immediately sprang into action, handing over two keys. "Pay him," she then ordered, turning to Jayce. He let out a sigh, following her commands. With a smile, Alara took the two keys, handing one over to Astris.

"Get as much information out of them as you can, give nothing away," Alara told her. "Bjorn do the same, don't hide anything," Jayce stated, as Alara began to pull him up the stairs. "Where are you going?" Wicke asked, only for a collective sigh to come from the rest of the group as Alara unlocked a door and shoved Jayce inside. The two groups then looked at each other, uncertain as to what exactly they were meant to do.

Seize the Seas Tales: Broken Ideals

Fortunately their room was a little further away, but it was not designed for nine people. The four Marines and the five Pirates sat spread across the three bunkbeds in an uncomfortable silence. Astris sat holding her wrist, a pained expression on her face as she glanced across the group in front of her. She flinched as Yuthura stood up. "Quit fussing and let me help, you silly child," Yuthura scolded, pulling out her red stone and beginning to chant before taking her wrist. Astris shut her eyes and looked away, but the pain subsided, disappearing entirely. She glanced back, Yuthura holding her own limp wrist before she cracked it and it straightened.

"Thank you," Astris said quietly. Yuthura nodded, heading back to her side of the room. Silence followed, Caelie pulling all manner of faces towards Riley as they sat on opposite top bunks. Riley returned the expressions before glancing towards Yuthura with earnt fear. "So," Bjorn said at last, too big to sit in the bed. "So," mirrored Wulf, barely fitting in his. Silence returned once more, before Witchford turned to Ordo.

"Why did you betray the Empire?" Witchford asked Ordo, as he sat next to him on the middle bed. "The Empire betrayed me, son, I didn't want to, but this is the hand I was dealt," Ordo admitted. "I sacrificed most of my life to serve. The chance at love, my family, and the Navy didn't like that I didn't agree with their views, so they chewed me up and spat me out. I owe my life to my new crew." "The Empire wouldn't..." Witchford stated, softening out as he looked down.

"There were Priests amongst the mob, brought here by the Navy," Riley stated, shaking her head. "They weren't Priests," Bjorn said. "The one I tore in half-" "Nice job by the way," Wulf admitted, his own hatred for the Church never hidden. Bjorn nodded. "He didn't have a scripture, all Priests carry one. Bishops

have spell books, but he should have had at least a pamphlet. Deacons only carry loose papers, so... the point being, he was a Warlock."

"There were also Daughters of Shade, Witches. I killed one," Wicke stated. "I shot someone with a wand," Riley confirmed. "They had a broom flying above them, but it fell out of the sky once I killed them." Astris stared between the two groups, surprised by how comfortable Riley, Wulf, and Witchford had become. "What are you doing here?" she interrupted, staring directly at Bjorn, sensing he was the closest thing to a leader. "We heard no one was helping the baned: that the Empire had condemned them to be lynched. We weren't going to let that happen."

"So you came out of altruism, is that why you robbed a Titan, sunk a bridge at the Capital?" Astris challenged, turning her attention towards Wicke. Wicke grit her teeth, glaring at Astris. Bjorn stood up, but Caelie slid off the top bunk, landing onto his shoulders and pulling his ears. "The Titan was a necessity, the bridge excessive, but done in order to save us," Ordo stated. "We broke into the Titan for food, and we broke into the Citadel to retrieve my personal belongings." "You can't believe we're stupid enough to believe you broke into the Citadel to get your things?" Wulf stated. Ordo just laughed.

"It's the truth. However, we are here for more than just altruism, that is also true." "The Church are hiding something. They're using the riots as cover to search for something. At least that's what we believe," Wicke stated. Riley swung her leg down towards Wulf. "Ow," he complained, rubbing his nose, but he realised what she meant. Wulf let out a sigh, glancing towards Astris. She nodded. "We thought the same. The Navy locked down an area near the church on the island. We're not certain, but even we're not supposed to go there."

"Well... breaking into things has become a recently discovered speciality of ours," Bjorn stated, glancing towards Astris' hand as she gently fiddled with her necklace, the symbol of the Church immediately obvious. She caught his gaze, realising what she was doing and immediately putting it away. "I'm not saying I believe that something evil is going on, but something suspicious certainly is," Astris said, immediately sensing anger from Wulf, Riley, and Bjorn. "The actions of the Priest, Warlock, whatever, were horrible. They were entirely in the wrong, but that can't have been planned by the Church... they're good people. Kind people who... who care. The Church wouldn't do something like this."

"Then let us prove it to you," Yuthura stated. "Hold your belief close to you, but don't blind yourself clutching to it. Help us discover what's really going on."

Astris looked down, eventually nodding. "Commander?" Witchford questioned. "We'll wait for Commander Vanathur to give the go ahead, but too much has happened to turn back. We'll help you, Rising Aces, but you follow our methods, and if the Church is innocent, you turn yourselves in. Agreed?" Astris proposed. Bjorn stepped forwards, Astris standing up to meet him. She was only just above five foot, whereas Bjorn was seven-and-a-half feet tall, so she stared right up at him. "Fine. We'll prove to you what the Church really is," he stated, shaking her hand, right hand to right hand.

Chapter 75: An Uneasy Truce

They couldn't quite believe what had just happened, but, as Alara lay with her head on Jayce's chest and he lay with his arms around her, they were both glad that chance had reunited them. They lay there silently for quite a while, unsure of what to say to each other now that there was nothing rushing them. "So..." Jayce said quietly. "So..." repeated Alara, listening to his fluttering heartbeat with her eyes shut. More silence followed until Jayce eventually noticed the bloody bandage on Alara's arm. "Are you hurt?" he asked, attempting to sit up only for her to push him back down.

"It's not major. It's just a small stab wound. The tip of the blade got through," she said quickly, looking up at him, her eyes meeting his. "Just a small stab wound," he recited, his blue eyes full of worry. "I'll get my Doctor to heal it," he said. She opened her mouth to protest, but she faltered, eventually nodding and accepting the offer. "Okay." She looked past his eyes, eventually spotting a series of scars on his neck and collarbone. "I don't remember those," she said quietly, reaching out and touching the old wounds.

Jayce chuckled. "Yeah, you wouldn't. I got them not long after we arrived at the Capital. Wicke and I needed money, so I entered a challenge in the Imperial Arena. The prize was a lot of money, and ownership. Anyway, I needed to fight and kill a cannibal. The owner tried to assassinate me by releasing seven more," he stated. "You fought cannibals?" Alara asked, sitting up and looking for more scars. "Yeah. Stupidly, I got cocky and tried to win that fight without Wicke's magic, nearly died, these bites and scratches are proof." Alara shook her head, before she pointed to a series of scars on his ribs. "And these?"

"A minotaur in the Ice Floes Dungeon," he answered, to her immediate surprise. "You actually went inside? I didn't believe the reports," she exclaimed. Jayce nodded. "We only just survived, if it wasn't for Vexx... anyway, the minotaur broke my ribs," he said, reaching out with his hand and brushing her face. She shook it off, glancing at a small scar on the outside of his hand. Gently she held his hand, looking at it. "Ah, that was from when Caelie first joined us. She didn't approve of the concept of sharing food," he said with a grin, before flipping over his other hand and showing four small puncture marks. "And this was from Bjorn: the first time Marisha cooked us a meal that actually tasted good."

Alara shook her head, smiling softly as she tried to mask her worry. Jayce saw through the façade, nodding to himself before rolling over. Unconsciously Alara let out a gasp, horrified by the deep marks across his back. "It's okay," he said

softly, his face resting on a pillow. Slowly she reached out, touching the grooves with the faintest of touches. "Ow!" Jayce yelled loudly, startling her before grinning. "You asshole!" she scowled, slapping his back, hard. He continued to laugh, rolling back over before grabbing her in a tight embrace. "How did you get that?" she asked.

"Not long after we left the Capital, we were hunting an unknown creature. It was a wraith, a cursed spirit. When we were fighting it... Vexx... it was an accident. The wraith got me - injured me - and it was a cursed wound... It... it killed me," he said quietly. "It killed you? What do you mean? I don't understand," she immediately asked. "I... died. Only briefly, thirty seconds or so," he said quietly. Alara lay in his arms, stunned, uncertain of what to say. "I'm okay," Jayce reassured. "They found Yuthura, and she treated me, it was also how I learnt magic."

"You know magic?" Alara asked, with barely a whisper. Jayce chanted quietly, eventually clicking his fingers to produce a small flame. He made it disappear as she reached out to touch it, and she turned back to look at him. "You've changed so much," she said quietly, a sad expression on her face as she sat up, wrapping the duvet around her. "We both have... Commander," he said, reaching out and pinching her exposed toe. She kicked his fingers off, hiding her foot back beneath the safety of the covers. "It doesn't have to be a bad thing," Jayce stated. "You're a Pirate! You robbed a Titan for Gods' sake," she stated. Jayce nodded, his face falling. "Yeah, and you're New Era, the Hero of the Marines," he said back. "Oil and water," Alara muttered sadly.

"I don't believe that," Jayce said quietly, shaking his head. She met his eyes, unable to recognise him. "Change is inevitable. We were always going to grow in different ways the moment we left home. I may be a Pirate, you may be a Marine, but that doesn't define us. Not if we don't want it to," he stated. Alara let out a sigh, tucking her head into the duvet to rest on her knees. He looked at her as she hid from him, questioning what he could possibly say. Questioning what common ground they now had.

He didn't have an answer, but slowly she raised her head from her shell. "Why are you here?" she asked, her words quiet and muffled. Jayce grinned, a big, stupid, and familiar smile. "I was looking for you, truthfully. But we heard that baned were being hunted by mobs, and given that the Marines normally deal with riots, yet were not ordered to intervene, we suspected something was going on. We came to find out what that exactly is," Jayce stated. "Why are you here?"

"Similar, well not the first or last part. Baned were being lynched, we couldn't sit by. However we were stonewalled, turned away. So we snuck in," she said.

"Something is going on, that wasn't a Priest and there were Daughters of Shade as well," he said. Alara looked at him curiously. "There are multiple factions in the Church: the Priests, the Paladins, the Sisters, the Daughters of Shade, and the Warlocks," he explained. "There were at least two Daughters of Shade, Witches." Alara nodded. "Riley shot someone with a broom. Wait, what do you think is going on?"

Jayce shrugged. "No idea, but if you were asked to keep away they must be hiding something. Help us find out what," Jayce asked, extending a hand. Alara looked at it, before looking beyond, at him. "Do you still trust me?" he asked. She thought to herself before she reached out and took his hand. "Of course I do," she answered. He pulled her closer to him, taking her out of her shell and kissing her. "Then let's solve this mystery together, your crew and mine. Oil and water."

Eventually the pair were disturbed from their reconnection by a loud banging at the door. "You still alive in there?" asked Riley, the shadows of multiple feet visible through the bottom of the door. "Time's up," Jayce stated, bolting upright and grabbing his clothes. "Time's up," Alara said with a sigh. The knocking continued. "Just coming!" Alara called, only for Jayce to grin as he threw her underwear at her. There was a mumble on the other side of the door followed by an exclamation of pain.

Alara put on her boots before Jayce passed over her jacket, the pair nodding to each other before opening the door to their unamused crews. Riley stood rubbing the top of her head as Wulf stood with his arms crossed behind her. "Had fun?" Bjorn asked sourly. "No. Yes," Alara and Jayce said, Alara immediately glaring at him as the group stepped inside. "Well, I hope your information sharing has been as fruitful as ours," Yuthura said, stopping herself as she went to sit on the messy bed. Alara glared at Jayce before he could answer. "What did we miss?" she asked.

"Well, we agreed to assist the Rising Aces in investigating the Church's activities on this island," Astris stated, much to Alara's surprise. Jayce looked at Bjorn, the baned nodding in acknowledgment. "However, if the investigation turns up nothing, the Rising Aces will turn over themselves to us for immediate arrest," Astris followed up with. Jayce's jaw fell open. "Come again?" he asked, turning to his crew who just nodded. "What were you possibly thinking?" Jayce asked

Bjorn. "Jayce, think about it. There's no way there's nothing going on," Wicke stated. "We've bet on black and red, we can't lose!"

"It could turn up green!" Jayce stated. "What if there's nothing?" he asked. "Hang on, you assured me you were certain the Church was up to something," Alara inserted. Jayce faltered. "They probably, almost definitely are. I just don't like the threat of being arrested," Jayce stated. Astris chuckled, stepping forwards and looking up at him. "Then you better be right, Exarga," she stated confidently, even though she only came up to his shoulders. "I guess we better be," he said with a sigh.

"Right, fine. If we're going to do this, we're going to do this properly. Falconer, is there anywhere the Navy have sealed off?" Jayce asked into his communicator. "The Navy have isolated a small area, a churchyard. There are only a few guards, but they have the perimeter secured," he stated immediately. Jayce nodded. "Right, good work. Keep us informed," Jayce responded, turning back to the group.

"Can you get us through the perimeter?" Bjorn asked the Marines. Alara looked to her group, but Riley stepped forwards. "If you need a distraction, I'm the one for the job." Jayce nodded in acknowledgement, reaching into his pocket to pull out a necklace. "Fine, but take this. It's a communicator, hold down these runes and think of one of us to talk directly to one of us, or this one to talk to all of us. In fact, Alara, take one as well."

They left the tavern as discretely as they could, leaving the keys on the counter as they passed before following Falconer's directions through the town. Eventually they came to their destination, peeking carefully around the corner at a pair of guards stood behind a barricade. "Wish me luck," Riley stated, adjusting her uniform before marching out of cover. "Are we sure she can do it? We could just knock them out," Wicke suggested. Wulf placed a hand on her shoulder, receiving an immediate look of disgust from her. "Better we don't raise the alarm. Besides, there's no one greater than Riley at making distractions."

The pair of bored Navy sailors raised their heads as she approached. "Marine," one of them scowled, the other spitting in her direction. "Ahem," Riley stated. "The hell do you want, Marine?" asked one of the sailors. Riley tutted, shaking her head as she took off her rifle. "Disrespect towards a superior officer, disorderly conduct, I think that's everything I need for a pair of court-martials," she stated with an overly dramatic and snobbish demeanour. "Death or prison?"

she asked, their eyes going wide as they noticed the Lieutenant markings on her uniform. "Shit," one stated, the pair immediately standing at attention.

"That's more like it, sailors. Now, my Commander will be making her way through here and just feel glad that I was sent ahead. Marines are higher ranked, even if I wasn't a Lieutenant, I expect better behaviour next time," she stated. "Apologies ma'am, we were ordered to let no one through. No exceptions." "Your orders? What am I supposed to tell my Commander?" she asked. "Don't answer!" she immediately snapped, interrupting the guard. She let out a sigh. "Who's orders?" she asked, the pair silent until she indicated for one of them to speak. "Priest Val's orders, ma'am," he said.

Riley let out another exasperated sigh. "Fine, take me to him," she said. They looked at each other. "Ma'am, we can't leave our post." They immediately flinched as Riley cocked her rifle. "Disobeying orders," she muttered, the pair springing into action. "This way. Follow us, Lieutenant," one of them said, the pair moving quickly and leading the way. Riley grinned to herself as she glanced back at the group watching her, sticking her tongue out before following them. "How the hell did that work?" Jayce muttered, only to get nudged by Alara. "Come on, let's go."

They raced forwards, seizing the opening that Riley had created for them to head through the streets directly to the church. "Captain, two guards are stationed outside of the main entrance," Falconer warned through his communicator. The Marines slowed down as Alara acknowledged the warning, but Jayce and his crew sped up, entering into Focus and racing towards the pair of unsuspecting guards. Jayce leapt into the air, dropping with a crash onto one of the guards from behind before Ordo swept the legs of the other using his greatclub. Yuthura then wasted no time, ensuring the pair wouldn't get back up, injecting them one after another as Jayce and Ordo held their mouths shut.

The Marines stared in disbelief and horror, with simultaneous admiration for the Aces' efficiency. "How long will that buy us?" Jayce asked Yuthura, as the sailor went limp in his arms. She pulled out a small capsule, feeding it to the unconscious sailors. "With that... an hour, at most," she stated. Jayce nodded, looking to Ordo before they dragged the unconscious guards inside the church. "Then let's make this count," he stated to the group, the Marines glancing at each other before following the Rising Aces.

The church had little distinguishing features - stained-glass windows, golden decorations, an organ, pews - but the large open hole leading down beneath the

bell tower certainly stood out. The group looked nervously down inside before Jayce pulled out a torch and led the way down the stairs into the darkness. The stairs spiralled downwards for seemingly forever, the darkness eventually giving way to a collection of lit torches that lined the walls. "I have a bad feeling about this," muttered Wicke as they walked. Bjorn immediately shushed her, a constant whispering echoing through the air.

Eventually Jayce stopped, the stairs evening out into a small chamber, a large pair of metal doors blocking their way. Ancient statues stood watching them from the corners of the room, their faces blank except for a singular eye where their nose should have been. "That's definitely not ominous," Wulf muttered, as he stopped and looked intently at one. "Boo!" yelled Caelie, grabbing his tail and causing him to yelp. She immediately burst into laughter, before retreating as he growled and chased after her.

As Jayce laughed, Alara and Astris stared at the large metal door. "How do we get in?" Astris eventually asked, spotting no keyhole and no handles. "Like this," Bjorn stated, pushing the door open. Immediately the whispering silenced, a strong gust of air blowing into the room they were in. Alara looked up at Bjorn, indicating for him to take the lead. Letting out a sigh, Bjorn accepted, stepping through the doorway into the darkness beyond.

One by one the others followed after him, finding themselves once more at the top of a staircase. This time the stairs lead straight down, eventually opening up into a large cavern. Artificial lights had been placed around the room, casting bright light in all directions, the signature magic stones powering the items. The walls were dark stone, a glossy sheen reflecting the light in all directions, all apart from one.

Directly opposite the entrance was a large ceramic mural, at least fifteen metres in height and width. "Woah," muttered Wulf, staring upwards at the giant image. The mural depicted a giant tree, a red moon acting as its background. It had a twisted silver trunk, curving into a hook, and its foliage was an unusual colour, its leaves an ashy grey, with pink and red eye-like fruit dotted throughout. Large words sat beside it, leading to several smaller images that surrounded the central tree: various islands, a silhouette of people praying, two keys, a giant shadowy creature with glowing eyes. The group stared up at the giant mural, uncertain as to what exactly they were seeing.

"Wicke, Yuthura, what does it say?" Bjorn asked, immediately recognising the language of Arcanum. "Give me a minute," Wicke said, reaching into her

backpack to pull out a large book as well as a pen and notepad, before she reached into her bottomless bag and pulled out a large, rolled-up rug. Astris stared at her with a look of confusion. "This is no time for a picnic," she stated. Wicke rolled her eyes, sitting on the rug before it began to float. "Just sit and watch, Marine. Don't get in our way," she stated, floating upwards to get a closer look. Astris stepped back, slowly walking over to Alara. "Just give me the order," she whispered, patting her holsters. Alara chuckled. "Wicke has that effect on people."

"Yuthura translate the lower half," Wicke called down, Yuthura rolling her eyes as she continued doing exactly that. "What do we do whilst they work?" Alara eventually asked Jayce, spotting him and Bjorn making notes of their own as they observed. "Just get comfortable, unless any of you know Arcanum," he responded, showing her his notes, a bunch of unintelligible scribbles. "Arcanum? The dead language? Does that mean this is pre-dungeon?" she asked, folding her arms and pretending to understand what he was writing. Bjorn nodded in agreement. "Yeah, it's astounding how common it is, but the sceptic in me would say that's exactly why it's not taught," he stated, pointing to the three islands on the mural and noting down their descriptions.

One island was golden and covered with sunflowers, another was covered in purple, blue and pink flowers, and the third had a large valley covered in small white flowers. Alara glanced over towards Witchford, also making his own notes. "Witchford, do we recognise the islands?" she asked. Witchford looked towards her, opening his mouth before hesitating, his eyes flicking over to Bjorn and Jayce. "Trust them, share everything. That's an order," Alara stated. Witchford nodded, stepping closer. "Given how old this mural is, the descriptors could be wildly inaccurate and until a translation is known, I cannot be certain. But, if I were to hazard a guess, Sunflower Island, Hyacinth Fields, and Valley of Lilies."

"The descriptors probably aren't too out of date," Wicke called down. "When the people left the Dungeons, they named the reclaimed islands using simple naming systems. The Heart – a gemstone and an uplifting adjective, the Ice Floes – a descriptive name, the Gardens – a local flower. The islands would have been named after what the settlers saw," she explained, before slamming a book shut and floating down. "All done?" Jayce asked. She nodded apprehensively

"I think so, just need to collaborate with Yuthura," she stated. Jayce glanced towards Yuthura, who was stood in front of the mural with her hands on her

hips. "How's it coming along, Doc?" Jayce asked. She glanced backwards, shaking her head before looking back. Wicke glanced towards Jayce, and he silently indicated for her to go help. "They better hurry it up, we're nearly out of time," Alara stated, glancing at her watch. "They're nearly done," Jayce reassured, glancing nervously towards Caelie and Wulf as they sat guarding the entrance, playing a card game with Ordo.

"Okay!" Wicke finally called out, turning to the rest of the group with a notebook in her hands. She looked towards Jayce, who nodded encouragingly, before nervously at the rest of the group. "The translation is a little rough, but we think it goes like this," she stated. "Long ago in the wake of the great war, the Gods returned to the lands beneath, unhappy with the dissolution of their followers and the infighting there within."

"To put an end to the petty feuds of mortals, they bestowed a gift to their devout. A plant whose fruit could open the eyes of their enemies with a single drop of its juice. The Demon's Eye allows all to see, until there is nothing left to fight over," Wicke stated, closing her notebook. Bjorn looked at Jayce quizzically. "The hell does that mean?" he asked, before glancing towards Wicke. She just shrugged, but then she immediately noticed the ghostly appearance of Alara.

"My Gods..." Alara muttered quietly, Jayce's eyes widening moments later as the same thought came to him. "Open the eyes of their enemies, right?" he asked, clarifying with Wicke as a cold sensation ran through him. Wicke nodded. "That's what they're after. They could target anyone, especially if all it takes is a single drop," Alara stated, her eyes wide as she looked at Jayce. "Your parents, the Admirals..."

"Hang on, what are you talking about?" Astris asked, Wicke and Yuthura both immediately understanding as they turned back to the mural, looking at the images. "By the ancestors..." muttered Bjorn before he looked down at Jayce, nodding in agreement. "The ultimate weapon is the power to turn your enemy into your ally..." Witchford stated. "Marine handbook, chapter eight, page two-hundred and twelve."

It then dawned on Astris, Alara nodding grimly. "They're after a weapon, a plant with the power to alter a person's mind with a single drop. The Church could infect the Admirals, the Emperor, anyone who stood in their way," Jayce stated to the group. "Wicke, does it say anything about a timeframe? How long does it last?" Alara asked. Wicke shrugged, quoting the last line again. Alara shook her head, letting out a sigh. "It could be a permanent change to a person's

biochemistry," Yuthura hypothesised. "Reversible with the right chemicals, but otherwise undetectable. Horrifying..."

"We can't let them have it, they'd be unstoppable. Does it say where it is?" Jayce asked. "To guard the Demon's Eye, a key was split, taken far from its home on the Isle of the Sun to two islands of safety. It doesn't say anything else, but Hyacinth Grove and Valley of the Lily are our best bets. The plant is probably somewhere on Sunflower Island," Wicke stated. Jayce nodded, turning to face Alara.

"It can't be real. Surely this is nothing but a myth?" Astris stated desperately. "Even if it is, we can't not investigate - the risk is too high. We need to stop them," Jayce stated, only for his eyes to go wide as he stared at three people stood by the entrance. "Marines? Intruders, sound the alarm!" stated the Priest, two sailors by his sides. "Wait, stop!" Astris called out, the Priest beginning to chant as the sailors turned around. However, Wulf and Caelie did not stop, both already acting on instinct as the two nearest to the entrance.

Caelie chanted as she ran, ducking behind the Priest as Wulf swung with his sword, a glowing fog flowing from her body as she touched the two sailors. They screamed, their voices quickly silencing as their skin turned grey before they turned to dust. The Priest stumbled backwards, his eyes wide as he placed a hand to his throat before he wobbled, and his head fell off his shoulders. Caelie and Wulf nodded to each other before returning to the group. "What have you done?" muttered Astris in disbelief.

"Astris," Alara said quietly, stepping closer to her. "You needed proof, this is proof." Alara then turned to Jayce. "We'll take Hyacinth Grove, you take the other. We'll meet at Sunflower Island and destroy this thing. Agreed?" she asked. Jayce nodded. "Agreed. Get going, we'll finish up here and follow after you." "Okay. Squad, we're moving out!" she called out, taking Astris's hand and dragging her towards the exit.

As the Marines ran off, Jayce turned towards his crew. "We got what we came for. Wicke, destroy this thing," he stated, the others heading quickly to the door as she began to chant. Jayce waited until everyone was out and Wicke was stood on the bottom of the stairs before he nodded to her. "Going loud!" she yelled, throwing her spell into the room, the pair immediately running before the ground shook. As they raced after the others up the stairs to the church, the ground continued to shake, the walls cracking and the stairs collapsing behind

them. Eventually, they leapt free from the staircase, racing after the others out of the church before the building sunk into the ground.

"Too close," Jayce panted, as he and Wicke lay on the floor. Bjorn chuckled, offering him a hand. "For once, can't we go somewhere without sinking a building into the ground or blowing something up? Come on, there's no way the Navy won't have noticed that." Jayce nodded in agreement, clambering to his feet as Caelie helped Wicke up. He glanced around for Alara and her Marines, but they were nowhere in sight, much to his relief. "Let's go!"

Seize the Seas Tales: Upgrades, People, Upgrades!

"Took you long enough!" said Riley, as she re-joined the group as they ran through the streets towards the Sole Survivor. "Anything to report?" she asked. "They're after a plant that has the power to warp people's minds, turn anyone they want into their servants," Wulf summarised. Riley's eyes went wide. "Holy shit! Okay, that's... bad, like really, really bad." The others nodded, apart from Astris as she ran at the back of the group, her eyes to the floor. "What's wrong with Astris?" Riley asked quietly. Alara just glared at her. "Right, later," she muttered.

They continued running, eventually arriving at the docks, only to immediately bump into another group heading that way. "What are you doing here?" Alara asked Jayce. "Oh, uh, our ship is that way," he stated awkwardly, as he pointed past her. "Ours is that way," she said, pointing past him. A few moments of awkward silence passed between the two parties before they began to slip past one another. "Stay safe," Jayce told her, as his group ran off, the Marines watching them go before they continued onwards.

"Is everyone on board?" Alara asked as she walked onto the deck of the Sole Survivor. "Aye Commander," stated Brett, confused as he watched Witchford ordering Marines to get the ship ready to leave. "Are we going somewhere?" he asked. "There's a lot to catch you up on. We are setting sail for Hyacinth Grove," she stated. "Right, fair enough," he stated, beginning to walk away before he faltered. "How was Jayce?" he asked, with a mischievous grin. She rolled her eyes, and he laughed as he walked away.

The Sole Survivor began to move minutes later, the ship pulling quickly out of the docks and heading east before turning north. As Alara sat her in her room, trying to think over everything that had happened in the last few hours, a loud knock echoed at her door. "Commander, there's a ship quickly approaching,"

called one of her Marines. Alara groaned before she reached for her glaive, only to immediately swear out loud as she remembered that Jayce had destroyed it.

She opened the door, following the Marine's direction to see a blue, black and white ship sailing quickly towards them. It was slightly shorter than her ship, but a little wider, and she immediately recognised it's Captain as he stood next to a large baned by the wheel. "What's he doing here?" she muttered, immediately wondering as to how she was going to explain this to her crew. "Commander, what are your orders?"

"Stand down, let them approach!" she called out to the Marines stood by the cannons. Albeit confused, her Marines followed her orders, the countless eyes staring in curiosity as the Stacked Hand pulled alongside them. "Greetings Commander!" called Jayce, as he leant on the railing closest to her ship. "What do want now?" she called back. Jayce just grinned before a figure leapt from the deck of his ship onto her ship, her Marines immediately drawing their weapons, only to freeze as they recognised who had landed on their ship.

"I'm giving you a gift!" Jayce called over. "No offence, but you're all really weak, so Ordo's going to whip you into shape. Treat him well!" Alara's face immediately warmed up as he grinned smugly at her. "Oh and one more thing, I'm also giving you Tempest," he stated, the djinn floating over to Alara's ship with a large case in his hands. "Good luck!" he stated. Bjorn span the wheel away and the Stacked Hand quickly turned around, leaving Alara stunned and all of her Marines looking up at her with very confused expressions.

Chapter 76: Bootcamp

"Quiet down. Quiet down, you bastards!" Ordo yelled, as he was mobbed by a swarm of Marines on the deck of the Sole Survivor. Alara's body tensed on its own as she felt Ordo use Focus, the Marines immediately falling silent. "Right, that's better. I'm going to be sailing with you for a bit, along with my fellow shipmate: Tempest. Treat us well. I expect to see your best!" he stated, walking through the mob towards Alara.

"Honestly," he grumbled, as he walked up the stairs to join her. "Permission to come aboard, Commander?" he asked. She glanced around, gesturing to the open seas around them, the Stacked Hand long gone. "Do I have a choice?" she asked. He laughed. "No, I suppose not. Well, anyway Commander, Jayce has dispatched Tempest and I to bring you, your ship, and your crew up to standard," he stated.

"My ship?" she questioned, looking towards the djinn as Tempest floated around observing the deck. "You know that's not possible. The ship is not my property, I cannot make modifications to it," Alara stated. Ordo weighed his hands, pulling a face. "True, but inspections only go so far. And the modifications that djinn will make will certainly be worthwhile. Anyway, where am I staying?" he asked bluntly.

After finding Ordo a bunk, Alara collected her command crew together, their questions numerous. "Okay, so, we have made a temporary alliance with the Rising Aces," Alara began, as she looked to her Shipwright. "And they have sent two of their people to help us prepare for our upcoming battle." "What battle?" asked Lieutenant Jicks, glancing out of Alara's quarters to Ordo and Tempest as they waited outside.

"We have discovered that the Church is looking for a weapon. It is a need-to-know basis, and this entire mission is classified to the highest degree. Let the crew know not to ask questions and that the mission is of the utmost importance. Tempest and Ordo are to be under constant supervision. Brett, you're in charge of that - at least two Marines at all hours. Am I understood?" she asked. There were various nods of acknowledgement, but Alara could sense the deeper curiosities.

With that settled, Alara returned to Ordo and Tempest. "May I begin?" Tempest asked. Alara nodded. "You're only allowed to modify areas with our permission, and it must be from myself or Lieutenant Commander Kai. Got it?" she asked.

The djinn nodded, floating away below deck with two Marines following closely behind. Alara then looked towards Ordo. "So what now?" she asked. He stretched. "Dinner. I need to wait for Tempest before I can start training people. However, if you could give me access to the crew manifest that would be appreciated." Sensing this wasn't a request, Alara let out a sigh, glancing out towards the rapidly setting sun as she questioned just what Jayce had forced upon her.

As the skies quickly darkened, Alara scoured the ship for Astris, eventually finding her sat alone in her quarters, her food untouched and a worried expression on her face. "Commander!" she stated, standing up quickly as Alara entered her room. "Are you okay?" Alara asked, Astris' returning rigidity never a good sign. "Yeah, yeah..." she said quietly, sitting back down on her bed and massaging her thumbs.

"May I?" Alara asked, pointing to a spot next to her. Astris nodded, scooting over to let her sit. "I'm sorry about today," Astris began, only for Alara to pinch her leg. "Ow! What the hell?" she immediately asked, a flash of anger wiping her face clean of her worries. "Don't apologise for today. You did nothing wrong. Today was a broken day, it didn't count. It wasn't fair, but we gained a lot from it. I know the Church means a lot to you, and I'm sorry for everything you had to experience today."

Astris shook her head. "I... I just don't know what to believe anymore. Ordo is a Pirate, the Church incited a mob to lynch people... they're looking for a weapon that warps minds..." she said softly, her eyes beginning to water. "I thought I could trust them. The Church was always there for me, even at my lowest," she confessed. Alara nodded, reaching out and pulling Astris closer to her. "I'm sorry."

Astris nodded. "When my mother killed herself, my father got worse. Cyrenna and Beowulf got the worst of it, but..." she shook her head, Alara's eyes widening as Astris finally opened up her past. "Your mother killed herself?" Alara asked softly. Astris nodded. "My father is a strict man. Legacy means everything to him, and that comes down even to his views on genetics: strong genes, strong person. So he found my mother, a daughter of an old Commodore. The marriage was political, and my mother had us."

"If we failed to meet his expectations, we were punished. This was just how it was. Anyway, as we got older, he got less patient, and our mother... got in the way. Fortunately, he was normally away. But, after a long time at sea, he

returned, to find the three of us taking care of a puppy." Astris shuddered. "He came home in a bad mood, and it was the last straw. After the three of us were done burying it, we returned to all see my mother jump from the second floor of the house."

"That's horrible... did you ever tell anyone? Surely someone could have-" "He's the Blue Admiral, who could we have gone to?" she asked softly, tears dripping from her chin. "He drove her to jump, but it was what he said afterwards that still haunts me. 'Weak'. He left us to watch her die... The Church was there for me. It was my mother's sanctum, a place where she felt safe, where we felt safe. I guess even now I need it to be somewhere where I can feel safe... but I'm not naïve enough to ignore what we've seen. I'll... I-I'll be okay," she concluded, Alara continuing to hold her.

"I'm so sorry. We could talk to Admiral Exarga," Alara suggested. Astris shook her head. "My mother is gone, it's too late to save her. Someday I'll avenge her, but for now I just need something else to focus on," she said, with a weak smile. Alara nodded, standing up, but Astris caught her hand. "Please don't tell anyone about any of this." Alara took her head in her arms, squeezing her tightly. "Of course not."

Glad that Astris would be okay, but mortified by what she had told her, Alara returned to her room. The morning came far too quickly, after a somewhat restless night. Letting out a yawn, Alara stood up and headed to her bathroom, pausing in front of the mirror to check out the new scar on her shoulder. She reached up, placing her hand on the mark before sliding her hand down. A red smear was left behind, and as she looked at her hands, she noticed they were both wet with blood. She blinked and the blood disappeared, the image of the civilians she had killed as well as the Priest and Navy adding to her collection of ghosts. She shrugged it off, splashing her face with water before getting dressed.

To her surprise, she found Brett stood on the main deck with Tempest, the pair talking with Astris. "Morning Commander," Brett greeted, as Alara approached. "Morning all. What's going on?" she asked, looking towards the schematics that Astris was holding. "Tempest wants to begin its work," Astris stated, pointing out the areas that Tempest had marked on the schematics. "And what work is this?" Alara asked.

There was a sparking sound from within Tempest's armour that Alara assumed was a sigh. "Captain Exarga has insisted I make modifications to your vessel to allow you to train properly. I will start with this. May I finally begin?" Tempest

asked. Alara nodded. "Please do," she stated. Tempest quickly began to float away towards the stairs. "Stay on Tempest. Do not let him out of your sight," Alara reminded Brett. He nodded, letting out a sigh before beckoning over three Marines to follow him.

Brett found Tempest arduously boring, and where the conversation was more than lacking, the activities the djinn was partaking in were even more dull. Tempest spent almost the entire morning measuring random areas of walls and creating doorways that went nowhere, before using a nearby cabinet, or storage rack, to create a means of hiding the doorway. But eventually, long after Brett and his fellow observers had run out of games to play, the djinn did something different.

"Let's go," Brett said, following after Tempest as he began to float back towards the main deck, searching for something. He watched Tempest open the case he had brought with him, reaching inside to pull out a round doormat. The djinn then placed the black mat on the floor before floating down into it. Brett and his companions stared at the hole in shock, briefly glancing towards Alara, as she stood observing the scene from next to the wheel. She motioned with her hand to follow, before Brett let out a sigh and jumped into the hole.

He fell for a moment, before he dropped with a crack onto his back on a wooden floor, the three other Marines with him exiting the hole horizontally before falling on top of him. After groaning and separating themselves, they stood up, finding themselves in a large workshop, with a huge and slightly perplexed bearded man. "Are you sure you're meant to be here, boys, lass?" Xander asked, glancing towards Tempest as the djinn floated past the Marines back through the hole. "Uh," Brett began, the large blacksmith crossing his arms. "We'll just be going." "Uh huh," Xander stated.

Brett and his Marines turned to the large open hole, one of them walking into it only to immediately fall backwards out of it. "Did Tempest place the hole on the floor?" Xander asked. Brett nodded. "Right, I've told that djinn it means only he can get back through it. Hang on." Xander then set down his hammer, stepping towards the Marines before spinning Brett around and picking him by his trousers and the back of his coat. "Hey, what do you think – oh Gods, no please no!" Brett cried out, as Xander swung him before throwing him through the hole. "Who's next?" Xander asked as he looked at the other three.

Alara frowned as she watched Brett fly back out of the hole, followed by his three screaming companions, the Marines quickly crashing back down to the floor on

top of him. She then let out a sigh, shaking her head before heading down to the officers' quarters. Ordo was sat at a desk, writing in a notebook as he read through a thin folder. "Ah Commander, I was reading your battle plan and I noticed some flaws," he said, closing the folder before sliding it through a small hole in the wall. "Ensign Charan Menso," Ordo stated to the hole, a grumbling coming from the other side. "I have better things to do than this," stated Wicke.

"Jayce asked you to help, either we do it all today or I bother you every day until it's done," Ordo countered. There was a muttered swearing coming from the other side but eventually another folder appeared. Alara grabbed it before Ordo could, opening up the folder to find a detailed file on one of her Ensigns inside. "Wicke, how did you get this?" Alara asked, Ordo quickly taking it back. There was a loud exasperated sigh. "I can enter something called the infinite library, it has everything that was ever written in there. You can take something out by exchanging something of equal value. Turns out letters, folders, files, they all count. Ordo, how many more to go?" she asked.

"Five more, then we're done," he said, scanning the file before making a quick note and handing it back before calling for the next name. "What flaws?" Alara eventually asked, crossing her arms after accepting there was nothing she could do about Wicke's invasion into her crew's files. "Well, having a command squad is a good idea. It's versatile and helps hunt key targets, but the rest of the crew is easy pickings to any enemy with a brain. If I were them, I'd lure you away and burn everything you have. Your crew are weak, and, with all its leaders fighting an away battle, they act as more of a detriment. That needs fixing, especially if we're taking on the Church."

Alara nodded; it wasn't the first time she had been presented with these concerns after all. "How do I fix it?" she asked. Ordo laughed, sliding the latest file back through the portal before calling out the last name. "You don't. I do. I'm creating a list of Marines capable of leading, or, at the very least with the potential to. These Lieutenants will act as your fingers, they will execute manoeuvres as heads of their platoons. Crew size is three-quarters of a company, right?" Ordo asked, sliding the last file back. Alara nodded.

"All done, Wicke, good job." There was some grumbling and then the portal collapsed into itself, specks of glowing dust quickly floated into the air before melting away into nothingness. "That girl... trouble," Ordo grumbled, before standing to his feet and looking at his notes. "I'm constructing two platoons, each led by a Lieutenant with four Junior Grade subordinates, each leading a squad.

The ten fingers of your hands. They will act independently from you, carrying out your orders to achieve your objectives when you and your squad are indisposed. The third platoon will remain with the ship, providing covering fire when necessary, as well as tactical intelligence. After all –“

“The battle doesn’t matter if you have no home to go to,” Alara finished, nodding as she thought through Ordo’s plan. “How do you intend to train the platoons?” Alara asked. He held up a hand. “Patience, Commander, my crewmate has that in hand. Give Tempest time to work. We have plenty of time before we reach our destinations. I’ll finish up my work and then I’ll give you a report to send to Cassandra, asking to officially promote those I’ve chosen.” “Cassandra?” Alara questioned, surprised at the familiarity coming from Ordo. “Hush. Pumpkin may be the Red Admiral, but I was the one who sharpened her fangs. I’ll do the same to you wolves.” Alara nodded, stepping back to let him get back to work. “Let me know,” Alara stated. He nodded, and she left his quarters.

It was an entire day until anything changed, but eventually, as Alara sat eating her lunch in the mess hall, she found Tempest floating behind her. “Commander Vanathur,” Tempest began, his voice gargling and sparking underneath his translator. “Anything to report?” she immediately interrupted, the djinn floating there confused until he awkwardly gave a nod. “Yes, I have completed my preliminary assessments and have created the first area. I was instructed to tell you when it was ready.” Alara nodded, tipping the rest of her food into her mouth before standing up. “Right, lead on,” she said with a mouthful of food.

As Tempest led her through her ship, Alara almost immediately realised the djinn no longer had an escort. “Tempest, where’s Lieutenant Brett?” she asked. The djinn stopped, slowly turning. “I believe his words were: this is so boring,” Tempest stated. “The Lieutenant has repeated this phrase two-hundred and three times since my arrival. I confess I do not know his whereabouts.” Alara let out a sigh. “Right, I suppose it doesn’t really matter,” she muttered, not exactly surprised.

Tempest led her to a small storage room, close to the main deck. The room itself was unimposing; there was little of note other than large storage racks lining the walls. Brett was sat waiting for them, a nervous look on his face. “There you – uh, Commander, what a surprise!” Brett attempted. Alara glared at him. “Ahem, sorry,” he said quietly, before she lightly smacked him around the back of the head. “Are you here to see it? It’s really cool,” Brett eventually said. Alara raised

an eyebrow, glancing around to see nothing of note. Tempest then ran his gauntlet across the back of the door, a few invisible glyphs lighting up before the djinn then floated to one of the racks, sliding it across the floor to reveal a concealed doorway.

Alara frowned as she looked at the strange door, both Brett and Tempest stepping aside to let her investigate. Her heart pounded in her chest, before slowly she pushed it open and stepped through. Her eyes widened as she found herself stood in a colossal, featureless, white room. "How is this possible?" she muttered, looking up at a ceiling fifteen metres above her. The large hall was at least thirty metres in length and twenty in width, far too big to fit inside the ship. "Welcome to our new training hall!" Brett grinned, as he stepped inside.

Alara turned to Tempest. "How?" she asked, the djinn's expressionless helmet remaining blank. "Quite simple. I have inscribed arcane runes onto your ship, creating extradimensional space as a consequence. The size can be altered, but I think a hall of this size is more than suitable for any of your needs. I will eventually complement the room with items, but if you wish I could place floors down for you, or cover the walls."

Alara knelt down and tapped the floor: it was dull, there was no real feeling to it, and it was perfectly smooth. "Maybe something with more grip, and a bit of colour," Alara suggested, the djinn nodding before floating away to a large pile of items stashed nearby. "I'll continue working once Ordo is finished," Tempest gargled. "Finished? Finished doing what?" Alara asked, only to quickly spot several Marines sticking their heads into the room.

As Alara returned to the main deck with Tempest, she passed countless of her Marines all making their way to the training hall. She eventually found Ordo stood on the main deck with Astris and Wulf. "Ah, there you are," Ordo stated. "Commander, he has ordered everyone to a new training hall, even those on shift. Do we go?" Astris asked, looking towards Alara before up at Tempest. "Ordo, someone needs to keep watch, and we're currently sailing, we can't just stop."

"Can't we?" Ordo asked, looking towards Witchford stood by the wheel. "I need everyone present for initiation, afterwards I'll be taking Marines in small groups. Tempest will keep watch, we're in the middle of the sea, the djinn will warn us if anyone approaches," Ordo stated. Alara let out a sigh before nodding. "Alright, fine. Full stop!" she called out to her Marines, the anchors quickly dropping. "Make it quick. Tempest, warn us if you see anything. Am I

understood?" Tempest bowed his head before he floated upwards above the ship. "I take that as a yes," Alara muttered.

Alara made her way back to the training hall with her Marines and Ordo, her entire crew assembling into neat lines, arranged by rank. Her Lieutenants stood at the front, and Alara quickly joined them, not quite certain as to what was happening. Excited chatter rang out all around her, a nervous energy sparking throughout her crew. "Right!" Ordo called out, silencing the group. "Listen up, I won't repeat myself. For those of you who don't know me, if that's possible, I am Old Dog Ordo, a member of the Rising Aces."

"My Captain and your Commander have come to an agreement to loan my experience to you, as such I am here to teach you. This will be hard work, and it will involve every one of you, regardless of rank. So, for the duration of our time together, you will refer to me as Chief and you will do everything I say, exactly as I tell you to. Am I understood?" he asked the crew, standing in front of them with a wooden sword in hand. "Yes Chief!" called out a few Marines in the back as the others muttered. Ordo grit his teeth, a cold feeling immediately spreading across Alara's back. "Come again? These old ears of mine must have misheard you. You all sounded very quiet," Ordo asked, practicing a few swings with the sword. "Yes Chief!" called the entire crew.

"Uh-huh, damn straight! Now, over the next few weeks I will be teaching you something called Focus. A few of you already know what this is, and can use it. Those of you, raise your hands." Alara, Brett, Riley, Astris, and Witchford all raised their hands, as well as few others scattered amongst the crew, much to Alara's surprise. "You are exempt from today's training, you may go, or you may stay and watch. The rest of you, form a queue. Rank descending."

The Marines sprang into life, following his command with a reinvigorated excitement. Wulf stood at the front, but Ordo stepped forwards whispering something to him. His face fell and he stepped to the side, walking over to Alara and the others as they stood watching. "You okay?" Riley asked him. He let out a sigh. "I need to work on learning how to transform before he can teach me anything. As if it's that easy," he said, only for his eyes to widen as Ordo hit Lieutenant Toger, who had been standing behind him, with his wooden sword. "Oh Gods," Alara muttered, stepping forwards to intervene, only for Ordo to glare at her.

Alara stopped in her tracks, Lieutenant Toger slowly standing to his feet and raising his fists. The bludgeoning continued until Ordo was happy, the

Lieutenant bruised and battered but now able to use Focus. With just over a hundred Marines to work through, it took Ordo all afternoon, as well as most of the evening, to achieve his goal. But despite the harsh treatment, Alara didn't receive any complaints. Whether it was due to the fact that, regardless of rank, all Marines were treated the same, or the fact that there was an actual physical result afterwards, she couldn't be certain. As she made her final rounds late in the evening, the Marines that were awake, albeit slightly beaten up, all seemed in high spirits.

Training resumed the following day, this time with far fewer numbers and consisting entirely of the Marines Ordo had chosen to lead. After observing for a bit she found herself kicked out, and it wasn't until a week later that Alara was needed by either Ordo or Tempest. But finally, the djinn requested her presence, and early in the evening she found him waiting on the main deck. "You had something to show me?" Alara asked him, drawing his attention as she approached.

"Ah yes, I have finished with my main modifications. All rooms are prepared, I shall now begin making my supplementary upgrades. Follow closely," Tempest stated. "Nothing visible, right?" Alara checked. Tempest nodded, leading the way below deck. "Only minor upgrades to water supplies, and storage. I have created a communications system for you and your officers to use, and I will then begin modifying your weapons."

Alara faltered. "Specialised weapons are not forbidden, as I understand." Alara nodded. "Yes, but they need to be licensed and requisitioned," she stated, continuing after him. "Then do so, you have allies in high places, I doubt the origins of these modifications will be heavily observed. Simply list them as confiscated." Alara bit her lip, an uncomfortable feeling residing inside her as she felt herself beginning to cross the line. "Okay, fine. All to serve the Empire," she muttered.

"Please tell me if there is anything else that needs altering," Tempest stated, floating to the side to let Alara see inside the upgraded training hall. Her mouth fell open. A wooden facade had been placed down and the walls had been painted to match the rest of the ship. The training hall now included a shooting range, which, as she watched a pair of Marines firing their rifles, she realised was enchanted to silence the noise within. There was also an obstacle course, adjustable in height and difficulty, by a series of glyphs nearby. There was also a

fighting ring, training dummies, and all sorts of other features to utilise. "Wow, Tempest this is... too much. How? I don't understand."

"I believe you are elated by this reveal. Correct?" he asked. She grinned and nodded. "This is amazing, thank you." The djinn nodded, quickly floating back through the doorway before leading Alara further below deck to the main crew quarters. He stopped next to a small cupboard, a few excited Marines waiting outside with towels, before opening a concealed door and floating inside. Alara glanced at her Marines before following after him, finding herself in a small round antechamber with two doors, each marked with a different letter: 'M' or 'F'.

Cautiously, Alara opened the door marked with F, finding herself in a large changing room equipped with a shower area and another door. "Please take off your boots." Alara did so, her mind refusing to process what she was seeing until she opened the next door. "Tempest, did you make a bathhouse on my ship?" Alara asked, staring at the various large baths, the bubbling hot tubs, the sauna, the cold plunge pool, and the set of waterfall showers. "The crew of the Stacked Hand seem to enjoy it, so I assumed yours would as well. Is it too much?" he asked.

"Almost definitely, but thank you. My crew will love this, although I really doubt they'll be able to keep quiet about it." Tempest sparked a little, an action Alara assumed was laughter. "I see, well. Is there anything else you wish for me to add to the training hall or the bathhouse?" Tempest asked. Alara thought to herself, eventually coming up with one last thing.

Seize the Seas Tales: Testing the Waters

Alara struggled to hide her excitement once she heard the news that it was ready. The upgrades Tempest had made to her bathroom had been more than enough already, but the fact that he had made what she had asked for, only made her want to steal the djinn from Jayce and make him a Marine all that much more. The djinn had also gone around the entire ship, fitting water runes to the taps and toilets as a means of reducing the reliance on the Sole Survivors' water tanks, as well as providing her and her command crew with their own bottomless bags, translators, and communicators.

She entered the training hall, immediately noticing the new door to the immediate left. Taking a deep breath, she pushed it open, stepping inside and heading to the changing rooms. After changing out of her uniform she stepped

through one last door to find what she had been looking for. A large swimming pool lay in front of her, twenty-five metres in length and at least fifteen in width. Diving blocks sat at one end, but, as she approached the waters, she immediately noticed someone was already swimming.

"I could kiss Tempest," stated Astris, as she grabbed onto the side. Alara nodded, jumping into the water with a large splash. "Gods that's cold!" she immediately called out, much to Astris' amusement. "Yeah it is a little, I think it's because its fresh water," she said, pointing at the water as it flowed across the surface before falling over the edge into some grates. "I assume it's how he ensures it remains clean. Where do you think the water goes?" Alara asked. Astris shrugged.

"Was this your idea?" she eventually asked. Alara nodded, floating on her back and looking up at the ceiling, an image of the night sky above her. "I realised we never get a chance. The ship travels day and night so we don't get time to stop, and when we do stop it's in ports, not exactly safe places to swim." Astris nodded. "Is this how Jayce and his crew live every day?" Astris eventually asked, splashing Alara. With a sigh, Alara nodded. "I assume so." "Lucky bastard," Astris muttered. "Ooh, take a look at what I found," she then said, with a burst of excitement.

Astris swam over to the edge, fiddling with some exposed dials. The starlight above became day, the light warm on Alara's body before it became covered with clouds, rain falling down onto her, before lightning sparked above her and thunder boomed. Astris changed the weather back to night, swimming back over. "There's also a power setting to create a current to swim against." Alara laughed. "Of course there is." The pair then went back to floating.

"What will you do if Jayce goes rogue?" Astris eventually asked. Alara thought for a moment. "What do you mean?" she asked. "As in... turns evil?" Astris shook her head. "I know what he means to you. I saw it on your face when you first saw him, and when he left. I'm not going to pretend I don't wish I had something like that myself, but we're Marines. Someday an order will come to bring him in. Maybe even from his own parents. Will you be able to?"

"I don't know. I've thought about it myself - of course I have - but I really don't know. We're so different, yet the same, and the more I see his side - all of this - the harder it is to be angry at him for going down the path he has taken. And I hate that. I really hate that I'm starting to see that he wasn't wrong. That he could even be... right," she admitted, Astris nodding as her necklace sat around her neck. "Would you want me to follow orders, even if you couldn't?" Astris asked.

Alara rolled onto her front, meeting Astris' obsidian eyes. Eventually she nodded. "There's no one I trust more to do what needs doing if I fail to. If Jayce becomes evil, if I become evil. If the Church gets me, the crew is yours, and I know you'll do your best. I trust you completely, Astris," Alara told her. Astris nodded. "Okay, I'll do my best. As long as you can say the same for me." "Of course. Race you to the other side?" she asked, splashing Astris before grabbing on to the wall. "You're on!"

Chapter 77: Hunting Prey

Jayce couldn't deny the excitement racing through him as Valley of Lilies finally became visible on the horizon. Each day had been agonisingly long; the fear of the Demon's Eye, as well as the notable absence of both Ordo and Tempest, ever present. They had followed the Inquisitor warship all the way from Lavender Grove, but with the presence of Priests on board, and potentially other Mages as well, the Rising Aces had been unable to catch up. But finally, with their objective in sight and the Inquisitor ship docked, Jayce felt he could take a moment to breathe.

"How long do you think they've been here?" Jayce asked Bjorn, as he stood next to him by the ship's wheel. "At least a day, if Falconer's estimates are correct." "Well, it's reassuring they're still here. Hopefully that means they haven't found the key yet," Jayce stated, running his hands through his freshly cut hair. "Maybe they'll just hand it over to us, if they have?" Bjorn chuckled. Jayce nodded, patting his friend on his shoulder. "Do you think we're that lucky?" he asked. Bjorn shook his head. "No, but can't a guy dream?"

"What's the plan?" Xander called up, as he emerged from below deck, before dumping a variety of equipment onto the floor. "No idea," Bjorn stated. "We have two options: either we raid their ship once they have the key, or we go in and get it ourselves," Jayce answered, nudging Bjorn before heading down to the deck below. "Thoughts? I always appreciate your insight," Jayce said to Xander, exposing Sola and Luna to the variety of weapons on the floor for them to memorise and copy for the day ahead.

"I'm not sure I fancy going ship to ship without Tempest," Xander stated, equipping a pair of bracers and greaves before twirling around his hammer. Jayce nodded in agreement, crossing his arms. "I agree, but I don't like the risk. A ship that size probably has more than a hundred crew, let alone the potential of Warlocks and Witches amongst them." Xander flipped over his hammer, presenting the handle to Jayce. "When faced with a tough choice often it's best to let your body do the thinking. Trust your instincts, they haven't let us down yet."

Jayce let out a sigh, looking at the hammer Xander had bestowed upon him. It wasn't particularly big, but it was quite heavy, with a large, rectangular head. It had a simple mahogany handle, the wood a reddish colour, opposed to the dark grey metal. Golden runes had been carved into the sides, sometimes glowing a faint orange colour, and on the base of the handle was Xander's signature: 'X'.

Jayce thought to himself, weighing up the two choices: risk the ship, or risk the crew. He handed Xander back his hammer, making his choice.

"We're going to wait until they've retrieved it, then we're going to wreck their ship whilst it's still in the harbour. If we steal it and run, they might catch us. So we need to ensure they can't, but I don't want to condemn their crew. No point wasting their lives in direct conflict," Jayce declared. Xander nodded in agreement. "I'll tell the others, I think that's the right choice, but they're going to put up one hell of a fight, regardless."

They docked in the main harbour, as far away from the Inquisitor ship as possible. Falconer took to the air to scout out the island, whilst Jayce waited with Wicke for the signal to begin their attack. "Are you sure you don't want backup?" Xander asked once more through their communicators, as Wicke and Jayce sat in a café enjoying the sunshine. "Yeah, Wicke's got the ship, I've got the key. We don't want to draw any more attention. Just keep the ship ready, we've got this."

"It's almost like he doesn't trust us," Wicke said as she sipped her cola, a pair of bright blue sunglasses on her face. "Do you enjoy sitting idly whilst others are putting themselves at risk?" Jayce asked her, leaning forwards with a fork and stealing some of her strawberry shortcake. "No, but... fine, I guess it's fair enough. Especially given what we're actually looking for," she answered. Jayce nodded, leaning back in his chair and shutting his eyes.

"Hey Jayce, if we somehow fail to stop the Church from getting the Demon's Eye..." she said quietly. "And if they turn me against you." He opened one eye, looking across the table towards her. "I promise I will stop you," Jayce answered. "Oh, uh, I was going to say the opposite. Don't kill me," she immediately countered. Jayce laughed softly. "Fair enough, well, put me out of my misery. I'd rather be dead than fighting against you guys."

"Do you mean that?" she asked, slurping her drink, before sliding her sunglasses down onto the tip of her small pointy nose. Jayce nodded. "You're my family, I don't ever want to hurt any of you. And I'm not sure what the Church would gain from enslaving me, but if they did, I wouldn't want to be their weapon. I'd trust that you guys would do everything you could to stop me." Wicke thought to herself, before grinning. "Do you think you'd win against me? If one of us turned against the crew," she asked. Jayce thought to himself before he laughed. "Without a doubt. You're too weak and too lazy to put up a fight," he stated. She turned bright red, grumbling to herself before pouting.

"They have the item and are on the move," came Falconer's voice in their heads, the pair bolting to their feet. "Are you sure?" Wicke asked. There was moment before Falconer responded. "Yes, I am certain. The Priest in charge is carrying it in a small box, he has six sailors acting as escorts, as well as two Daughters of Shade flying overhead." Jayce nodded to Wicke, the pair bumping their fists together before going their separate ways. "Distract the Witches, I'll get the box," Jayce ordered, glancing up as he ran through the streets to see the tiny shape of Falconer and Wren hidden in the sun. "On your count, Captain," came Falconer's response.

Jayce entered into Focus, concentrating on his legs and channelling his energy into his speed. "I hope you'd be proud of me, Vexx. Wherever you are," Jayce muttered, moving in a blur as he utilised the Focus form Pursuit and weaved through the citizens going about their day. "Now!" Jayce ordered. Wren divebombed, dropping from the skies in an instant and swiping the brooms of the escorting Daughters of Shade out from underneath them as Jayce rounded a corner.

The Navy escorts turned as the Witches screamed, falling to the floor with a crunch, only to blink as Jayce charged past them. The Priest in charge looked down - the box, that had just been in his hands mere seconds before, now gone, with Jayce quickly getting further and further away, a huge grin on his face. "After him! He has the key!" screamed the Priest, the Navy stunned by everything they had just seen.

Jayce skidded around a corner, glancing up to see Falconer flying back around. "I have it!" He called into his communicator, a huge storm cloud appearing out of nowhere near the harbour. Wren flew down towards him, her talons grabbing onto his shoulders and lifting him into the air before the three of them began to fly quickly back towards the harbour, Jayce whooping as they flew through the air, the Navy too slow to catch them.

Falconer and Wren dropped Jayce onto the deck of the Stacked Hand before flying off back into the skies, Wicke appearing moments later as she flew in on top of her flying carpet. "Go, go, go!" Wicke yelled to Bjorn, the Quartermaster and Helm wasting no time to begin their getaway as the first Navy sailors came into view along the harbour. Jayce threw the box to Xander before he began to chant, controlling the winds to accelerate the ship as they pulled away from the Valley of Lilies.

With the Inquisitor ship on fire from a freak lightning strike, they escaped without issue. They reconvened on the deck of the Stacked Hand, Xander proudly and sophisticatedly hammering away on the small metal box. Eventually it opened, the group gathering around the tiny box to see inside. To all their pleasure, it wasn't empty, but it was not what they had been expecting. "The hell is that? Where's the key?" Zeta asked.

"I think that is the key," Wicke stated, cautiously picking up the small golden rectangle inside. "Doesn't look like any key I've seen before," Zeta muttered, quickly losing interest and wandering off. Wicke rolled her eyes, handing it over to Jayce. "What do you want to do with it? We could throw it in the sea," she suggested. Xander shook his head. "No, there's no guarantee that they couldn't find it. There's also a chance they could find a way inside without it." Bjorn nodded in agreement. "As long as we have it, we know they don't. Let's just hope that Ordo and the Marines managed to do the same."

It was a few days before they heard anything from the other crew, the temporary portals long out of charge and the ships too far away to use the communicators. Wicke paid the Guild albatross and handed Jayce the letter addressed to him. He opened it immediately. "We were too late," it read in Alara's handwriting. "Shit," Jayce muttered. "That's not good." Wicke glanced towards him, raising an eyebrow. "They didn't make it in time, the Church have the other key."

With the bad news stirring them on, the crew continued onwards, pushing themselves as much as they could during the day to cover the distance between them and Sunflower Island. "Checking, checking, Rising Aces, do you hear me?" came an unfamiliar voice on the communicators, early in the morning on the day of their arrival. Jayce looked up from his breakfast - toast with jam - a few others sat around him. "You heard that, right?" he asked, receiving several nods.

"Hello?" Zeta called back, the various communicators in the room all repeating her message. "Finally," came the voice that Jayce now recognised as Riley. "We're nearly at the island, did you get our message?" she asked. Zeta went back to her fruit salad, lazily indicating that Jayce take over. "Yeah, we have ours." "Well, that's good to hear. We were unable to catch the Navy ship, but they also don't know of our involvement. We'll meet you at the island. Alara - ahem, I mean, Commander Vanathur thinks that it's best we aren't seen together." Jayce nodded. "Right, see you soon."

Jayce disappeared into the training hall, unable to sit still as the minutes ticked away until their arrival. He weaved between the wooden swords of the training

dummies, blocking and countering with Sola and Luna, both in longsword form, as he stood surrounded. A blade caught his shoulder and he let out a pained grunt, the automatons quickly backing away. "Fuck!" he yelled, dropping to the floor and laying flat on his back.

He lay there panting, frustrated that he was still being caught off guard, until a familiar face looked down at him, with a tankard in hand and a straw in her mouth. Caelie sat down behind him, crossing her legs and putting his head on her lap before she went back to her drink. "Are you not nervous?" Jayce asked her, wiping the sweat from his brow and attempting to sit up, only for her to drag him back down. Caelie shrugged, before she eventually shook her head. "How?"

Again she shrugged, before pointing to the charts marked on the walls: the record of the crew's progression. Jayce glanced over to where she was pointing, his eyes focusing in on the length of time that the crew had managed to fight against the dummies for, the number of dummies fought at once, their speeds, their weight records. Jayce was near the top in all categories, but each had their own leader: Bjorn, Marisha, Caelie, Ordo. Caelie's slurping drew his attention back to her, and she quickly set aside her empty tankard, pointing to herself and then tapping Jayce's forehead with her finger. She then reached out and took his hand, her fingers tiny compared to his, interlinking their hands.

"Together," she said clearly. "Not alone." He looked up at her, and she grinned down at him. He smiled back, nodding. "We can do this, we're the Rising Aces. We're unbeatable." She nodded, letting go of his hand and sliding out from underneath him, his head dropping onto the floor with a clunk. She picked up her custom tankard, fake bones decorating the sides, before beckoning for him to follow her.

Jayce followed Caelie back to the living quarters where most of the crew were sat nervously, the radio quietly on in the background. Immediately the group looked towards him. "Hey," Jayce said, walking into the kitchen and grabbing a drink. "Do we have a plan?" Xander asked, Caelie walking over to him and sitting next to him on one of the sofas. "Truthfully," Jayce said, before shaking his head. Zeta looked down at the floor, her chin in her hands as she bounced her legs.

"Then we do what we do best," Falconer stated, the others looking towards him, Bjorn and Yuthura the only two absent, with RK just outside the door. "We adapt and react," he concluded. The nervousness did not dissipate, silence returning, apart from the crashing of the sea outside. "We can do this, right?" Wicke asked, looking towards Jayce. "Of course we can. It's only the Church and the Navy

we're planning on fighting. We've done this before," he half-joked. Xander chuckled, the others not quite so amused. "We can handle it, we're not alone. We have the Marines backing us, and we have the advantage," he said. "Which is?" Marisha asked,

"We have the key. If the Church wish to get to the Demon's Eye then they need us. They'll be waiting for us, or searching us out. In either case, they can only act when we want them to. They'll have found the site already, we just need to get in, open the door, and blow it to pieces," Xander stated. Wicke smiled. "I think I have just the spell." Zeta shook herself, pinching her cheek before taking in a deep breath. "We've got this! We have to."

Xander heard something coming from the radio, the background noise turned almost completely off. He stood up and walked over to it, turning it up to reveal a familiar voice coming through: Zeta's. "No way," Jayce muttered, as Zeta bolted to her feet, her mouth open as she pointed at it. "Th-that's my song!" she squealed, a heavy guitar coming through, paired with a fast-paced drumming. Jayce stepped forwards, offering a hand to Caelie. She took it and they quickly began to rock out, stamping their feet and dancing to Zeta's song. "We're the Rising Aces! Evildoers beware! 'Cause we have a big fucking bear!" they screamed.

The moment the song finished, the group panting heavily, Bjorn's voice rang out through their communicators. "We're here," he stated, the crew looking towards each other. "Gear up! We have a world to save!" Jayce called out, nodding to Xander in appreciation before stepping outside. Jayce raced up to the aft deck, Bjorn waiting by the wheel. "This is going to be a bit more difficult than we initially thought," he said pointing onwards to the island ahead of them.

Sunflower Island was huge. It was a sloped island backed by sharp white cliffs, with a huge town covering almost the entirety. The only exception was a huge field of golden sunflowers leading towards the cliffs, a sight seen all year due to the unique environment of the Gardens. Three large harbours had been combined into one, at the front of the island. A clear distinction between them was noticeable, one was for commercial use - directly in the middle, another for military use - to the right, and the last was for local use - to the left.

"Given how popular Sunflower island is for trade, I'd have assumed it would be busier, and better guarded," Bjorn stated, pointing towards three Inquisitor ships docked in the far harbour, as well as the commercial ships quickly leaving the island. "I guess any merchant worth their coin can sense that three Inquisitor

ships arriving at an island is bad news,” Jayce stated, before stepping into his room and getting changed.

“I don’t see the Marines,” Bjorn called out to him, as Jayce finished dressing. “I’m not surprised,” Jayce called back, before stepping out, his vambraces on, his backpack prepared, and Sola and Luna chirping in his head. Jayce entered into Focus, concentrating his eyes on the rear of the island, a faint glow emanating from beyond the cliffs. “Alara’s sensible, denying her presence is the best thing she could do. They’ve docked behind the cliffs,” he stated, a powerful glow cutting beyond the rest as Jayce spotted Ordo.

He winced as his eyes went back to normal. “Makes sense. I’ll dock us in the local harbour, we should take the ship with us,” Bjorn advised, Jayce nodding in agreement. He grabbed his necklace as Bjorn angled the ship. “Ordo, we’re here,” he said. “About damn time. Lieutenant Brett has already scouted ahead. We count two-hundred-and-fifty Navy, mostly at the ships, six Priests, twelve Daughters of Shade, eight Warlocks. Fortunately no higher-ranked Navy are involved so its mostly fodder, but the Marines are hesitant about fighting.”

“I’m not surprised. The Navy are just following orders. There may also be ramifications if the Marines are discovered. Any suggestions?” Jayce asked, glancing towards Bjorn. “We hit them hard and fast. Get inside, destroy it, get out. We can worry about the Navy and the consequences afterwards,” Ordo responded. “Okay, let’s do it. Get the Marines into a suitable position. We’ll meet you there.”

Jayce glanced down to the others on the main deck as they stood listening. “Right, let’s do this. We stay together, work as a crew, and get this done. The Stacked Hand stays with us. Don’t be heroes, stay safe,” Jayce told them. His crew nodded in agreement, apart from Xander who had his gaze locked on the rapidly approaching harbour. “Be careful of civilians, there are innocent people here,” he stated. Jayce nodded in agreement. “Wicke, that means you. Simple spells, minimise collateral damage.” She let out a sigh before nodding.

They docked the ship and dismounted. Jayce summoned RK-227 into his ball, before placing the Stacked Hand in its container and storing it under his backpack. Jayce then looked towards his crew, extending his hand out. One-by-one they placed their hands on top, before they ran off towards the island. Falconer then took to the air aboard Wren, flying high into the sky. “Tell us what you see,” Jayce ordered.

"There is a cathedral towards the centre of the island, but I only see minimal guards around it. They have begun to tear up the streets, digging downwards." Jayce nodded. "That hopefully means they found the door but can't get inside," Bjorn stated. "You would be correct, I see a magical barrier emanating from deep underground. They won't dig through it, but there's something else. I sense a leyline, I believe that is what the Demon's Eye is using to sustain itself."

"Makes sense, how else could a tree live underground?" Yuthura stated. "Where are the Marines?" Xander asked, as they rounded a corner, a large group of citizens leaping to the side. "A kilometre north, near the cathedral," Falconer answered. Jayce smirked, ever grateful to have Falconer in the skies. Jayce glanced back towards Wicke and Caelie, both at the back of the group. Caelie seemed fine, although it was hard to tell through her mask, but Wicke was a little red-faced as she ran. She caught him looking, waving it off and pointing ahead.

They continued running through the town, unopposed, uninterrupted, until the sound of gunfire echoed in the distance. "We've been engaged!" came Riley's voice through the communicators. "No warning, they just opened fire on us," came Alara's voice. "We're nearly there. Can you handle it?" Jayce responded. There was no response, but the shooting ceased. "Alara? Alara!" Jayce repeated. "We're fine." Jayce let out a sigh of relief, the group rounding another corner, the spire of the cathedral visible in the distance. "A few casualties, no fatalities. Hurry."

The Rising Aces arrived moments later, immediately receiving a dozen rifles aimed in their direction. "Stand down!" called a voice from a nearby rooftop, the familiar figure of Riley stood up top alongside another Marine wielding two swords. Cautiously Jayce and his crew made their way through the wall of Marines, the immediate smell of blood drawing their attention to the Navy corpses piled near the entrance of the cathedral.

"Took you long enough," Alara said as she stepped outside with Astris, Tempest, Wulf, Witchford, and Ordo. She had a grim expression on her face, and a rifle in her arms. "Where are the injured?" Yuthura asked, Wulf immediately leading her away. "What's the situation?" Jayce asked, the various Marines around beginning to mutter to one another as they looked towards him. Alara glanced around with her eyes, before shaking it off and looking towards Jayce.

"Well, there's a path going down inside, and, given that the Navy stationed here shot at our messenger, I take it there's not going to be any negotiations. I have a platoon with me, the rest are back at the ship, ready to deploy if we need

reinforcements," Commander Vanathur stated. Jayce nodded, looking towards Ordo and Tempest. "How were my people?" he asked. Alara looked down trying to hide a smile. "A welcome addition. I invited them to stay, but apparently they missed their home."

"You could say that again, my Gods I missed the quiet. Chief this, Chief that," Ordo grumbled, stepping over to join the other Aces. "It was most enjoyable," sparked Tempest. "Good. Maybe someday we can trade again. But for now, we have some gifts for you. Xander," Jayce stated, stepping to the side. Xander pulled out a marked bottomless bag, reaching inside to pull out several cases. He handed a leg-sized one to Alara, before handing a smaller one to Astris.

Their eyes widened as Alara and Astris opened the cases, Alara pulling out two halves of a pristine glaive as well as a sheath, whilst Astris pulled out a pair of heavy, black revolvers. "They've been enchanted to serve you better, I can only imagine what modifications Tempest has been making. If the grips are awkward I apologise, I was running off the small details Tempest gave me before the portals closed." Alara connected the two halves, stepping to the side and twirling the polearm. It was a little longer than her previous weapon, slightly heavier too, but its quality was undeniable. Astris checked the sights, getting a feel for the weapons before checking the ammunition types.

"With more time I could have figured out a solution to your reloading issue, two pistols is cumbersome, but the damage and power should more than make up for it," Xander stated. Astris pursed her lips as she struggled not to grin. "Thank you. Xander, right?" Alara asked. Xander nodded. "I really appreciate this, even if you are just making up for your idiot of a Captain." Xander chuckled. "A weapon broken is a replacement owed. I hope we are even. I assume the woman on the roof is your resident sniper?" Xander asked, pulling out another, larger case. "She's going to love that," Astris muttered. "Follow me, I'll take you to her."

The pair departed, the various members of Jayce's crew eyeing up Alara as she stood in front of him. "We need to get my injured out of here," Alara stated. "I disagree," stated Yuthura, returning with Wulf, slightly pale and holding her arm. "They've been dealt with, and are ready for payback," Yuthura added. Alara glancing towards Wulf with alarm, but the baned nodded in confirmation. "Right, I guess that's that. It's probably best we leave a guard - I doubt our shootout went unnoticed."

Jayce nodded in agreement. "Falconer, if this is leyline-related we might need you inside," he said into his communicator. A moment later Wren dropped down from the skies, dropping Falconer onto the floor before flying quickly away. "This will leave us exposed," he warned, taking off his bow, as the Marines around him stumbled backwards. "Yeah, but I think it's worth the risk if we can guarantee its destruction." Falconer nodded, joining the other Aces before looking towards Jayce.

Jayce then turned towards Alara. "Are you ready?" he asked. She shook her head, before stepping away. "Squad 3, stay here. Hold the line and protect our backs. The rest of you, let's go!" she called out. Her small army leapt into action, forming up behind the Aces as the large group looked towards the cathedral. "Onwards!" Jayce called out, stepping inside and leading the way, his crew behind him along with Alara and her command squad.

Seize the Seas Tales: Forgotten Bonds

"Elaine, please don't go!" Arthuria begged, desperately blocking the door to her bedroom. Even with her arms and legs spread, she hardly took up half the doorway. "I'm sorry Arthuria," said Elaine Pendragon, picking up her backpack and pushing past Arthuria with ease. "I can't stay a moment more, I can't watch him hurt anyone else," she growled, angry tears in her golden eyes, as she stormed towards the door. "Don't go!" Arthuria called after her, the hallway in her home stretching as she tried to chase after her sister. "Please," she cried, the door slamming and startling her awake.

Arthuria bolted upright, her eyes wide in the darkness and a cold sweat across her body. She rubbed her eyes, the old memory bubbling to the surface once again, as it did every-so-often. Slowly she dragged her legs into her chest, leaning her chin on her knees. "Elaine," she muttered, glancing towards the open window. "Why did you leave me?" she asked once again. "Why did you leave me alone with him?" she asked the night. It didn't answer.

Chapter 78: The Demon's Eye

The minute Jayce stepped inside the cathedral, he knew they were in the right place. The cathedral contained all of the usual decorations commonplace in a holy building of the Church of Reclamation: mock-ups of the thirteen Gods, images of the Dungeons opening, the giant ships sailing across the seas fleeing devastation. Yet buried amongst the usual imagery were hidden alterations. The trees of the Frontier were bearing fruit: large peach-like fruits, that were pink and red, with rippling patterns that turned them into eyes from the right angle.

The alterations created a chain, a pattern that lead to an area of the floor called the chancel, near the rear of the cathedral. The floor had been torn open already, and a set of lit stairs led downwards, once more spiralling into the unknown. "No one has come up from inside," Alara stated to Jayce, as he paused outside the hole. "Well, fortunately we know the main force is still by the harbour. Still," Jayce muttered. She nodded, turning back to her forces. "Eyes open, weapons ready."

Alara then looked towards Jayce, nodding. He took a deep breath, taking the first step downwards. The stairs were large, wide enough that multiple people could walk together. The stone had worn away with time, but very few members of the large group took notice. The rest were all glancing nervously at the shadows flickering on the walls from the torchlight, or the faint heartbeat that seemed to travel upwards through their shoes. "I've got a bad feeling about this," echoed Wicke's voice as they walked. "Stow it," Ordo called forwards.

The stairs eventually came to an end, connecting into a more rough and natural cave that slowly sloped downwards. Water trickled from the ceiling, sometimes dripping onto the lit torches that continued to burn, lighting their path onwards. Jayce glanced backwards, his own heartbeat pulsing in time with the one travelling through the floor. His crew and Alara's looked towards him, waiting for him to take the next step. Slowly Jayce let out a sigh, continuing onwards.

"Why am I leading?" he muttered, almost inaudibly. He then flinched as he felt a small hand pull on the back of his shirt. He glanced down, meeting Caelie's eyes through her mask. She slowly blinked at him, a simple and deliberate sign of acknowledgment, one of many they had taught each other. He repeated it back to her before smiling. Alara frowned as she observed the interaction, not exactly sure of what she was seeing, but as Jayce straightened up and seemed to be renewed with a sense of confidence, she couldn't help but be glad for it.

The cave naturally curved and winded on its own, leading them further downwards. "West," Witchford muttered, as he walked behind Alara, a compass in hand. The cave then came to a rather sharp turn, their path continuing onwards. "North," Witchford stated. "We are most likely near the cliffs." Alara nodded in appreciation, the information noteworthy, but not exactly useful. Jayce continued onwards to the right without fault, but Alara spotted Ordo stood still next to an area of the wall where the cave turned.

"What is it?" she asked, seeing nothing, even through Focus. Ordo reached out before hesitating, his palm only a few inches away from the cave wall. He shook his head, lowering his hand. "Nothing, just age playing tricks on me. Keep moving," he stated unconvincingly, before moving onwards. Alara glanced back at the wall, slowly reaching out to touch it. "Vanathur," Ordo called back. She glanced over to him, and he softly shook his head. Alara turned back to the wall, before leaving it behind.

Alara ran past her Marines to rejoin the main group at the front, her command squad and Jayce's crew all stood in front of a set of huge, grey, stone doors. One half was decorated by intricate golden lines that had spread outwards from a small golden rectangle. The other side had an empty slot just in reach, clearly awaiting a key. "Well, this is it," Jayce stated, reaching into his bottomless bag to pull out an identical key.

"There's no way this isn't a trap," Riley stated, her new rifle over her shoulders. "Definitely," Bjorn agreed, glancing backwards over the Marines to the only route in and out. "The minute the door opens, they'll be coming. Alara, get your Marines into a defensive position. We'll handle the Demon's Eye," Jayce stated. Alara cleared her throat. "I mean, Commander Vanathur. My apologies," Jayce quickly corrected, a few of Alara's Marines glancing towards him with increasing peculiarity. "Understood, Captain."

Jayce took in a deep breath. "Let's destroy this thing!" he stated, slotting the key into the door. A loud ping rang out, golden lines spreading out from the key as the door accepted it before opening. The cave began to shake, dust raining down from the ceiling as the doors grinded open, cold air hissing through the gaps as fresh air spilled out. The moment he could, Jayce charged inside, his crew close behind him and the Marines behind them.

They immediately found themselves at the top of a huge set of black stairs, the sides open and a sharp drop into a fog-covered abyss on either side. "Watch your step!" Jayce warned, as he began to race down, glancing around and taking in

everything he could. To his surprise, the air was fresh, and the cavern had light, provided by the small cracks in the ceiling high above them. The giant walls were made of natural stone, dark and unmarked, but the floor was made of carved stone slabs, each the size of a fully-grown person.

The heartbeat pulsing through the floor had grown stronger, the pulsing now beating through the air as they pushed onwards. The source was obvious as Jayce stared ahead: a large tree, nearly eighty foot in height, sat near the rear of the colossal cavern. It's trunk was a silvery white colour, with pulsing, fleshy veins spread throughout the smooth bark. It had leaves: a dark, soot-grey colour, that looked dead, yet as alive in fullness as a normal tree. Throughout the numerous branches and foliage were the Demon's Eye. Each fruit was the size of a head, and was connected to the tree by pink, fleshy stems. All were mostly red, with an inner pink iris.

Jayce shuddered as he continued running, his entire attention moving away from the tree - if it could be called that - to the colossal machinery surrounding it. A conveyor belt sat underneath, surrounded by large grabbing arms, presumably used for picking the fruit. The conveyor belt then led onwards into a large, open juicer, filled with barbed, grinding gears. Once grinded, the remains then dropped into a vat that then dripped the juice into another factory line carrying small vials, long covered in dust.

The Marines spread out across the large stone field, forming a defensive perimeter, with the command squad at the back, stood near Jayce and his crew. "Wicke, blow it up!" Jayce stated bluntly, the young Wizard already chanting. "Hellfire!" she yelled out, unleashing a strong stream of blue and black flames towards the tree. The moment the flames came close, a shimmering golden field spread out from the ground, the spell flying back towards Wicke. She shut it off, Tempest extending a shield of his own out to protect her from her own spell.

"Well, that was expected," Bjorn sighed. "Falconer, try to hit it with an arrow." Falconer nodded, firing off an arrow without hesitation, once more the shield arose, this time disintegrating the arrow. "Fuck," Riley muttered. "Can't you use your magic to - I don't know - take down the shield?" she asked Tempest. "I would need to find the point of origin, and get to it. Otherwise, I suspect the shield is designed to ward against it."

Jayce entered into Focus, staring up at the tree. There was no inclination that it was shielded, no signs of a protective barrier in any way. Cautiously, he stepped forwards, reaching out with his fingers towards the spot where he had last seen

the barrier. He passed through, nothing stopping him. "Fascinating, an empathetic barrier. It must be capable of sensing hostility," sparked Tempest, floating closer. "Great, a thinking shield," Bjorn muttered, glancing back towards the entrance, the sounds of incoming forces getting louder and louder.

"Falconer, would destroying this thing hurt the leyline?" Jayce asked. Falconer shook his head, his eyes scanning the floor. "This tree is feeding off it, but they are not interlinked. I do not believe the leyline is in danger," he stated. Jayce nodded. "We'll have to figure out a solution on the move, we've got company!" he called out, turning around and stepping forwards to join the Marines as several figures flew into the room atop broomsticks.

The Daughters of Shade flew over the group at an immense speed, before circling back and dropping off their passengers. Twelve Witches flew about in the air, but moments later they were joined by eight Warlocks, all kept aloft by fleshy wings sprouting from their backs. Jayce turned his attention away from them to the clear leader now stood in the centre of the room, surrounded by five Priests. The Archbishop was sleeveless, his arms very muscular, and he was quite tall, even taller than Jayce, as he approached. He wore a set of golden, cream-coloured robes, with a matching mitre on the top of his head. He had dark skin and a thick set of eyebrows, with a square jaw adorned with a smug grin.

"Ah, Exarga, I assume?" questioned the Archbishop, the Priests around him all very confident in themselves, apart from one wiry young man wearing spectacles. "Yeah, that's me. And you are?" Jayce asked, his hands by his sides as he glanced nervously towards the huge swarm of Navy entering the room. "You can call me Father Mys, although I can't imagine we'll encounter each other again. If it wasn't obvious, you've fallen for our trap. Surrender and I promise we'll find use for you. Why waste your lives when they can instead be used for something far greater?" he offered.

"Yeah, no. You're not getting your hands on the Demon's Eye," Jayce countered, stepping back, Sola and Luna both transforming into longswords. The Priests leapt back defensively, but Archbishop Mys simply held up a hand. "Blasphemy, the God's Eyes are ours by right. But if I can't convince you, that's fine, look around you. You're outnumbered three to one - you can't win, boy. This is your last chance, do not throw your peoples' lives away for nothing. I beg of you. Please, do what is right," he asked.

The machine surrounding the Demon's Eye roared to life, a Daughter of Shade flying quickly away - the Archbishop's distraction successful. "Oh, you bastard,"

Jayce muttered, a sneer across Mys' face. "Purge the unholy!" Mys yelled out, the Navy opening fire and charging forwards towards Jayce and the Marines. Jayce lunged forwards, charging towards the Archbishop, but he disappeared into the sea of Navy sailors.

Jayce swung, blocking a series of strikes aimed towards him, but, as the Navy continued pressing forwards, he was forced to retreat, crouching low and pushing away, a stream of bullets sailing past him as the Marines returned fire. The sailors around him dropped dead and he continued to retreat, glancing back with a look of anger as a bullet grazed his cheek. "Watch your aim!" Jayce yelled to the Marines, as he leapt over their defensive line.

His crew were scattered amongst the Marines, but, as he glanced around, they gave away their positions. Ordo and Bjorn were fighting on the left flank, Bjorn's height a giveaway, along with Ordo's large and powerful attacks: the ground shaking accompanied by plumes of dust. A cloud of blue smoke indicated Yuthura was also present. A shimmering shield had spread out across the right flank, and Jayce could vaguely hear the sound of music. A crowd of spirits flew over the area, and Jayce guessed Caelie was there as well.

Falconer, Xander, Wicke and Marisha were all in the middle, desperately trying to figure out how to turn off or destroy the machinery. The mechanical arms were plucking fruit from the tree one after another, the juice flowing into contained vials before getting stored in a pile to the sides. "They destroyed the controls!" Xander called out, as Jayce approached. An explosion of green fire bounced off Tempest's shield, the Daughters of Shade zooming through the air and throwing spells.

"Leave it, we can't stop it. Falconer, if the shield protecting the tree is empathetic, maybe it's controlling it. Can you use the leyline to weaken the tree so Wicke can destroy it?" Jayce asked. Falconer shrugged, firing an arrow off into the air, a Witch falling from her broom into the sea of Navy. "I can do my best, Captain." "Do it. Wicke, stay with him. If you get an opportunity, destroy it. Xander, Marisha, help where you can!" His crew nodded, Falconer and Wicke heading closer to the tree itself as they searched for a way to destroy it, whilst Xander and Marisha split off.

"Jayce!" Alara called through the communicator. "We're taking losses, and the Navy just keep coming!" Jayce turned, glancing to the three main areas the battle was converging upon. The Daughters of Shade were continuing to fly around, throwing spells down from above, but as Jayce looked past them, the Warlocks

were holding back, as if they were waiting for something. Jayce eyes widened as he spotted them chanting.

"They're preparing large area spells. Target the Warlocks, look for the Priests!" Jayce called into his communicator. "Counter! Echo!" called Wicke behind him. The Warlocks frowned, confused as their spells dispersed, before they started chanting again. "Counter! Echo!" Jayce glanced back, Wicke stepping forwards to join him. He looked beyond her to Falconer, his right arm embedded in the large tree, his body convulsing as he did something. "Protect Falconer," Jayce told Wicke. "I can't, not unless you want a lot of people to die!"

A Witch flew low across the battlefield from the right, but as she crossed onto the left flank, Bjorn leapt up, grabbing her off her broom. He threw her through the air, the young woman screaming as she flew. She hit one of the metal grabbers with a clang, silencing before dropping onto the conveyor belt below. As she struggled to get up, dazed from the impact, her body continued to roll along with the fruit, her eyes widening before she dropped into the grinder. Her screams silenced immediately, Jayce grimacing as she disappeared, before he noticed the liquid entering the vials had taken on a significantly darker red colour.

Jayce glanced between the two flanks, uncertain as to where he was needed. Astris and Riley were fighting alongside Bjorn and Ordo, their weapons blocked by the Marines in front. "Bjorn, get me line of sight!" Astris yelled, running forwards with her new pistols in hand. Jayce watched as Bjorn turned, crouching low before he threw Astris up into the air. She unloaded her weapons, two Warlocks dropping from the skies as the others flew desperately to avoid her shots. She quickly fell back down, disappearing out of sight into the crush.

"Riley!" Ordo yelled through the noise. She glanced towards him, desperately looking for an opportunity to use her rifle without a risk of hitting her allies. He waved a handful of shiny disks in his hand, her eyes widening before she nodded. He threw one up into the air, the curved disk spinning, her eyes glowing as she concentrated her Focus before she fired. The bang from her sniper rifle rang out across the battlefield, her bullet glowing blue as it sailed towards the disk before ricocheting, straight towards a Warlock. His head exploded, his body dropping from the sky. Riley released the empty cartridge, aiming for the next disk as she waited until the surface darkened, indicating there was something lined up, which in the air could only be an enemy. She fired, dropping another Warlock.

"Incoming!" yelled Wicke, no longer able to stall the enemy's large spells. The light in the cave darkened as black bolts filled the skies, twisting and spiralling as they spread out towards their targets. Jayce continued racing forwards, desperately looking for Alara as the attack drew closer, plumes of blue fire igniting the lower battlefield, consuming the still living sailors on the frontlines. The Marines braced, concentrating their Focus in a desperate attempt to protect themselves, but a figure floated upwards, drawing their gaze.

Tempest pulled the lever on the top of the antimagic sphere, his body dropping to the floor with a crash as the antimagic field spread out. The bolts of shadow and the hellfire disappeared, erased by Tempest's quick thinking. Jayce changed his direction, leaping over the Marines to stand over his crewmate, as the second wave of sailors pushed forwards. "Tempest, are you okay?" he asked, slashing a sailor before impaling another. A sparking gargle came from behind him, the djinn unable to move in his enchanted armour, and the translators disabled by the antimagic. "I hope that's a yes," Jayce stated, glancing up towards the antimagic sphere floating in the air.

"Destroy it!" yelled out the voice of the Archbishop, somewhere up ahead. A hail of bullets peppered the device before it exploded in a shower of bronze pieces. Tempest immediately sprang back into life, floating backwards before unleashing a wave of lightning from his gloves, allowing Jayce to retreat back towards the Marines. He leapt back over, glancing towards a terrified Marine putting pressure on spurting wound on another groaning Marine. Jayce grabbed a healing potion from his bottomless bag, handing it to her, before spotting numerous other wounded.

The armour the Marines wore was saving countless lives, even if they were still getting injured in the process, and their newfound use of Focus was only helping, but the Navy just kept coming. "Jayce, there's too many!" came Alara's voice through the communicator. A piercing screech came from the Demon's Eye as Falconer stumbled backwards away from the eldritch plant. "It's done!" he called into his communicator.

Jayce glanced across the warzone: the number of wounded were only increasing and, as he spotted Yuthura bleeding from head-to-toe, he knew the Marines were outgunned. Jayce ran, heading straight to Alara as he spotted her on the left flank. "Get your people out of here!" he told her, pulling her to the side as a green bolt cracked the floor where she just was. "What?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"Sorry, but you're in the way! We'll clear a path. Get out and get to safety. Save who you can."

Alara nodded, looking towards Brett and Wulf as they fought nearby. "Don't die on me!" she said, pulling a flare gun out from her belt and firing a purple flare over the battlefield. Jayce ran off, meeting up with Falconer as he stumbled towards the battlefield. "Falconer! Go with the Marines and get to the surface, you've done enough. Get in the air," he ordered. Falconer grimaced before nodding. "Yes, Captain," he called after Jayce, as he ran straight forwards to the frontlines. The Marines on the backlines were helping to support the injured, and checking the dead for any life signs, but as Jayce jumped over them, they turned, waiting for their chance.

The Navy had blocked off the stairs, using the platform to mount their gunners as well as protect a few of the Priests. Jayce grit his teeth as he reached into his pocket, grasping his target. "Clear the path!" Jayce ordered, as he threw the palm-sized orb. It flew over the battlefield, the entire world slowing down before the orb cracked and exploded outwards as RK-227 dropped onto the staircase with a crash. The entire cavern shook as he crushed the Navy underneath him, before slowly he turned to face the others stood on the staircase above him, their weapons lowered and their eyes wide in terror.

"Open fire!" screamed a Navy Lieutenant, before RK let out a guttural, grumbling roar and swept the row of Navy in front of him over the edge of the staircase, screaming into the abyss below. "Retreat! Retreat!" yelled the Navy on the stairs, RK continuing to charge after them, their bullets embedding themselves harmlessly into his huge stony body. Jayce continued to charge forwards towards the rokken, carving a bloody swath with his blades through the Navy, the enemy panicking as the Marines charged forwards with him, funnelling through the army towards the exit.

"Don't let them escape!" called a familiar voice, Jayce changing his direction towards the Archbishop. His escorts raised their swords, but Jayce cut them down with ease, dodging strike after strike before countering with a single slash from one of his swords. Jayce then leapt towards the Archbishop, swiping upwards with the flat edge of his blade as Mys attempted to fire a bolt of green light at him. The bolt sailed harmlessly away, the large man picking up a sword from a fallen sailor and chanting as he began to swing at Jayce.

His strikes fell in almost slow motion – his attacks predictable and obvious to an experienced fighter like Jayce. However, as Jayce dodged a strike and swung

towards him, the Archbishop disappeared in a flash of golden light, appearing several metres away and beginning to retreat backwards into the now significantly smaller crowd of Navy. "Jayce, tell your boulder to move!" Astris cried into her communicator.

Jayce growled as he was forced to back away. He reached into his pocket, grabbing the reformed container that normally held RK. He brushed the runes on the glass orb, pointing it towards RK as he slowly turned towards the incoming Marines. The runes carved into RK's body began to glow and the rokken was pulled inside. Jayce quickly put him back in his pocket before he ran back towards his crew as they protected the sides of the retreating Marines.

As the last living Marine disappeared from the cavern, a voice called out through his communicator. "Jayce, thank you. Finish the job!" called Alara. He nodded, looking towards the surviving enemy as they rallied around the Demon's Eye, filling their pockets with the countless vials. "You heard her! Rising Aces, do what we do best!" Jayce yelled, charging forwards. There were two remaining Warlocks, now limping on the ground, three Witches still flying, around forty Navy sailors, and Archbishop Mys had only a single Priest beside him.

Bjorn, Ordo, Xander, and Marisha roared as they charged forwards behind Jayce. Wicke and Caelie threw spells towards the Warlocks, as Zeta sang, filling the group with energy, only enhanced by the sweet-smelling blue smoke Yuthura fired over the group. Tempest put up a barrier in front of them, blocking the hail of spells and bullets fired their way before Jayce threw RK out in front of the Archbishop.

The Rising Aces unleashed their resolve, working in unison as they clashed with the Navy, the Priests, the Warlocks, and the Daughters of Shade. "Don't you dare think you've won!" yelled Archbishop Mys, his spell book floating in front of him, numerous glowing rings spinning across its surface as he prepared a final spell. "Wicke!" Jayce yelled, glancing towards her, the Archbishop too far from him to engage with.

His eyes widened as he saw her condensing a swirling and pulsing purple and black orb. Her grimoire was covered in twelve rings, all spinning quickly in opposite directions as she chanted, her face white and covered in sweat. "Get down!" she screamed, throwing the orb forwards towards the tree. It sailed across the room, Wicke's arms extended outwards as she controlled it. As it flew over Jayce he felt his clothes briefly lift off his body, as he was pulled towards the orb.

It grew in size as it flew past him, the air whipping around as it was dragged towards the black hole Wicke had conjured. A Witch flew too close, screaming as she dragged inside, her body folding in on itself before disappearing in an instant. The orb then hit the tree, and the giant plant screamed as it began to twist, the gravitational pull snapping its branches and cracking its trunk as the orb continued to grow. "Grab onto something!" Bjorn yelled out, slamming his axes into the floor as the corpses around the room began to roll, the remaining Navy and Warlocks lifting off the floor as they were dragged screaming into the void.

Jayce's legs slipped out from underneath him, and he rapidly stabbed at the ground as he was dragged towards the void. He found no grip, but RK reached out, grabbing him tightly into an embrace as a few of the others held desperately onto him. "I can't stop it!" Wicke cried out, slipping and beginning to get dragged towards own spell. She rolled across the floor, bouncing off the stone and pinwheeling, but Bjorn grabbed her leg, hanging onto his axe with one hand as Wicke hung upside down, desperately holding onto her hat.

"Jayce!" she called out, pointing towards the Archbishop, crawling slowly across the ground towards them as he held onto the cracked stone. "I've got it," Zeta yelled, as she leant into RK. She pulled out a broken violin, handing it to Jayce. He immediately threw it, the improvised projectile sailing through the air and colliding with the Archbishop. His grip slipped and he fell screaming back into the void. "How do we stop it?" Marisha yelled, as RK began to scrape across the floor.

Tempest glided past them, flying quickly towards the out-of-control spell with his arms crossed before he spread his hands out and dispelled the magic with his own antimagic spell. The gravity in the room changed and the Aces collapsed to the floor with a series of crashes, breathing a sigh of relief. "Wicke, I think it's a bit too early to use that spell," Jayce groaned. A few laughs echoed around. "Agreed," Wicke stated, laying flat on her back with a big grin on her face.

"We did it! We actually did it!" Bjorn stated, laughing before rolling over onto his back. "That we did!" Xander stated, standing to his feet before offering a hand to Caelie. "Woo!" Zeta whooped. "Go Rising Aces!" Jayce lowered his head, before standing up, a huge grin on his face as he glanced towards what remained of the Demon's Eye. There was little more than a cracked stump, accompanied by smashed vials and broken stone.

Yuthura slowly limped her way over to the wreckage, reaching down and collecting a sample of the spilt juice. "Are you sure that's a good idea?" Xander

asked, as she returned with a pipette full of the liquid. "If I can use it to find an antidote and a way of detecting it, then definitely," she stated. Jayce nodded in agreement before he walked over to Wicke and helped her to her feet. "Care to do the honours? No black hole this time." Wicke nodded, stepping closer to the remaining wreckage and chanting once more. She incinerated what remained, and - once they were happy that there was truly nothing left - they looked towards the exit.

"What now?" Bjorn asked, wiping his axes and letting Yuthura tend to his countless wounds. "Come in..." came a staticky voice through their communicators, unheard by the group. "I don't know," Jayce stated. "Shall we find a resort island?" he proposed. Zeta nodded enthusiastically, as she fixed her messed-up hair. "Get out..." came the staticky voice once more. Ordo frowned. "The Rose is the best there is, let's go there," Zeta stated, Marisha nodding in agreement. "It's... trap," came the voice once more, this time much more clearly.

Jayce's eyes widened. He grabbed his communicator. "Say again, you're patchy," he said quickly, the group looking to each other with concern. "Get out of there!" Alara's voice came through, much more clearly. Jayce summoned RK into his ball, the group racing towards the stairs without hesitation. "Enemy fleet," came Falconer's staticky voice. "They were waiting," came Alara's. "Run!"

Seize the Seas Tales: An Elder's Strategy

Arthuria wasn't quite sure as to what had whipped the Holy Palace into such an excited frenzy - she hadn't been told, but she knew something was happening. Her plans of a relaxing day off had already been ruined: daytime nightmares of the experiments she had been assisting with had removed any thought of relaxation, and Morgana's continued absence meant there was no one else she could bother without consequence. So, instead, she had taken to wandering the Paladin district in the Holy Palace.

"Metz and Baudricourt have made landfall," stated an excited Paladin Knight as she walked past with a companion. "The Elder's a genius," replied the other, as they continued walking onwards. Arthuria glanced back, changing direction to head towards the central strategy room. To her surprise, the door was open. A large collection of Paladins stood inside, surrounding a map-covered table. "They're on the run," came a voice through a communication device. The Paladins cheering. "Open fire, make them pay," stated Sentinel de Rais.

Arthuria continued circling around the room, dusting surfaces, whilst listening out. The map changed shape, images of flames covering parts of the surface, before the entire map disappeared. "What happened? Why did we lose connection?" asked Gilles de Rais. Another Paladin started moving glyphs around, but the map didn't reappear. "Unknown sir, it was cut off on their end." Rais slammed his fist onto the table. "Dammit Baudricourt, you better not let them escape. You, Sister, what are you doing here?" Arthuria flinched. "Cleaning," she stated, smiling nervously, before holding up a duster. Rais growled. "Get out!"

Chapter 79: The Price of Victory

Alara's voice repeated once more across the Aces' various communicators. "Get out of there!" she cried, the group running up the stairs out of the chamber that used to contain the Demon's Eye. "Shit! Shit! Shit!" Zeta yelled, as they sprinted onwards, leaving the antechamber entrance before coming to a split in the path that hadn't been there before. "A split?" Wicke questioned, her eyes wide as they stopped at the parting.

"They put up a barrier to hide themselves, that's how they got here so fast," Ordo explained. "Which way?" interjected Bjorn. Jayce pointed down the path they hadn't taken. "This way. They'll seal off the cathedral first," he guessed, leading the way. "Who is they? We don't know who's coming for us," stated Yuthura. "Paladins are surrounding the cathedral!" warned Falconer through their communicators. "That answers that..." muttered Yuthura.

"Paladins? Why are they here? They've had nothing to do with the Demon's Eye," asked Wicke, lighting the way for the group as they ran through the winding passageways, steadily heading upwards. "Your guess is as good as mine," Jayce answered, his heart pounding in his chest, his body exhausted from the heavy fighting he and his crew had already done. "They must have used the Demon's Eye as bait for us, once they realised we were meddling," Xander stated.

"Their Elder is the only one who would use that sort of strategy, and besides why hunt us? We've not been involved with the Paladins," questioned Zeta. Jayce glanced back at her with intrigue. "Lady Jeanne d'Arc is well-known, she leads them for a reason. My grandfather introduced us when she joined the Church," she explained. "Well, we do have some history," Bjorn stated. "Vexx killed a few of them in the Ice Floes, and my people wiped out a fleet of them."

"That doesn't matter right now," Jayce stated, pointing ahead towards the afternoon light at the end of the tunnel. "We can worry about it once we get out of here. We run for the coast, and don't stop! Let's just hope we can escape without running into them," he said, bursting out into the open air of the town, only to skid to a stop as a wall of swords pointed his way. The group stopped behind him, their eyes wide as they glanced towards the twenty Paladin Knights stood around them.

Some had taken to the nearby roofs, holding bows loaded with arrows, the rest were scattered amongst the open street, all wielding a variety of swords, some also equipped with large metal shields. All of them were dressed from head-to-

toe in plate armour, but two in particular stood out. Jayce glanced towards one of the Sentinels as he stood on a nearby roof with the archers. He wore bronze armour, adorned with red cloth and a matching waist-length cape. His helmet had two long vertical slits that formed a 'Y' as his visor, with a pair of small spikes on his temples and a red ribbon extending out of the top. He had a long curved blade in his hand and, upon seeing Jayce looking up at him, he crouched down, pushing up his visor a little and grinning.

The other Sentinel, stood on the street, was much larger in stature. He was taller than Jayce and significantly wider. His armour was a little more robust than the other Sentinel and the other Paladin Knights, with more layers of protective metal. His armour was the same grey silver as the other Paladins, but he had black cloth hanging from his belt over his legs as well as under his armpits. His helmet was more bucket-shaped with a 'V' shaped visor, with three fin-like metal ornaments lining the corners and middle. A dark greatsword was resting over his shoulder and - unlike the other Paladins - he was holding his helmet.

"Well, I guess our information was correct," stated Sentinel Robert de Baudricourt. "The rats came right to us," he growled. He had dark skin and a large round head, with closely cropped hair and a dark goatee. His eyes were a bright green, with a vertical scar over his left eye. "Of course they did. Did you ever doubt the Elder, Baudricourt?" called down the other Sentinel. "Told you," muttered Zeta, the others glancing nervously at the large group of enemies in front of them.

"Fuck off, Metz!" called back Baudricourt. The other Sentinel laughed, seemingly unconcerned by the Aces' presence. Jayce glanced past Sentinel Jean de Metz towards the mounted bird flying high in the air, climbing higher and higher. "May we help you?" Jayce asked, drawing their attention back to him. Ordo stepped up next to him, as the other Aces quietly arranged themselves. "No, I'm afraid not," stated Metz.

"Your crimes have already been judged, Pirate," interrupted Baudricourt. "However, if you surrender and make this easy, we promise the safe collection of your magical possessions and your swift and merciful executions," added Metz. "Yeah, I'm going to have to reject your generous offer. No deal. Now!" Jayce ordered, entering into Focus and grabbing Zeta before throwing her up into the air as Ordo threw Yuthura.

In a blur of feathers, Wren and Falconer flew past. Falconer caught Yuthura, dragging her onto Wren's back as Wren snatched Zeta out of the air, the quartet

flying quickly away with Zeta screaming as she hung from Wren's claws. Wicke and Caelie threw out the spells they had quietly been chanting, blocked from view by Xander and Bjorn. The plume of blue fire forced the Knights on the left to dart to the side, ducking quickly behind others with shields, whilst Caelie's skeletons charged forwards, covered with a shadowy fog. "Run!" Jayce yelled, stepping forwards and holding out Sola and Luna as Ordo backed him up.

Baudricourt let out a sigh, slamming his helmet onto his head and throwing his Knights out of the way as he charged towards Jayce, swinging his blade downwards. Jayce crossed his longswords, catching the greatsword, but his knees buckled out from underneath, his eyes going wide as Sola and Luna began to scream in his head – the dark greatsword slowly slicing into the two mimics. Ordo slammed his club into Baudricourt, forcing him backwards before pulling Jayce to his feet.

Jayce stared in horror as Sola and Luna healed themselves, a green blood dripping from the cuts in their blade forms. "Go!" Ordo yelled to Jayce, charging in the opposite direction from the rest of the crew, Baudricourt roaring and racing after him. Jayce ran forwards, towards the Paladin Knights, swinging with his two swords. The first Paladin blocked with their shield, and Jayce slashed at another, his blade bouncing harmlessly off their armour. Jayce gulped as they swung at him, both blades fast-moving and precise.

Jayce turned and ran, leaping high using his Focus and clambering quickly onto an unoccupied roof before he began to sprint across the rooftops - away from the rest of his crew, away from Ordo. He ran faster than he had ever run before, his vision blurring, his heart pounding in his chest, and a feeling of cold fear chasing after him. His neck tingled and he slid down one of the slate roofs, narrowly avoiding the curved bronze blade of Sentinel Metz as he slashed where Jayce's head had been.

Jayce leapt over a street, continuing to run as quickly as he could. He glanced back, Metz hot on his tail, and - to Jayce's continued concern - he noticed he was gaining. Metz's armour glowed brightly in Jayce's eyes; it was heavily enchanted, but beyond that, Jayce spotted he was also using Focus, of a level equal to his. "You're under-gear'd, Pirate!" yelled Metz, leaping towards him and swinging. Jayce ducked once more, dropping from the roofs to the street below as Metz raced over him.

Panic filled his mind as he scrambled to an alleyway, squeezing through the tight gap and leaping over crates to exit out of the other side into a small square. His

body tingled once more and he dove forwards, rolling away as Metz slammed his blade into the floor where he had just stood. The citizens around him screamed and ran off, leaving the two of them alone in the square. "I promise you a quick and easy death. Give up, let it all be over, Exarga. I promise you that Baudricourt wouldn't be nearly as nice," stated Metz, the pair circling around each other.

"Why are you here? How do our actions concern the Paladins?" Jayce questioned. Metz let out a sigh. "Really? You want to question me? Now? I'd worry about yourself," Metz countered, darting forwards in a blur. Jayce blocked with Sola and Luna, pushing the terrifyingly strong attack back as Metz forced him to take a step back. Sola and Luna once again screamed in his mind. "Hang in there," he called out. Metz tilted his head, his face hidden behind his helmet. "Sorry?"

"Not you!" Jayce yelled, charging forwards and slashing with his swords. He attacked high and low, Metz vaulting between the two slashes before ducking under the third. "Too slow! Come on, I'd expect more from you, Captain Exarga!" Jayce roared, increasing the speed of his strikes, aiming for the gaps in Metz's armour. The Sentinel blocked every strike, waiting for an opportunity. Sola and Luna continued to chatter his mind, and, as Jayce glanced towards them they shimmered, their black, viscous form underneath changing into a deep crimson colour.

Jayce leapt back, uncertain as to what had just occurred. The pair chattered once more, his hands moving on their own and he flicked the blades out, the pair morphing into identical copies of Metz's sword. "Interesting," stated Metz, standing up straight and crossing his arms. "Maybe I won't kill the creatures. I think I might take them for myself," he declared. Jayce yelled once more, charging forwards, the magic of Metz's blades flowing through him, reinvigorating him. He slashed faster and harder, forcing Metz quickly backwards across the square.

The sense of fear faded as adrenaline continued to pump into him, until Metz appeared behind him in the blink of an eye. Jayce twisted to the side to avoid the lunge aimed at his back, but as Metz's blade lay between his arms, his eyes went wide as he realised it was a feint. Metz twisted his sword, leveraging it on Jayce's forearm and slicing upwards, through Jayce's right eye. Jayce screamed as he stumbled backwards, the vision on his right side entirely gone and blood dripping down his face.

"Ooh, ouch. That's, that's nasty. My bad, I was hoping to open up your neck," chided Metz, as Jayce placed his shoulder to where his eye had been, feeling nothing but an empty hole. "Right, let me finish this quickly," Metz goaded, flicking part of Jayce's eye off the tip of his blade onto the floor. Jayce yelled once more, his vision filled with red, as hot pain ran through his face. He lunged, his blades pointed to Metz's throat, but the Sentinel just leant back, his green eyes glowing through his visor before he swung back with his sword.

Jayce desperately blocked, but Metz twisted his blade around the sides of Jayce's swords, turning the upwards strike into a downwards one before he carried the attack along Jayce's blades. The sword caught Jayce's vambraces and, as he pulled away, Metz carried the strike through Jayce's right elbow. Jayce fell to his knees, blood spurting out of his severed arm as he found himself unable to speak, the pain unbearable, his arm on fire despite laying on the floor in front of him.

Sola liquified, grabbing his severed arm before darting inside Jayce's bottomless bag. "Yikes, well, it was fun – I'll admit that much," Metz stated, crouching not too far away from Jayce. "I suppose I should answer your question before you go into the great abyss." Sola re-emerged from the bottomless bag, moving quickly onto Jayce's arm before squeezing, acting as an emergency tourniquet. The mimic siblings chattered in mind. He couldn't understand them, but he sensed their fear.

"You see, when the Church learnt of this God's Eye, they were besides themselves with joy. An easy win, a way of turning our enemies into our allies. But my Elder, she saw something else. A weapon that would inevitably be used against us. So, she put in a plan for us to ensure that didn't happen, to backstab the others and destroy the God's Eye for the good of the world. Of course nobody in the Church would know it was us, or that we had some ourselves, but I guess that's where you came in," Metz boasted, pacing back and forth as Jayce struggled to fight through the pain.

"An enemy, a foe to blame. Although we don't have the God's Eye, and I trust you're the type to destroy it rather than keep it for yourself, we still win. So know that much, Jayce Exarga. Anyway, I'll give Elder d'Arc your regards. Oh, but before that - by any chance, do you know where that assassin you had is? I really miss one of my students, and I kind of need him dead." Jayce glanced up, his eye widening. "Vexx?"

"Yeah, that's the one – I think. Where is he? Give me a location and I'll spare one of your crewmates in exchange," Metz offered, crouching back down. Jayce grit his teeth, his hand in his pocket. "Fuck you!" Jayce yelled, throwing the orb in

his pocket onto the floor. It shattered and RK burst outwards, swinging his arm into Metz. Metz grunted as he was sent bouncing along the floor, smashing into a wall before crumpling, his helmet rolling away. "Go," Jayce said weakly, as he climbed onto RK's back, tucking himself into the crevices on the rokken's body. RK grumbled softly, expressing his concern before he charged forwards, several Paladin Knights emerging into the square.

"Xander, Caelie, Ordo, Jayce, Marisha, where are you?" called Bjorn's voice through the communicator, as Jayce's eye began to close on its own. Sola and Luna chittered, waking him from his stupor a little later, his blood spread across RK's back. Jayce glanced around: he didn't recognise the area they were in, but RK was still charging onwards. The rokken slammed through a house, a scream coming from inside as they ran onwards. "RK no! Use the streets, there's innocents around."

"Incoming!" warned Falconer's voice, through Jayce's communicator. A loud whistling sailed above Jayce before the streets and houses around them exploded into flame, the Navy and Paladins firing on the island. "Those bastards," Jayce growled, as another barrage detonated around him, screams filling the air. Jayce continued to slump into RK's body, but slowly he fumbled for his bottomless bag, reaching inside and pulling out a healing potion. "Sorry Doc," he muttered, drinking it quickly, his body burning as his cuts and wounds forced themselves closed. Pain tore through him and his vision went black as he slumped onto RK.

"Xander, where are you?" repeated Bjorn. Xander glanced around at the flames all around him; his hammer was in his hand, dripping blood as he glanced at the Navy squad in front of him. "Commander Leers, what do we do?" asked a young man, his eyes full of terror as Xander continued to break the bones of any Navy foolish enough to approach him. The Commander grit his pearly white teeth, his custom gold pistol held in his hand and his forces diminishing.

"Go, get him!" he ordered, shoving the young man forwards. With a terrified cry the young sailor ran towards Xander, only for his legs to be swept out from under him and for Xander to slam his hammer down on his knee. The sailor screamed in pain and Xander turned towards the Commander, stepping closer. Commander Leers yelped, turning and running quickly away. "Bastard!" Xander grumbled, glancing at the cuts on his arms and the bullet wound in his shoulder.

The whistling came once more, the Navy sailors cowering on the floor as the island exploded around them. Xander grunted as he was peppered with debris, shielding the young man with his body. "Why?" asked the sailor, as Xander stood

up, blood trickling down his temple. "Why the hell not?" Xander replied, pulling a healing potion out from his pocket. "The other young ones are alive, get them to safety," he ordered, pointing at the other cowering sailors, before he turned and ran onwards into the fire.

He continued running until the flames no longer surrounded him, the streets empty of people. "Xander?" repeated Bjorn, but Xander ignored him, unable to hear anything as blood trickled from his ears. The streets continued straight ahead, but they also split off to the left. As he came to the junction, the houses exploded around him, another volley destroying the island. There were no flames, but the houses began to collapse, his eyes going wide as he spotted a tiny girl and young woman cowering in what remained of their front room.

The lower part of the house had been destroyed and the walls began to give way, Xander's body moving on its own as he raced towards them, their faces and bodies changing as he saw his wife, his daughter. He grunted as he braced himself, catching the falling ceiling and holding it up with every ounce of strength he had left in him. He glanced behind him, his wife and daughter had disappeared, replaced by the young girl and her mother. They stared at him, the woman's eyes wide with terror, the girl's with scared awe.

Xander winced as he felt something pierce his front, he looked away from them. Commander Leers stood facing him, a ragtag collection of sailors armed with pistols and rifles emerging from one of the many alleys, the boy Xander had saved amongst them. "Open fire!" Leers yelled. Xander dropped the ceiling onto his shoulders, spreading himself as wide as he could to protect the girl and her mother, the bullets spreading throughout his body as he roared. "Go!" he grunted, the young woman grabbing her daughter and fleeing from the hail of bullets, racing away down the street.

Xander grimaced as his knee gave out and he dropped down, still holding the edge of the house. The firing stopped, his body riddled with bullet holes, his focus only protecting him so much. "I love you, my darling. No matter how far away you are on your journey, know that we will always be waiting for you," said his wife Brianna. "Come home, Daddy," called his daughter Ava. Xander's vision blurred as he tried to focus on the person approaching him.

Jayce jolted back to consciousness as RK jostled him, the rokken grumbling as they charged through the streets. His eyes widened as he remembered where he was, unable to see anything on his right side, and his arm still missing. "RK, Sola, Luna, thank you," he stated, reinvigorated. He pulled himself up, glancing along

the street ahead at the wreckage around them. Far in the distance the street split in two opposite directions, a ruined house directly in front of them, kept up by what looked like a person. Jayce's eyes widened as he focused in on Xander, a Navy Commander stepping in front of him with a pistol in hand.

Jayce vaulted over RK racing forwards in desperation. "Xander!" he cried, his body in agony. "Xander!" Jayce cried, the faint voice drawing Xander's attention to the street to his left. He was covered in blood, they both were, but Xander couldn't see Jayce's missing arm or eye, still he knew it was him. "What are you looking at, scum?" asked Commander Leers, placing the barrel of his pistol to Xander's forehead. "My friend," Xander said quietly, before Leers pulled the trigger.

"No!" Jayce screamed, as Xander grabbed the Navy Commander, dragging him backwards with one arm whilst throwing something with the other. Leers pulled the trigger, the back of Xander's head exploding outwards before the building collapsed on the both of them, spewing dust in all directions. Jayce stumbled, falling to his knees, tears beginning to fall down his face as he sobbed uncontrollably. A tinkling echoed across the stones in front of him, Xander's hammer bouncing along the stone. "Xander," Jayce sobbed, reaching out towards it and clutching onto the handle.

RK scooped him up onto his back, continuing to charge onwards before taking turning right as the Navy began to fire at him and Jayce, one young man desperately trying to stop them. "Xander? Xander where are you?" called Bjorn through the communicator. Jayce gently placed Xander's hammer into his bottomless bag before he slowly reached up to his necklace, grasping it tightly. "Xander... Xander didn't make it," Jayce said softly.

The entire island silenced, explosions and shooting stopping as a cold wind blew through the streets. A fog appeared out of nowhere, a faint green glow building up somewhere near the middle of the island before the scream of a young girl filled the air. A green swirling beam split the skies, thousands of glowing spectral spirits flying off in all directions. "Halt!" yelled a pair of Paladins, charging out in front of Jayce and RK, but a swarm of spirits descended upon them.

Their armour clattered to the floor as the spirits flew off, two more souls added to the swarm. "Caelie," Jayce muttered, his eyes wide as he stared at the swirling beam of souls. "RK, we need to get to her!" Jayce yelled, the rokken taking a path leading towards the giant beam. "Jayce, where are you?" Wicke cried. Jayce

grabbed another healing potion from his bottomless bag, drinking it quickly. "I'm heading to Caelie, is anyone with her?" he asked.

"No, she's on her own," answered Marisha, her voice holding back a sob. "RK, faster! Please," Jayce begged, his body fighting against the healing potion as it rapidly tried to recover his lost blood. The rokken couldn't go any faster, but in an instant the beam of green light vanished, along with the spirits and the fog. "Caelie!" Jayce yelled, spotting another junction up ahead. There was blast of lightning, electrifying a group of Paladins as Wicke charged forwards with Marisha, Tempest and Bjorn. Ordo lay bleeding across Bjorn's back.

Jayce jumped off RK, racing towards them. "Jayce," Wicke sobbed. Jayce glanced around. "Where is she?" he desperately asked, glancing around, only for Marisha to shakily point past him. Jayce turned, staring in horror at the mass of Paladins and Navy in front of him throughout the market square. Stalls had been blown apart, the houses damaged or on fire, with several clusters of Navy gunners and Knights stood on top of the numerous buildings. The square was covered in sailors and Paladins, but at the centre, stood next to the large central fountain, was Baudricourt.

He stood helmetless, with blood covering the left side of his face and his eye swollen shut. His sword was loose in his left arm, but in his right gauntlet he held Caelie, by her throat. She hung in his grip, fighting to break free, her face hidden by her mask. "Caelie!" Jayce screamed, stepping forwards only for Bjorn to grab his remaining arm and hold him back. "Caelie!" Jayce screamed again. She glanced towards them, swinging her fist into Baudricourt's swollen eye.

He roared in pain, slamming her head into the stone fountain. Her mask fell off and her body went limp, blood trickling down her forehead. "Exarga!" Baudricourt roared. "I owe you and your people a debt. And I assure you, I will take it slowly. I will kill your crew one at a time, until you beg me for death. And I will start with this one, that Witch is next!" he yelled, pointing to Wicke. Bjorn let go, but Jayce stood stunned, unable to move as Baudricourt began to squeeze. Caelie's eyes widened as she reached out towards Jayce and her crew, gasping for air. "Run," she whispered, before Baudricourt pressed his thumb through her windpipe and crushed her neck, her body going limp in his grip.

Jayce couldn't hear anything other than his scream, not even as the Paladins raced forwards to try to stop him, not as the Navy shot at him. He let out a scream of pure unfiltered anguish, one of agony, of pain, of misery, as he watched Baudricourt drop Caelie's body behind the fountain. She disappeared, her small

hand the only part of her in view. He unleashed a tidal wave of Panic, the air warping and twisting with cyan energy as he cried for the loss of Xander, for the death of Caelie. The Paladins nearest to him seized up, dropping to the floor unconscious. The sailors on the roofs went limp, falling one after another to the ground below, their hearts stopping.

Baudricourt staggered backwards, before he gripped his sword and charged forwards. His eyes widened as Wicke stepped next to Jayce, tears falling uncontrollably as she threw a pillar of blue flame. "Echo!" she yelled, as Jayce stopped, staggering backwards. Three more pillars of fire spread out, the remaining conscious Paladins desperately throwing up protective shields to halt Wicke's fire. Jayce just stood there, watching the flames consume everything in front of him, before he saw Marisha grab Wicke and begin to pull her back, the world moving in slow motion.

Marisha screamed something at him, her eye wide with fear and desperation. She screamed it again, grabbing him and dragging him with her. His body felt heavy, and not his, but slowly he began to run, his legs moving after his fleeing crew. Wicke ducked behind RK along with Marisha and Bjorn as a squad of Navy and Paladins attempted to block them, bolts of gold fire and bullets flying past him as Jayce moved towards them.

He leapt over them, jumping off RK's back. Sola and Luna fused together into a copy of Baudricourt's dark greatsword and Jayce slammed it down through a sailor, parting her in half before he swung wildly at a Paladin. They desperately blocked, but Jayce slammed his body into them, crouching low and swinging through their legs before he cleaved the heavy blade through their armour like it was butter.

Bjorn stared at Jayce as he swung the heavy greatsword with one arm through the squad in front of him. His face was blank, stained with blood and tears, his eye cold as he slaughtered them. The last sailor backed away and Jayce pointed the greatsword at him, the blade splitting into the two mimics who leapt on the victim in front of him. The sailor dropped, screaming as the mimics tore him apart before returning to their master, who just turned to his crew. "Don't stop!" he ordered, stumbling forwards.

RK grabbed Jayce, carrying him once more and charging forwards. Another squad of Paladins tried to stop them, but RK roared and flattened them. The Aces continued limping forwards along the street, the Paladins racing after them. The street split once more, a row of houses blocking their path to the seafront. RK

began to turn, but Jayce pointed forwards. "Go through!" he ordered. RK barrelled through the house, the crew passing through before it collapsed behind them.

Jayce reached under his backpack, grabbing the Stacked Hand before he threw it to Marisha. She uncorked the bottle, running her fingers across the runes on top, releasing the ship onto the pier in front of them. The remaining Aces didn't stop running, but Marisha pointed the bottle at the crew, pulling them inside before climbing desperately on board. She released them, Bjorn racing to the wheel, Jayce slipping from RK's back onto the deck, as Tempest put up a shield. Falconer and Wren flew down from the skies, dropping Yuthura and Zeta onto the deck as the ship began to pull away from Sunflower Island. But Jayce just lay there, his back on the deck of the ship, his eye staring upwards at the smoke filling the sky, blocking out the sunlight. His vision darkened and he fell into unconsciousness.

Seize the Seas Tales: Aftermath

News spread fast of the battle between the Church and the Rising Aces. To those who knew, the lack of mention of the Wolfpack was a blessing, but as Alara sat reading the report, nearly two weeks later, she couldn't help but grit her teeth. Two dead: Xander and Caelie. She looked down, shaking her head. "Poor Jayce," muttered Astris, as she stood with Wulf, Riley, Witchford and Brett in Alara's quarters. "Poor Caelie," muttered Wulf, looking up at the ceiling. "They were good people, they deserved better," Astris stated, looking down at the pistols on her sides. Alara nodded.

"What do we do now?" Riley asked. "We can't let the Church get away with this." The rest of the room looked towards her, a collection of sad expressions on their faces. "What? They were in the wrong! They can't just get away with this," she stated, her face red. Astris stepped towards her, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Th-they can't just... all of those people..." she whimpered. Astris nodded. "I know. I know. We will find a way to bring them to justice, but we can't just yet," she said, looking towards Alara.

Alara just looked at the floor, eventually letting out a sigh before getting to her feet. "We need to lay low for now. We haven't been called out, but there's no way our presence wasn't noticed," she stated. A knock drew their attention to the door. "Commanders, Lieutenants, sorry to bother you," said Lieutenant Greiger, one of the Communications Officers. "What is it?" Alara asked. Greiger held out

a small document. "The New Era have asked for assistance. Apparently there's a vampire problem," she said.

Alara took it, stepping outside into the sunlight as she read through the document. Kidnappings, pillaging, murders. She looked back towards Riley and the others. "We start with this. Witchford, set a course for the Mysts. We're going hunting!" Alara declared, the others moving quickly away to their stations. Astris stepped forwards, standing on Alara's right. The pair looked at each other before slowly Astris reached up to her neck, taking off her necklace. "They'll pay. We have to make them pay," she stated quietly, turning and throwing it over the edge of the ship.

Far across the seas, Cassandra sat reading the same report. "Only one body could be recovered, the damage across the island was extensive and due entirely to the actions of the Paladins and their accompanying Navy. But of course this is going to be placed on Jayce and his crew," Cassandra said quietly, as she looked up towards Sylvie Gamble. "Cass... I'm so sorry," Sylvie said quietly. Cassandra wiped her eyes, standing up.

"It was bound to happen sooner or later. No one is invulnerable, no crew survives without loss. At least Xander can see his family again. I hope that much," she said quietly, before a sob forced its way out of her. "Caelie deserved more. So much more," she cried, Sylvie stepping forwards to hug her as they glanced towards the pair of wanted posters on the Admiral's desk, both now stamped and marked as 'Deceased'.

"Damn. Do we know where they are?" Kitty Deliver asked Anne Muerte, as they sat together looking at a newspaper, along with Rebel Red and Somme Ankor, in a café somewhere near the Frontier. Anne shook her head. "No, they've disappeared. Probably recovering after everything that happened," she stated, her shoulders slumped and her head low. Slowly Rebel reached out towards her, placing a gentle hand on her back. "I'm sorry about your student," he said. Anne nodded, letting out a sigh before grabbing her cocktail. "She was a good kid. We should find the Rising Aces before they destroy themselves. This is only the beginning."

"No," Kitty declared, standing up and barely getting any taller, her Captains looking towards her with surprise. "They've suffered a loss, a big one at that, but if they can't learn and grow from it then they're not worth our time. They will recover, but we'd only hinder them if we offer a crutch to lean on," she stated. The others nodded, but, as Anne and Rebel leant back in their chairs, Somme

couldn't help but notice Kitty digging her nails into her palms, cutting through her gloves. "They have to get stronger," she muttered, slowly sitting back down, the holes in her palms sealing over.

"Get up!" yelled Cardinal Beauford, as he dragged William the Priest across the floor of the Inner Sanctum of the Holy Palace. "Please, please, I beg of you!" William cried, his glasses missing and bruises across his face. Beauford threw him forwards, William's body hitting the dark stone floor with a smack as he landed in a large circle of light. "Your Excellency, I have brought the witness," stated Beauford as he knelt next to William, the pair in front of a giant white and gold throne.

"You may go," said a gentle voice in front of them, the Pope hidden in shadow. "Your Excellency?" questioned Beauford, the huge room empty apart from the three of them. "Beauford, are you questioning my decree?" asked Pope Alexander. William whimpered. "N-no your Eminence," Beauford stuttered, standing with his head still bowed. "Then go." The Cardinal walked quickly away, leaving the pair alone in the room.

William kept his head low to the floor, prostrating himself as he whimpered quietly. "Raise your head. You have nothing to fear, William." The Pope's voice was soft, gentle, but the words chilled William's body to the core. He gulped, raising his head and attempting to stand. An invisible force pressed him down, his body ignoring his commands. "I said, raise your head." William obeyed his master, looking up to meet the Pope's gaze.

The Pope's golden eyes stared through him, the rest of him hidden in the shadows of the Inner Sanctum. "The Cardinals place the failure to acquire the God's Eye on you. I do not. Be grateful that this is the case," he said softly, the words anything but. "Thank you, thank you, your Grace!" William stated. A white smile emerged through the darkness. "The failure is upon your previous leader. Archbishop Mys failed, and he has already suffered the consequence. I do not believe in punishing those who are loyal. You, my servant, have only continued to prove your loyalty."

William opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out, the coldness rushing through him. "Still, I do find it... intriguing that you were one of the only survivors. And you returned home of your own accord, through your own means. Were you expecting a reward? My blessing for what you experienced?" Pope Alexander asked. William vigorously shook his head. "I live only to serve you, your Excellency. I wish nothing more than to be of use," William said

desperately. The Pope chuckled. "Good. Good. Then you can begin by telling me who ruined our plans. Tell me about this Jayce Exarga and the Marines who aided him."

Chapter 80: Saying Goodbye

Explosions thundered through Jayce's head, his vision fading in and out: destroyed streets, flaming buildings, Xander's bloody hand visible through rubble, Caelie's neck snapping in Baudricourt's grip. "Jayce!" called the voice of a young girl. "Jayce!" it repeated. His vision darkened, the heavy weight on his body lessening. "Get him inside! Man the cannons!" called a deeper, gruffer voice. Cannon fire boomed around him. "Ordo's not breathing! Doc! Doc!" called another voice.

The noise softened and weight returned, this time resting on his legs, and slowly, Jayce opened his eyes. "Ugh," he groaned, slowly sitting up. Half the room lay in darkness, and as he tried to open his right eye it refused to obey. Slowly he raised his hand to his face, pausing as he spotted stitching across his elbow before he felt similar stitching across his eye. "Shit," he muttered, cautiously pressing on his eyelid. He felt nothing underneath, confirming his thoughts.

He glanced around, the weight on his lower body continuing to press down on him, but as he spotted red hair covering a teenage girl, he let out a sigh of relief. His body burned, his muscles trying to drag him back down onto his pillows and exhaustion rampant throughout him, but he fought against it. A sharp, piercing pain flew through his head, causing him to wince and bend over as he placed his palms to his temples. Xander died once more in front of him; Caelie's body fell out of view behind the fountain in the market square of Sunflower Island.

"No..." he said quietly, flashes of golden light jolting his memory. He blinked, watching Baudricourt charge towards him, Caelie's tiny hand disappearing from view, her body left behind. "No, no, no, no, no-no-no-no," he groaned, the figure laying over his legs slowly waking as he got louder and louder. "Caelie, Xander," Jayce cried, holding his head in his palms. He felt his bed move, a figure climbing onto it before he felt a pair of arms wrap themselves around him.

"I know, I know," Wicke said quietly, holding him as he sobbed. "They're gone, but we're safe," she said softly, resting her head onto him. Eventually he looked up, turning his head to see her. Her eyes were red and puffy, and dried tears stained her face. She smiled weakly at him, bowing her head and leaning into him. "What did I miss?" he asked, she just shook her head, getting closer to him. They sat in silence until eventually she spoke up. "You've been asleep for five days."

"Five days!" he yelled. "Wh-what happened?" he asked. Her shoulders began to shake, tears dripping from her face. "I-I thought you wouldn't wake up. You collapsed when we got onto the ship. We were pursued all day and all night by the Paladin fleet. Bjorn forced me to rest whilst the others fought and protected us. Yuthura was in surgery, dealing with Ordo, and... it was horrible, so much blood. I had to sit and wait, hoping you wouldn't die, hoping that Ordo would survive, that, that we wouldn't be sunk. Once I recovered enough magic, I burnt the rest of our magic stones and threw a storm at the pursuing Paladins. We've been hiding in a cove ever since."

Jayce stared at the fear in her eyes, the tears lining her face. "I'm sorry." She shook her head, balling her fists before pounding on his bruised shoulders. "No, don't apologise. You got us out of there, we're alive, don't say you're sorry!" she cried. He winced, before nodding. "Xander? Caelie?" he asked desperately. Wicke looked down, shaking her head. "The Guild confirmed their deaths." Jayce just nodded, laying back, looking up at his ceiling.

"How is Ordo?" he asked, biting his lip to hold back his grief. Wicke lay back as well. "Alive. Doc operated for a while, and then she immediately reattached your arm. The old man is awake and healing, somehow. Yuthura is preparing to regrow your eye." Jayce nodded in appreciation, but a small whimper escaped Wicke. "They're dead," she cried. "Caelie and Xander, they're dead!" Her cries turned into full sobs as she broke down, wailing as she hugged one of Jayce's pillows. Jayce couldn't say anything; his throat wouldn't obey him, a lump unwilling to move as he lay listening to Wicke's cries.

Eventually she quietened, tiring herself out and shutting her eyes as she fell asleep, still hugging his pillow with tears still dripping down her face. Jayce shook his head, groaning as he forced himself to sit up before he slid out of his bed onto his feet. His body shook as he stumbled forwards towards his desk. He caught himself, desperately searching through his drawers until he found what he was looking for: an old notebook.

With the torn and sandy notebook in hand, he stumbled towards his door, dropping to his knees on his rug before he dragged his legs into a crossed position. He opened the notebook, reading through his old notes before he forced his body into Focus, pain shooting through every fibre in his body. His body shook as he fought himself, controlling the pain and flattening his left palm before holding it vertically in front of him. "Fight it," he growled, through gritted teeth, shutting his eye.

Jayce extended his other arm high above him, the world muting around him. He ran his raised arm around in a clockwise direction before he bent his hand inwards, forcing his fingers into a fist and colliding it into his palm. Complete silence followed, then he felt himself falling, wind rushing around him before he hit a cold surface with a splash. He continued to sink, his eyes still shut as a cold feeling enveloped him.

Eventually the cold feeling faded, or he got used to it – he wasn't sure, and he opened his eyes. He was floating in water, although it was everywhere, so much so it was almost like air. He took a deep breath, his lungs empty yet full at the same time as he looked around, continuing to sink until he was stood on a sandy seabed, the sand a dark grey colour. He jumped, floating before sinking back down. A cold thrum build up around him, energy filling his surroundings before a loud gong rang out, the air crackling as a wave of blue light flew over him.

Jayce turned towards the black pyramid in the centre of the underworld. It had a flat top, with a colossal golden bell suspended above it, hanging from a long silvery rope that floated upwards into nothingness. Gates of coloured fire lined the path towards the pyramid, thousands of souls making their way towards the stairs leading up the pyramid, towards the large swirling blue and purple portal at its peak.

Jayce turned away, looking to the edges of the large open plane, foggy darkness surrounding the Abyss. Every-so-often Jayce could spot a giant serpent, or fish-like creature, swim close to the edge before disappearing. He looked down at his body: unlike last time, he wasn't fully transparent. His body was solid, but his Spirit Font was visible inside him, the cascading silver bowls larger than before. He took a deep breath, walking towards the nearest gate before passing around it.

Immediately a group of cloaked figures descended upon him, floating around him. White masks covered their faces, warped into expressions of emotion. Large white ropes bound their waists with no legs present underneath. Their hands were hidden in their sleeves, and they floated around him. A mask with an expression Jayce assumed was joy stopped him, blocking his way. The eye and mouth holes were nothing but empty voids, but he sensed the reaper talking to him.

"I'm here to see some people," Jayce told it. It floated closer and he placed a foot behind him, taking a defensive stance. "I've come to say goodbye, you will not stop me," he ordered, his fists glowing with blue fire as he concentrate his Focus.

The reapers backed away, floating quickly away from him. The bell rang out, a fresh wave of blue light flying over him, and Jayce turned his attention back to the pyramid, carrying onwards.

He kept walking until he reached the last gate. There were clusters of people all around him, some all on their own, others in pairs, some in full families. Every-so-often a figure would depart from the long line of spirits and join an awaiting soul, reuniting before they carried on their journey together. Jayce glanced from group to group, searching until he found them. A large man knelt on the floor; he still wore his blacksmith's clothes, albeit adorned with a black kilt rather than his usual brown trousers.

Xander's face was still tattooed, the large lines still marking his face, the smaller ones turning into small spirals and curves. His beard was as neatly cropped as it always was, his head still smooth, but, as he glanced away from the small girl and the young woman he was hugging, he looked younger, in his early thirties. He gasped, his eyes widening as he spotted Jayce. He let go of his wife and daughter, standing up and towering over them, his daughter retreating behind him and taking his hand.

"Jayce? No, no..." he said quietly. Although he was clothed, Jayce could see right through him, Xander's body spectral with his bones highlighted underneath. "I'm alive," Jayce reassured, stepping forwards. Xander let out a sigh of relief, nodding. "Did the others...?" Jayce nodded. "Good, thank goodness," Xander said. The little girl tugged his hand, and he looked down at her. "Right, of course. Jayce Exarga, this is my daughter, Ava, and my wife, Brianna. This is the man who has been looking after me: my Captain," Xander stated.

The little girl ran forwards, hugging Jayce's legs tightly. "Captain!" she said excitedly. Jayce tried to smile but found himself unable to do so, his face unwilling to obey. Instead he placed a hand on the top of her head before looking towards Xander and his wife, his face fallen. Brianna looked at Jayce with a nod of appreciation, her eyes filled with sadness, but a soft smile on her face. "Thank you for looking after my husband," she said gently. Jayce shook his head. "I didn't do a good enough job," he said quietly.

Xander shook his head, his daughter retreating back behind him. He lifted her high into the air, placing her on his shoulders. "You did more than a fine job. I died long ago Jayce, but you and your crew breathed a new life into this corpse. I thank you for that. Truly, thank you." Jayce looked down and Xander stepped forwards, reaching out and placing a hand on his shoulder. "I lived for Caelie,

she made me her Uncle and I needed to protect her. Or so I thought. The truth is, she kept me alive. But it was you who made me look forward to the next day, you who gave me purpose again. My Captain, you did not kill me. Besides, I died to save others - a fate better than any I could have asked for."

"But-" Jayce attempted. Xander shook his head, taking his hand off of Jayce and reaching out to his wife. She stepped forwards taking it. "Smile Jayce. You're alive, don't waste it mourning me," Xander reassured. Jayce nodded, looking down before he forced a tearful smile and met Xander's gaze. "Aye, good lad. Unfortunately it seems our time together has run out. I'm grateful to get a chance to say goodbye. Please tell our crew, our family, to live long and happy lives."

Jayce nodded. "Good." A wave of blue energy flew over them. "I suppose we best be on our way. There's been enough waiting," Xander stated, handing over his daughter to his wife, the pair beginning to walk towards the pyramid before stopping and waiting. "Before I go. Tell Tempest that the forge is his, and that he will overtake me before long." Jayce nodded, and Xander began to walk away. "Have you seen Caelie?" Jayce asked him.

Xander faltered, turning and glancing backwards with a look of confusion before he let out a sigh. "No, please tell her I'm sorry. She'll have to walk the road ahead alone for a while, but maybe someday we'll meet again. She's yours, I know you'll look after her." He turned away, oblivious to what Jayce had meant. He re-joined his wife and daughter, the trio climbing the stairs together before stopping in front of the portal at the top. Xander turned and looked towards Jayce, his daughter waving. "Captain! Live long, live well! Have lots of children and marry a pretty lass! Farewell, my dear friend!"

"Jayce! Jayce!" yelled a voice in his ear, shaking his body. He took a deep gasp of air, turning towards Wicke as she knelt shaking him with tears in his eyes. "Thank the Gods, I thought you'd died! Don't do that to me!" she yelled, hugging him tightly. "I'm okay. Wicke, I'm okay," he reassured, hugging her back. "You looked like you were dead, you were hardly breathing. What is this? What did you do?" she asked, holding up his old notebook.

Gently he recounted his experience in the Abyss, her eyes widening as she listened. "He said to thank you, to thank everyone, and to tell you all to live long and happy lives." The tears resumed, flowing silently as she nodded, before she sniffed and wiped her face with her sleeve, chuckling softly. "That old idiot," she said sadly. Jayce nodded, trying to smile but failing once more. "You couldn't find Caelie?"

He shook his head. "She wouldn't have waited around," Wicke said quietly. He nodded in agreement. "Maybe they'll find each other. I hope they do," she added, slowly standing up before offering Jayce a hand. He took it and together they dragged him to his bed. "Lay down. You're on bedrest. I'll go tell the others you're up," she told him, heading quickly to the doorway before pausing. "Promise me you'll rest." He nodded, his body fighting to stay awake, his only wish to retreat back under his covers.

She left him alone, and slowly he scraped himself up along his bed to his pillows. Moments later, the door opened and Yuthura limped in. "Still alive then?" she asked, walking around and sitting on the edge of his bed. She wore her usual black leggings, but only had a black tank top on, a series of bandages visible along her arm and waist. Portions of her top were stuck to her body, clearly hiding portions where blood had seeped through. She caught him looking, immediately going on the offensive.

"So, not only did you manage to lose your arm, but you also had your eye gouged out. Do you know how long that will take me to regrow? I'll have to cultivate the cells, manually observe and modify the growth, and then I'll have to surgically implant it," she chastised, talking only to distract him as she saw his concern. Eventually she just let out a sigh, looking down before meeting his gaze. "You don't need to worry about me. Worry about yourself, Jayce. Ordo says you pretty much shattered your meridians, so don't even think about using Focus. You exhausted yourself, then pushed yourself beyond, even whilst low on blood. It's a miracle you're alive."

Jayce nodded, laying back and letting her continue to check his body. "Still," she said quietly. "We're alive. You're alive. That's all that matters... It'll take me a month or two to restore your sight. Naturally, you're on bed rest for another week. Then we can see about getting you active again," she said. He glanced towards her, attempting to sit up, but she quickly pressed a hand to his chest, forcing him back down. "I can't just--"

"Yes, you bloody well can!" she ordered. Jayce grit his teeth. "There's nothing more to be done other than to rest. You're hurt, and you're no good to us until you've had time to grieve. They're gone, Caelie and Xander are gone," she said, her eyes serious, but glistening as she spoke. She quickly turned away, clearing her throat and wiping her eyes before she looked back. "I spoke to Xander," Jayce said quietly, her eyes widening.

After recounting his experience once more, Yuthura just nodded before standing up and walking to the door, but she paused in the doorway, glancing back. "Xander got what he wanted, a hero's end and a meaning to his continued existence... but Caelie deserved better. She was a... special girl. I'm so sorry Jayce. Rest up, I'll tell the others and we'll hold a funeral for them." He nodded to her, and she exited the room, shutting the door behind her as Jayce began to sob.

His crew visited him throughout the rest of the day. Marisha brought him food, Zeta came to just chat, and Bjorn recapped what Jayce had missed, promising to continue leading in his place. Each crew member that came and visited all wanted the same thing, to hear Xander's last moments and his last conversation directly from Jayce himself. Each left relieved in some ways, but deeply saddened in others.

"My bag," Jayce said to Tempest, as the sky knight floated next to him. "Inside the bottomless bag is Xander's hammer." Tempest retrieved it carefully, holding it in his hands with reverence. "Xander said to give it to you. He said the forge is yours, and that you'd overtake him before long," Jayce stated. A soft buzz came from inside Tempest's armour, and he attached the hammer to his belt. "I doubt that to be the case. Xander was a master, but I am honoured to carry on his legacy. Recover soon, Captain. There is much to be done if we are to avenge him."

Tempest's words repeated in his mind as Jayce and his crew sat around the ship's brazier, burning some of Caelie's clothes and one of Xander's kilts. No one dared say anything: there was nothing more to say, everyone felt the same way. Bjorn then helped Jayce back to his room, leaving him to continue his rest. Jayce slept intermittently, unable to fight off the inevitable nightmares. Xander's and Caelie's deaths replayed over and over again, each time startling him awake, but by the sixth day he was numb to it, even as the nightmares continued to haunt him.

Steadily he got to his feet, his body stiff, but no longer in pain. With a groan he stretched, rubbing his left eye before wandering over to his bathroom. He splashed his face, admiring the rough beard that had begun to cover his jaw and neck, before he looked at his scar-covered right eye. His replacement was still a while away from completion, so he grabbed one of the eyepatches Zeta had made for him before placing it on top. It was made of a blue cloth with a small gold 'J' embroidered upon it. It didn't cover the entire scar, but it at least hid the wound.

After dressing and performing a series of stretches and body exercises, he stepped outside. "The hell are you doing up?" Bjorn immediately asked, glancing towards him with quick alarm. "Enough is enough," Jayce stated, holding up his hands. "I need to do something." Bjorn let out a sigh, shaking his head. "Doc said at least two more days. She'll make me drag you back like I had to do to Ordo." Jayce half-smiled, before it quickly faded. "I'm serious, Jayce."

"I know. If it makes you feel better, I promise I won't raise a finger to help around here," he stated. Bjorn chuckled, shaking his head. "Anything to report?" "We're still heading east, Falconer's been flying all morning, but still no sight of any Navy or Church. We're going to stop off some point in the next week before we hit the Mysts to resupply. Otherwise we're all good... well, as much as we could be."

Jayce nodded, slowly stepping closer to Bjorn before resting a hand on his arm. "Thank you for taking charge of the ship," he said. Bjorn nodded. "It's my job, but I hope I never have to again under to these circumstances." "Agreed." Jayce continued onwards, stepping down onto the main deck before a voice rang out from the living quarters. "Absolutely not!" yelled Yuthura, storming out, her bandages now gone.

Jayce flinched, holding up his hands. "Back! Get back in bed!" she ordered. "Doc, please. I'm fine, right as rain," he attempted. She pinched him and he yelped in real pain. "Fine my arse, don't make me make you," she threatened, pulling out a very large needle. Jayce gulped, surrendering before Bjorn called down to them. "Doc, if he wants to he can. He's promised not to do anything to hamper his recovery."

Yuthura glared at him, sending a sharp shiver down Bjorn's spine. "On the other hand, you do raise a valid point," he immediately surrendered. Jayce stared at him disappointedly. "Doc, I'm not in any danger. Please, I can't sit in there anymore. I've been a good patient, ask anyone," he pleaded. Yuthura let out a sigh, biting her lip as she shook her head. "Fine, but if I hear even a squeak of pain from you it's back to bed. Am I understood?" she asked.

"Yes Ma'am," he answered immediately. She glared at him, once more threatening him with the needle before she pointed it at Bjorn. Satisfied they were both sufficiently threatened, she departed, allowing Jayce to resume his wandering. Slowly he made his way down to the lower deck, heading straight to Ordo's room. He stuck his head inside, finding Ordo sprawled out across the top of his bed, covered in bandages and snoring heavily.

Jayce shut the door, continuing onwards to Xander's room. Jayce went to knock, only to catch himself as he quickly remembered no one would answer. He opened the door, the room mostly untouched and now nothing more than a memorial to their fallen friend. Jayce shut the door, carrying onwards to Caelie's. Her clothes lay on the floor, empty snack boxes had been shunted to the side, and her bed was messy.

Slowly he made his way over to her bed, sitting on it and taking one of the soft toys he had given her from his home. He held it tightly, her smell now overpowering his. He sat there for a while, eventually making her bed and tidying up her room before he placed the cuddly black wolf back on her bed. With a sigh he headed to the door, shutting it behind him before carrying on towards Vexx's old room. It too sat empty, now joined by the other two.

Jayce's final stop was Caelie's meadow, he crawled inside, laying down and looking up at the stars above. Slowly he reached upwards, covering the moon with his hand before he squeezed his fist, a cold rage spreading through his body. "I'm sorry, Caelie. I hope wherever you are, you are happy. And I'm sorry if what comes next isn't what you would have wanted. Baudricourt, Metz, just you wait. I'll burn the Church to the ground, until nothing is left. I swear."

It was three weeks later that Jayce found himself laying in Yuthura's infirmary, glancing nervously towards a bubbling glass jar holding an eye and some nerves inside. "Once it's in, I will seal your eye shut until it's fully recovered," she warned, as she inserted another needle into his neck. "How long will that take?" he asked, his left eye beginning to shut on its own. "Not too long, only a week or two, sleep tight," she told him, darkness enveloping him once again. The nightmares had stopped, but Jayce had remained miserable. The empty chairs at the dinner table hurt every time he ate. Every time he told someone to tell Xander or Caelie to lend a hand his heart would fall. He missed them, they all did.

"Sit still!" Yuthura told him, as she cut the stitches over his eye before pulling out the pieces. "Ow, ow!" he yelped, only to receive a quick and unsympathetic slap on the top of his head. "There, done! Don't lose your eye next time!" she told him, sitting back. Slowly Jayce forced his eye open, his eyelid slow to respond after weeks without use. He immediately closed it as the light blinded him, but after a few moments his vision settled. "Well?" she asked, looking him over.

"I can see," he stated apprehensively, trying to fight her off. She rolled her eyes. "I'd hope so, anything else, genius?" she chided belligerently. He entered into Focus, glancing around. A sharp pain filled his head, and she immediately

pinched his cheeks. "I told you not to do that. No Focus for another month, especially not with that eye." Jayce muttered under his breath, and she grabbed his ear. "Okay, fine!"

"Jayce, we're just about to enter the Mysts, come take a look," interrupted Bjorn through the communicator. Jayce leapt to his feet, slipping past Yuthura. "Oi!" she called after him. He stopped, returning to her room. "Thank you!" he stated, racing off once more as she shook her head. Bjorn was waiting for him by the ship's wheel along with Wicke. "You can see!" she called out to him, as he approached, joining them on the aft deck.

"That I can. What's going on?" he asked. Wicke immediately pointed up ahead. "Welcome to the Mysts!" she declared. The sea remained open in front of them, the sun shining above them, with several islands dotting the seascape. Roaming clouds floated over the waters, sometimes consuming an island, other times revealing one that had been hidden. But as they sailed onwards, a strong smell of smoke tickled their noses.

"Do you smell that?" Bjorn asked, sniffing the air. The other two nodded, glancing across the deck to see if anything was on fire. "Marisha, is something on fire?" Jayce called into his communicator. She emerged moments later from the living quarters. "I'm not cooking anything," she stated. Marisha glanced around, entering into Focus before pointing to the south east. Bjorn grabbed his binoculars, handing them over to Jayce, who then handed them to Wicke. "That island is on fire," he stated.

"Wildfire?" Jayce asked. A bright flash of light hit their eyes before disappearing. It then reappeared moments later before disappearing again. "It's code. Someone on that island is asking for help," Bjorn stated. Jayce grabbed on to the wheel, turning it quickly, the ship lurching as it changed direction. "Code of conduct tells us to investigate. Let's see what's going on!" Jayce declared. Wicke and Bjorn glanced at each other, before back at their bearded Captain. "Let's do this!"

Seize the Seas Tales: A Friendly Face

Arthuria let out a sigh as she hovered her hand over the door in front of her. The excitement of the Paladins' encounter with the Rising Aces had long faded throughout the palace, and, with little else other than to continue her work, she had continued to offer her assistance to the Warlocks. She knocked on the door, a gaunt figure she didn't recognise letting her inside. "Where's High Mage Brackus?" she asked.

"Dead." Arthuria frowned, but the Warlock in front of her just waved it off, as if it were nothing. "What do you mean dead?" she asked. "How? What happened?" The Warlock let out a sigh, pointing vaguely towards one of the blank walls lining the laboratory, the rest covered with large bubbling vats or glass jars. Arthuria gasped, her eyes widening beneath her blindfold as the outline of a splattered body lay printed on the surface.

"Brackus fell behind, I am his replacement. As such, you will refer to me as High Mage Lucanus. I will make good on the deal he had with your convent, and - provided word does not get out about his misfortune - I shall even incorporate a bonus. Does that suit you, Sister?" asked Lucanus, cleaning a blood-covered blade as he leant against a workbench. Arthuria glanced around, her trained eyes immediately noticing the burn and blast marks across the walls, ceiling, and floors. "Sister?" repeated Lucanus.

"Of course," she quickly said. "The ways of your sect are not mine to judge, only the Gods can do that. A weekly donation of a hundred pearl will suffice." Lucanus nodded, placing the blade back in his belt. "Marvellous. I will make it one fifty. Thank you, Sister..." he pried. Arthuria slowly bowed her head, trying her best not to throw up, as the stench of what remained of Brackus wafted her way, bits of him slopping to the floor. "Arthuria. Sister Arthuria," she answered.

"Ah. I apologise if I forget it, my mind is often occupied with more important matters. Anyway, now that I have ascended to High Mage, I will take over Brackus' work. I was informed you were working closely together. I hope that means you can keep up. Prepare to get your hands dirty," he said with an unpleasant grin. Arthuria smiled back, holding up her gloved hands. "Oh, ha-ha, how amusing. Let's get to work."

Hours later, with the stench of death smothering every pore on Arthuria's body, she shambled her way back to the Sister's Convent. Hate didn't begin to describe how she felt about the Warlocks. The constant feeling of some creature watching from above, their obsession with mutilating and rebuilding corpses, the eldritch abominations they forged. It was all everything she stood against - everything she thought she should be standing against.

She heaved open the door to the convent, staggering inside before heading straight through the corridors to the locker rooms. "Evil, evil monsters - all of them!" she grumbled, as she passed through the enchantments, finally free to speak her mind. A few of the others in the room looked towards her, their eyes

widening in alarm as she banged her fist on her locker. "Ugh!" she yelled, only to yelp as a firm hand squeezed her shoulder.

She immediately placed her glove over her mouth, her eyes wide as a familiar faced looked at her with bemusement. "What's got you so riled up?" asked Athena. "Athena!" Arthuria called out, hugging her tightly. Athena hugged her back, surprised by such a strong greeting, but not opposed to it. "Arthuria, what's that smell?" she quickly asked, holding Arthuria back at an arm's length. Arthuria shuddered. "You don't want to know."

"Warlocks?" Athena asked. Arthuria nodded. "Go shower. Ugh, now I need one too," she stated, turning Arthuria around and pushing her towards the showers. Arthuria couldn't take her eyes off Athena as she showered and changed. She hadn't changed much, her black hair was slightly longer, and now shaved at the sides. She was still tall, and muscular, with a large tattoo of a waterfall covering her back. The corpse of a golden dragon was at it's top, with a snow leopard laying on top of the torn-open body. Bright coloured fish were swimming up the waterfall, reminiscent of an old fairytale Athena had told her about.

"Did you become a pervert whilst I was away as well?" Athena asked, eyeing Arthuria back as they showered. Arthuria turned a deep shade of red, swiftly holding up her gloved hands. "No, no, sorry. I just can't believe you're back," she quickly said, turning away. Athena laughed. "I am, in the flesh as well. No more letters or messages." Arthuria nodded in appreciation, letting out a sigh and turning off her shower.

She grabbed her towel and slowly walked back to her locker, Athena frowning as she observed her. A few other Sisters were stood around, chatting to each other, but they glanced towards Athena as she grabbed her own towel and approached Arthuria. She dismissed them with barely a tilt of her head, the room emptying and leaving the pair of them alone. "Something you want to get off your chest?" Athena asked.

"I don't know what I'm doing anymore. Everything I'm seeing - hell - everything I'm doing goes against my oath! My honour! My duty!" Arthuria exclaimed, laying down on one of the benches and kicking her legs in protest. "Meaning?" "The Warlocks kill each other for power, the Daughters of Shade are weaponizing young girls, I dread to think what the Priests are up to." "You don't want to know," answered Athena, grabbing Arthuria's clothes from inside her locker and dropping them on her head. "Tell me, make my job easier, I beg of you."

"Sorry Arty, no can do," she said, Arthuria mimicking her with her hand. "You may be a Paladin, but we Sisters have duties and oaths too. I can't jeopardise our sect. If you get caught you need to honestly be able to say you spied and didn't get any information from us. You know this," she stated, Arthuria continuing to mime with her hand. "Oi," Athena protested, grabbing Arthuria's hand. "Sorry," Arthuria immediately said. "I just... hate it, hate it all. Duty means nothing if I'm going against everything I stand for."

Athena just nodded, dressing into some simple clothes before sitting down. "Preach. I know how you feel, but someday a time will come where it will have meant something," Athena assured, her grey eyes meeting Arthuria's through the gaps in the bundle of clothes on her head. "How can you be so sure?" she asked. Athena shrugged. "Faith, I guess. I am a Sister after all. Anyway, now that I'm back, how about I show you some of the techniques I picked up whilst working with some mercenaries. Will that make you feel better?" Arthuria nodded, sitting up. "You're a really strange Sister, Athena," she stated. Athena laughed. "I'm really not."

Chapter 81: A Taste of Death

It had been just over a month since the Wolfpack's adventure with the Rising Aces. The first days following their adventure had mostly been filled with grieving. Losses had been minimal: eight crewmates had been killed by the Church, with a significantly larger proportion injured in the line of duty. After getting the injured to a hospital and marking the dead as killed in service of the Empire, the report of Caelie and Xander's deaths came to Alara's hands.

With the ship resupplied, Alara and her crew sailed east, following the request by New Era Captain Xyrex for reinforcements. After a long journey, Alara let out a sigh of relief as the familiar sight of a pair of Navy ships came into view, both flying a unique flag only used by the New Era. She glanced up at her own: it was a white flag with a large golden bell in the centre, held up by a flying bird silhouette, a new addition commissioned to her by the Fleet Admiral himself.

"I'm still not sure if I like it or not," Alara muttered to Astris, as they sailed closer to the two Navy ships. "Why not? It's a great honour and it makes us stand out above the rest," Astris said proudly, a large smile on her face as she looked up with Alara. "Precisely because of that. Doesn't it make us more of a target? And... it makes me feel... owned. It feels like a warning that he owns us," she said quietly. "I still don't know why you don't like him. The Fleet Admiral is definitely intimidating, but he's not got some grand scheme, or an agenda against us. He's the Fleet Admiral. Just think of it as a sign that he's acknowledged you," Astris reassured. Alara didn't feel reassured, but as one of her Communication Lieutenants came running up to her, she shook it off.

"Vanathur, is that you?" came the voice of Captain Soho Kask. Alara let out a groan: she thought she'd recognised his ship, the Trigger. "Yes Captain, we heard you had a vampire problem and came to offer our help," she responded. A deeper voice cut off his mocking response. "Glad to hear it, Vanathur. Long time no see. Weigh anchor next to us and we'll bring you up to speed," stated the assertive voice of Captain Tane Xyrex. "Will do," she responded, handing the communicator back before calling out her orders.

As her crew leapt to action, Alara glanced down towards Astris with an apprehensive look. "What's wrong?" she asked. Alara glanced back to the approaching Trigger and Xyrex's ship: the Tidebreaker, her memory returning back to Kask opening fire on his own men, his uncaring attitude, and his merciless ways. "I'd rather anyone other than Kask be here. I get the feeling he'd blow us up if it assured victory." Astris nodded in agreement, well-versed with

Alara's opinion of him. "Well, as long as it's to kill vampires. Anyway, Xyrex is leading, we're in good hands."

The Sole Survivor pulled up next to the Tidebreaker, laying a gangplank across the two ships to allow Alara and Astris to cross over. "Welcome aboard!" called over Xyrex as he, Kask, and their Commanders stood on the main deck of the large warship. Xyrex was a large man, to say the least; he towered over Kask, nearing Witchford's height, or even Wulf's, at six-and-half feet. He had light, tanned skin, with short, curly, black hair, narrow brown eyes, a large nose and a wide smile.

His Commander on the other hand was a short blonde woman, with dark skin, and shoulder-length curly hair. She too had a big friendly smile, a direct contrast to Kask's Commander Briggs. "Thanks," Alara stated, shaking their hands and smiling back, before glaring at Kask as he stood with his arms folded. "Right," Xyrex asserted, sensing the tension. "Well, first of all, thank you for answering our request for reinforcements. Our requests for additional ships were denied by Rear-Admiral Okongo, but this is not exactly something I want to deal with alone."

"You disobeyed an Admiral's orders?" questioned Astris. The other Commanders glanced towards her before looking at Alara, surprised by her engagement. "You could say that. I view it more as an acknowledgement of utilising the resources I had available," Xyrex corrected. "Regardless, now that you Marines are here, maybe we'll actually start making some progress." Kask scowled. "I'm not sure I like what you're implying," he stated.

Xyrex held up his hands. "Sorry, I didn't mean it that way, but it's been six days without any progress, and I've seen enough misery. I'm simply saying the three of us might be able to actually start hunting rather than reacting," he salvaged. "What's the actual situation?" Alara asked, butting in. Kask and Xyrex turned to her, but it was Xyrex's Commander who spoke up. "As you are aware, we've come across a vampire infestation," stated Commander Birios.

She looked towards her Captain, but he nodded for her to continue. "A single ship has been raiding islands. It began with a few abductions, one or two people, but it's slowly grown. Their last attack involved a whole village. Most were killed, but they took at least twelve captives. That was a few days ago, but we've received a report of another attack, two days from here," she clarified. Alara and Astris glanced to one another. "What do we know of these vampires?" Alara asked.

"Not much, it appears to be a single crew. They appear from out of nowhere, normally in the night. Witnesses were minimal, but, given they're all loyal to the Pirate Lord Jure Strigon, this could be the beginning of something larger. Maybe even the beginnings of another Night of Blood Rain," stated Xyrex. Both Alara and Astris shuddered. Strigon's original attack had been almost eighty years ago, but the tale around it had long been used as a horror story to tell children about the dangers of the night.

"Then I guess we need to go to the last island they attacked," Alara stated. The two Captains nodded in agreement. "Break out your manuals if you haven't already. Ensure your crew have silver ammo and get your sleep in now, it may be a few nights until you can again," warned Xyrex. "Let's get moving!" Alara nodded to the New Era and the other Commanders, before making her way back to the Sole Survivor. "Grab the manuals related to vampires," she ordered Brett, as she stepped back onto the main deck. He nodded, racing off, their crew quickly pulling the gangplank back on board.

The Trigger set off first, leading the way with the Tidebreaker and the Sole Survivor sailing next to each other. It didn't take long for Brett to return, but, to Alara's dismay, he returned with a large and heavy tome. "Here you go," he stated, blowing off dust and handing it to her. "I was hoping it would just be a file," Alara muttered, taking it from him, before reading the title: 'Monsters of the New World'. "Yeah, good luck," he stated, slinking away. Alara let out a sigh, heading into her room and sitting down at her desk.

The tome was better organised than she had initially feared; an index made finding the information she was after significantly easier. But, to her surprise - whereas the other sections had detailed notes on the various creatures of the New World like goblins and ogres - the section for vampires was only a few pages. It provided a brief history, from Strigon's first appearance during the Night of Blood Rain, all the way up until his emergence as a Pirate Lord a little under thirty years ago. Alara frowned as she read: given it had been eighty years, she had been expecting something more significant, but at the least it made it easier for her to summarise the information.

"Silver is their weakness," she stated a while later to her Lieutenants. "From what we know, there are three main varieties to be aware of. Vampire spawn are the lowest class of vampire. They have pale, almost translucent skin, pointed ears, fangs, claws, and next-to-no hair. They are animalistic, obeying orders from their masters at all costs, with little regard to their own lives. Next we have ordinary

vampires: they are human-like, apart from the pointed ears, fangs, and pale skin."

Brett glanced around, looking at the other Lieutenants before raising a hand. Alara nodded to him. "Vampires actually exist? I thought they were just... you know, myths, stories. I mean regenerative, immortal creatures that drink blood - doesn't that sound... a little absurd?" he questioned. Alara let out a sigh. "And humans that turn into animal-hybrids, or people using magic, sounds any less absurd?" she countered.

Brett glanced towards Wulf stood next to him. "Point taken," he muttered, only to immediately get punched hard in the arm by Wulf. "Anyway, we then have vampire captains. There's not much difference - that we know of - from them and normal vampires, but apparently they're more powerful. I know this isn't much to go off, but treat all vampires like any other unknown enemy - play it safe, strike first and strike hard. If that doesn't kill them, back off and get reinforcements." The numerous Lieutenants nodded in acknowledgment. "Dismissed, spread the word. This might be the most dangerous mission we've had," she warned.

Two days later they arrived at their destination. A haze covered the entire island of Ogrok's Shadow, the remains of a village still burning near the shore. Bodies were everywhere, most with their throats torn out, or bodies punctured. Alara grimaced as she walked the streets; Silas Gale, a member of her original squad, ran to the side before throwing up, the majority of her Marines also not looking particularly well.

"Anything we can use to tell where they're headed next?" Kask asked, as he emerged from the ruins of a burned down house. Xyrex shook his head. "Not likely, but I suspect this isn't everyone. They probably took captives: I'm not seeing many women." Astris and Alara did not like that statement, both immediately noticing that Xyrex was probably right. "Witchford, where does this island line up when compared to the other attacks?" she asked.

"There isn't a straight line, but given our proximity to the edge of the Mysts and the last two attacks it appears they're turning back. Their general trajectory hooks back east," he stated, looking at a map of the Mysts, several markings indicting wind flows and the general movement of the fogs and mists that the region was named after. "Good work, Marine," stated Xyrex, stepping closer to Witchford and placing a hand on his shoulder before looking over the map. "Thank you, Captain," Witchford stated, tracing the trajectory for him.

"Well, that means we can at least move in the direction that they should be going, correct?" asked Kask. Witchford and Xyrex nodded. "Then let's get moving, every moment wasted could be another life lost," Kask stated, gesturing to his men to head back to the ship. "Wait, we can't just leave the bodies like this," stated Alara. Xyrex shook his head. "We're not gravediggers. And Kask is right, those captives are in danger and are relying on us to save them. These people are dead; the animals will clean up."

He too gestured for his people to head back, but as Alara stared at the numerous corpses he stopped. "Vanathur, they're dead. It'll take too long. If it makes you feel better, another ship should come soon to collect the records of those who died. They will be buried, but can we really sacrifice a day to put them to rest?" he asked. Alara let out a sigh, shaking her head. "Fine. Everyone, back to the ship!" she called out.

Once again, Witchford was right. "Commander," called Xyrex, through the communicator. "Yes?" she responded, glancing towards the Tidebreaker sailing nearby. "A report has come in. Another island was attacked early this morning. We're two hours out from the last location, make sure your people are ready." "Aye, Captain," she responded. "The hunt is on! All crew prepare for a potential battle!"

An unnerving feeling ran through Alara as they arrived at the last known location of the vampires. It had been an only few hours since the attack, and the sun was shining brightly above them, but the island lay surrounded by dark and thick fog. As Ordo had trained her to do, she immediately entered into Focus, concentrating her eyes onto the island, but she saw nothing – her vision obscured. "Something feels off," Astris muttered, Alara feeling and thinking something similar.

"The attack was a few hours ago, there might be some clues as to where they've gone next," stated Xyrex through his communicator, the Tidebreaker and the Trigger sailing ahead of the Sole Survivor towards the shrouded island for a better look. "When did the attack occur?" Astris asked, looking towards Alara and Witchford. Alara repeated the question into the communicator, the three ships continuing to get closer to the fog.

"Last night, but the report came directly from the island three hours ago," answered Xyrex. Witchford frowned, the fog enveloping the Tidebreaker. "It took days before the last island was reported. And there were no survivors during the last three attacks," he stated, frowning as he too observed the

unmoving fog through Focus. "Maybe, a trader came through," suggested Alara, watching the Trigger enter the fog. Astris' eyes widened. "The fog isn't moving," she muttered, as the Sole Survivor became shrouded in darkness. "Alara, this is a trap!"

Glowing orange lights leapt through the fog, spreading out from the island in the direction of the three ships. "Ambush!" Alara yelled into her communicator and across the deck, as three slimy and skinny creatures landed on the main deck. Their skin was as pale as snow, with dark, web-like veins spread across their body. Their eyes were shrunken and entirely white. They had pointed ears and no hair across their entire bodies, wearing only rags around their chests and waists.

All three of them were covered in a clear viscous liquid, and flames were spreading across their body. They let out a bone-chilling howl, their mouths spreading wide to reveal pointed and broken teeth, before they ran forwards, charging towards the stairs leading below deck. "Stop them!" Alara yelled, charging forwards down the stairs to the main deck and assembling her glaive, but a series of shots rang out from behind her. The three vampire spawn burst into dust as Astris shot them with silver bullets before they could head below deck.

The other Marines across the ship drew their swords or rifles, glancing around nervously, before a huge explosion rocked the entire ship. Alara hit the deck, rolling as the Sole Survivor lurched. Alara quickly got to her feet, looking around before grabbing her communicator as Witchford span the ship's wheel to get them away from the island. "Xyrex, Kask, come in?" she called out, three more flaming vampires leaping onto the ship.

"Bit busy, guard your powder!" replied Kask, no response coming from Xyrex. Her Marines gunned down the vampires, with more armed Marines emerging from below deck to reinforce those above. "Xyrex? Xyrex, come in?" Alara called out - again he didn't reply. The fog disappeared from the Sole Survivor, sunlight basking the deck of the ship as they pulled away from the island. "Dammit!" Alara yelled, pairing the explosion with Xyrex's lack of response.

"Witchford, get us away from the fog and then bring us about!" Alara ordered, only for a large series of blasts to ring out from inside of the fog, a barrage of stray cannonballs emerging moments later. "Kask, get out of there!" Alara called into her communicator. Moments later, the Trigger emerged from the fog, flames

covering the out-of-control ship, the sunlight turning the small mass of vampire spawn on main deck into ash in an instant.

The Trigger sailed directly towards the Sole Survivor, narrowly turning at the last moment to avoid collision. Alara let out a sigh of relief, only for the fog to disappear, replaced by a thick cloud of darkness that blotted out the sun above. A black ship was sailing quickly after the Trigger. Red lights covered its surface, and its sails were also black, with a huge array of cannons arming the large ship. It had a figurehead: a large bat with its wings spread and frenzied look on its face. The dark clouds floated above the vessel, shielding it from the sunlight as its crew maned the ship.

Kask thought ahead of Alara, turning his ship away from hers and splitting up, but, to both their horror, the cloud split into three, shrouding all three vessels in darkness. "Not good," Alara muttered, a blood-coloured mist flying quickly towards her ship before depositing a quartet of vampires onto the main deck, several more emerging moments later. "Defend the ship!" Wulf yelled out, the Marines opening fire on the intruders as the vampires spread quickly out, charging towards the defending Marines.

A spawn leapt towards Alara as she backed away towards the communications room. "The child of the Admiral!" it hissed. She cleaved it in two, the upper portion crawling across the floor towards her, but Brett stabbed through its head, the body turning to ash. Alara frowned, glancing towards his sword, it glowed in her vision but wasn't silver. "Those upgrades Tempest made are making a difference!" he yelled, turning and heading to fight the closest vampire.

A barrage of cannonballs flew over the deck of the Sole Survivor, Alara immediately spotting the Trigger and the vampire ship locked in battle. "Grab the child! Grab the child! Grab the child!" screeched another spawn, as it dove at Alara. She slice upwards, cutting it into two halves that burst into ash. "The child of the Admiral?" she questioned, Astris leaping down from the aft deck before charging forwards, killing vampire after vampire as she shot with her two pistols.

Another barrage of cannonballs flew over the deck of the Sole Survivor, the ship shuddering as some connected. "Kask! Watch your aim!" Alara yelled into her communicator, receiving no response. Alara's body tensed, a shiver running down her spine as another blood mist deposited a single vampire onto the main deck in front of her. "A Captain," she gasped, Ensign O'Renger and Marine Slavin charging forwards towards him. "No!" she yelled out. The vampire

dodged their two slashes with ease before he thrust his hands straight through their chests, the pair gasping before he tossed their corpses aside.

Alara stared at the blood dripping from the vampire's hands, the two Marines having been with her since the Lone Wanderer. "Bastard!" she yelled, charging forwards and thrusting with her glaive. The vampire twisted around it, turning into red mist before reforming behind her. She sensed his attack in her blind spot, weaving to the side and swinging her glaive upwards. It cut open his shirt, but drew no blood.

His face twisted into a sneer, before his pupils turned into slits, his irises glowing red. He swiped at her, another strike following immediately as she blocked with her glaive. She leapt back, but he kept pushing her backwards, the pair battling all the way across the main deck towards the bow. She watched swipe after swipe, each slash getting closer and closer, but a hail of bullets sent the vampire captain darting to the side as Astris opened fire on him.

Alara smiled as she slashed the vampire, drawing blood, but the wound quickly healed over. Her smile then faded as Astris let out a scream of pain, a vampire grabbing her from behind and sinking its mouth onto her neck. She lifted her pistol up, next to her head, firing – the vampire's head exploding outwards, before its body turned to ash. She immediately staggered backwards, pain across her face and blood dripping down her neck as she placed her palms over her ears.

The Captain slashed at Alara once more, pushing her further away from Astris towards the bow. Alara glanced across the deck, looking for someone close enough to help Astris, but Riley was stood by the aft deck with Witchford and Chase Soner - equipped with a pair of swords as he guarded her. Wulf had lost his sword and had resorted to tearing apart the seemingly endless vampire spawn with his bare hands and teeth.

The vampire captain let out a yell of pain as a sword pierced his stomach from behind, Brett charging into him. He then roared, grabbing Brett and throwing him into Alara, before tearing the sword out through his side. "Take her!" he ordered, pointing towards Astris as she staggered around clutching her ears. Alara dragged the dazed Brett off of her, reaching out towards the vampire captain as he turned towards Astris, several other vampires converging on her, as they began to retreat.

Brett shook himself off, spotting the danger Astris was in, before the ship shuddered as another barrage hit the side of the Sole Survivor. Alara's eyes

widened, her yell inaudible as she cried out, racing forwards towards Astris as she looked up, staring wide-eyed at the barrage of cannonballs flying over the deck. A cannonball tore its way through the left side of Astris' head, her body twisting and turning towards Alara as she staggered backwards, dropping her pistols, her remaining eye wide with surprise, before her body slumped and she rolled over the side of the ship.

Wulf, Witchford, Riley, Brett, Soner, Braze, Violette, Ryker, Delex and Gale all stared in horror, unable to react as Astris toppled over the side of the ship, a third of her head missing. The battle disappeared, silenced by Alara's scream. The vampires turned towards her, as she dropped to her knees, tears rolling down her face with her hand outstretched. "Grab the other!" ordered the vampire captain, but Alara's crew surged forwards with a brutal and enhanced aggression.

A gunshot rang out across the deck, louder than all the rest. The vampire captain exploded into ash as Riley shot him with her sniper rifle, tears blurring her vision. Brett raced towards Alara's side, throwing her arm over his shoulder. "Alara, get up!" he told her, but her legs refused to obey her. "Get up!" he yelled, giving her no choice as the vampires continued to converge on them. A howl cut through the air, Wulf leaping onto a vampire, the body regenerating as he stomped through it.

"Riley, find the Mages! I'll cover you!" yelled Soner, pushing her towards the stairs leading above Alara's quarters. She sobbed uncontrollably, her body shaking as she surged forwards, tears streaming down her face. A vampire leapt towards them, and Soner dove into it, the pair rolling over the railing of the aft deck onto the deck below. Riley continued to stagger up to the highest deck, stumbling to the floor and sitting down before holding the barrel of the rifle over her arm as it rested on her knee.

She used her Gaze to focus onto the black ship, her eyes streaming and her vision blurring as her tears refused to falter. A sob cut through her, and she rubbed her eyes on her shoulder, the Sole Survivor rolling as it sailed over the waves, the black ship also rolling. She scanned her eyes across the ship, looking for her target, but three figures dressed in robes drew her attention, their hands to the sky as they moved the clouds above.

Another sob began to build up, her eyes continuing to water as the ship began to roll up. She grit her teeth, blinking the tears away, before letting out a yell of anguish, pulling the trigger as she focused onto the bullet flying through the

barrel of her rifle. It glowed with blue fire through her vision, sailing through the air as the ship rolled down, before flying through the air across the sea. The cloud above the Sole Survivor disappeared in an instant as she gunned down the first vampire mage.

The other two glanced around in a panic, but Riley had already pulled the bolt back on her rifle, loading her next shot. She adjusted her aim, firing once more, the cloud disappearing above the Trigger, the vampires across the deck erupting into flames before turning to ash. The third Mage ran for cover, diving through one of the doorways on the ship, but Riley fired anyway, following the glowing outline of the vampire, and firing through the wall of the enemy ship. The vampire exploded into ash, the final cloud disappearing and the vampires on the top deck of the black ship exploding into ash.

Alara leant numbly onto Brett, before she slowly steadied herself, standing up and glancing around at the death across the deck of her ship, the wounded bleeding out and calling for aid. "Medics! Get to work!" she yelled out, walking over to her glaive and picking it up, the rest of her original squad all looking towards her as they realised they'd lost another squad mate. "We need to finish this! Do your jobs! We have to," she told them, tears streaming down her face.

"Vanathur, still alive?" called Kask through the communicator. She wiped her face, turning towards the black ship as it sailed without any crew. The lower decks glowed with life through her eyes, and she grit her teeth, rage boiling throughout her. "Still here," she answered, pointing to Witchford and then towards the black ship. He nodded, wordlessly steering the Sole Survivor on an intercept. "Good, we're going to board and look for survivors."

"No!" Alara snapped. "They're mine!" Silence followed for a few moments before Kask replied. "Understood, we'll search for any survivors from the Tidebreaker." Alara glanced towards the flaming wreckage of Xyrex's ship: she saw no signs of life, but as the black ship came close she changed her attention, leaping aboard with several others of her crew. "Commander, there's life down below," warned Brett. She turned towards him, and he flinched.

"I know, stay here. I'm not losing anyone else," she said quietly. He opened his mouth to speak, but Wulf placed a hand on his shoulder, the pair watching as Alara descended the stairs to the deck below. She returned a few minutes later, a steady stream of terrified islanders following behind her, a cut on her cheek, and a dead look behind her eyes. A gangplank had been extended between the Sole Survivor and the black ship and she made her way across, walking up the stairs

to the aft deck before stopping next to Witchford, Riley's sobs echoing above them. "I leave the ship in your hands, Lieutenant Commander," she said quietly. Witchford just nodded, and she walked past him, heading into her room before slamming the door behind her.

Seize the Seas Tales: A Twisted Connection

Astris stared at the endless expanse of water surrounding her. Lines of light illuminated her surroundings and a bubbling sound echoed in her ears. She lay floating in an endless abyss, unable to move her body, her arms limp in front of her and some of her black hair loose in front her right eye. A rushing sound flowed behind her, as if something was moving through the water and her body began to turn.

A chunky cloud of red flowed into the water in front of her eye, and slowly she began to move her arm. The water distorted again behind her, and a chill passed through her. A chittering screech filled her mind, and she winced, moving and twisting in pain in the water. The noise disappeared, replaced by a slow and raspy inhale. "Fallen foe, do you know where you are?" asked a deep and guttural voice, broken by high-pitched squeaks.

Astris glanced around, unable to turn her body to look behind her. The water distorted around her, and her body began to slowly turn, keeping the figure out of view. "Who are you? What do you want with me?" she asked, her voice faint and originating away from her mouth. "I? I am a God, long forgotten," it uttered, her hairs standing on end. "What have you done to me? What do you want?" Astris repeated. The deep raspy inhale filled her mind once more.

"I have done... nothing!" the voice screeched, the words thundering in her mind. An image of the Sole Survivor filled her mind, her vision blurry and flashing as she stumbled around, her ears ringing. The vampires converged on her, and her vision disappeared, her last sight of Alara mortified and reaching out to her. "I'm dead," she realised, her one eye widening as she continued to float in the Abyss. "Yes, you are. But your existence is not yet over. We lay on the barrier of the afterlife, frozen in time, thanks to my intervention."

"Why? What do you want from me?" she asked, panic filling what remained of her mind. "I want little, but to offer you a chance. A gift to live again," it told her. She couldn't see the creature, but, as it floated behind her, she wanted nothing but to escape it. "No, I don't want anything from you," she cried. The creature's

laughter thundered through her mind, her body beginning to sink. "Are you sure?" it asked.

Another memory bubbled to the surface of her mind. She sat next to her dying mother with her siblings, her mother's body broken as she lay on the cracked stone floor. Her mother looked just like her, and even as she lay dying, her children crying next to her, she had a gentle smile on her face. She slowly extended a bloody hand, resting it on Astris' face. "Don't let him destroy you, I beg of you. Don't avenge me," she told them, her hand slowly lowering and her eyes shutting.

Astris sensed the creature behind her begin to move away, her body continuing to sink. "No, wait!" she yelled out, something grabbing her waist. She tried to look down, but her body refused to obey her. "What do you want?" she asked the creature. "I want nothing, but for you to be my vassal. My seed of chaos, to destroy my enemies. I offer you your life in exchange for my blessing." Astris stared out into the endless abyss, her mind filling with the memories of her life: her acceptance as a Marine, finding friends in her squad, Alara smiling at her.

Her vision changed to her placing the barrel of her pistol to her father's head. "Don't avenge me," her mother told her once more, the voice disappearing as a gunshot rang out. "I'm sorry Mother. Whatever you are, I accept," she declared. Something pieced her back, a hot pain racing through her as vision returned to her left eye. Her ears began to burn before her skin began to itch, her body contorting in agony in the water before she shut her eyes, her entire body going cold.

She opened her eyes to find herself looking down at clouds beneath, the wind racing past her as a loud flapping reached her ears. She glanced down: a huge claw was grabbing her torso. It let go and she began to fall, twisting in the darkness of night to look up at the creature holding her. She saw only the dark silhouette of a giant bat-like creature before she disappeared through the clouds, falling faster and faster through the air.

Astris rolled onto her front, the wind whipping past her face as the ocean stretched out before her. She hit the water with a painful splash, the water ice cold. Quickly she dragged herself to the surface, the remains of her Marine uniform helping her to float. She saw nothing but darkness, the night sky blotted out by clouds, but, as she desperately looked around, her eyes focused and she saw the outline of a small island not too far away. She dragged her pained body

forwards through the water, desperately clutching at the waves as her heart raced.

Eventually the water became shallower, and she crawled out of the surf onto the cold wet sand of the island. "Ugh," she groaned, slowly forcing herself to look upwards. Foliage covered the small island, and as she concentrated ahead of her, she spotted numerous small animals hidden amongst the trees and brush. They glowed bright red in her eyes, their heartbeats and arteries visible in her vision. Several had congregated near the centre of the island, their heads low to the ground as if drinking something.

Raking her hands through the sands, she pulled herself to her feet, stumbling forwards until she reached the middle. The small pig-like animals ran off, leaving her alone with the small pond. She fell to her knees, scooping up the water and bringing it to her mouth, only to yelp as she scratched her cheek. She glanced down at her nails, now sharp and long, before frowning. "What?" she muttered, before looking up around her.

A small shed-like shelter had been put up nearby, a skeleton leaning against it with a fishing pole in hand. Relieved that she at least had shelter, and a water source, she leant forwards, looking towards the still surface of the water to check out her scratch. Her eyes widened as saw only a faint line of blood on her cheek, but as she looked beyond the blood she gasped, falling backwards. She immediately grabbed her ears, feeling around before rubbing the pointed tips.

She quickly crawled back to the edge of the water, staring in horror at her almost bald head. The left side had white fuzz growing out of her scalp, her right side black and long as normal. Her ears were pointed, and, as she looked at her eyes, she noticed they were two different colours: her left was white, her right was obsidian. Her heart began to race, and her pupils narrowed into slits, her iris glowed red, mixing with the white and black to form two different red glowing eyes. "No," she muttered, sitting back and slowly running her tongue over her teeth, pausing as she felt two extended canines reaching down and peeking over her lips. "No!" screamed Astris the vampire.

Chapter 82: An Enemy Wearing the Face of a Friend

The smell of smoke stung Jayce's eyes and burnt the inside of his nose. It was overpowering – overwhelming – as the Rising Aces sailed closer to the burning island at the edge of the Mysts. "Whoever set the fire definitely took a gamble," Bjorn stated, grabbing a pair of goggles and placing them over his eyes. "They probably waited until they saw a ship," Wicke countered, before eventually just swearing under her breath and casting Gust.

The wind morphed to her will, blowing the smoke away and giving them a clear look at the island. It wasn't very big, a little more than a hundred metres wide, with the majority covered in foliage and brush, now on fire and quickly spreading. Bjorn had approached the island in a wide arc and, as the Stacked Hand got closer and closer to the beach, the ship began to grate on the shallow sands beneath, eventually stopping in knee-high water.

Wicke grinned excitedly at Jayce and Bjorn, but as much as Jayce tried to smile back, he still found himself unable to. Still, the excitement of rescuing a castaway filled Jayce's chest, his heart fluttering as he headed to edge of the ship before climbing down the ladder carved into the ship. He dropped the last few steps into the shallow water, his shoes quickly filling with warm water. A few splashes followed after him as Marisha, Bjorn, and Wicke joined him. Zeta stood above them, leaning on the railing as she observed.

"Hello?" Jayce called out, stepping through the water towards the beach. They had docked as close as possible to the source of flashing light, but as he glanced towards the few areas of plant life that hadn't caught alight, he quickly noticed an artificial line cut through the island. Trees had been cutdown, wet barriers of sand had been built up, and a few small creatures were taking refuge amongst the shrubs.

"Clever," Bjorn acknowledged, spotting it as well, whilst remaining in the water and looking around with the others. "Hello?" Jayce called out. A whistle came from above, Zeta pointing further along the beach to where a barefooted figure was slowly shuffling towards them. Jayce's eyes widened and he darted forwards, Bjorn immediately holding an arm out as Wicke went to follow, his mouth slightly open.

The figure was young woman, pale-skinned and wearing a torn uniform. She wasn't particularly tall, only a little over five feet. She was holding a ruined Marine coat over her head, desperately trying to block out the sun. Blistered

burns covered the gaps in her trousers, her feet, and parts of her face. She stumbled as Jayce neared her, dropping to her knees before slumping over, writhing in agony as the sunlight burned her skin.

Jayce dropped his body over, covering her as much as he could. "Get me a cloak!" he yelled out, looking up towards Bjorn and the others as they stood frozen next to the ship. "What are you doing? Come here and help!" he yelled, tearing open his shirt and wrapping her legs before reaching into his bottomless bag to find anything to cover the rest of her. "Jayce!" Bjorn repeated, the first three attempts falling on deaf ears.

Jayce found an old blanket within his bottomless bag, wrapping the rest of Astris' body, before he scooped her up in his arms, looking up to see Bjorn blocking his way with his axes drawn. "What are you doing?" Jayce immediately questioned. "That's a vampire, Jayce. Put it down and step back," Bjorn growled. Jayce glanced from Bjorn to Wicke and Marisha, they were both stood behind Bjorn with uncertain looks.

"Bjorn, do you not recognise who this is?" he asked. Bjorn nodded, but he remained with his axes raised. "That's not Astris anymore. Trust me, Jayce." "We don't have time for this, she needs help." Jayce stepped forwards, Bjorn hesitating before stepping aside. He hefted Astris over his shoulder, her body light, before he climbed the ladder back up to the main deck. Bjorn watched him climb, shaking his head. "This is a bad idea," he muttered, before putting his axes away.

Jayce wasted no time, carrying Astris quickly through the ship to Yuthura's infirmary. He shoved the door open. "What do you think you're..." Yuthura exclaimed, faltering as Jayce gently laid Astris onto the bed in the room and began to unwrap her. Yuthura's eyes widened, her body stepping back on its own as she immediately noticed the pale and burnt skin, the fangs and the pointed ears of the vampire in front of her. "Jayce... this is--"

"Astris, I know. Help her!" he ordered, looking at her desperately, only for his face to darken as he saw the hesitation in Yuthura's eyes. "Help her!" he yelled. "Doc, don't do anything!" Bjorn interrupted, stepping into the room as the other Aces crowded the doorway. "What the hell are you doing? She needs help!" "Jayce, look at her! That thing is not Astris, not anymore," Bjorn stated, an axe in one hand as he pointed at her face.

Astris let out a pained groan, a few of the blisters on her legs bursting as she writhed. Jayce looked at her, her eyes flickering open every so often: one was obsidian, the other silver. The left side of her head had short silver hair, the right side was her normal black hair. A pair of pointed fangs were immediately noticeable, and her ears were pointed, but it was definitely Astris. "We don't know that!" Jayce countered. "I'm not doing anything until we know for certain!" he yelled, looking directly up at Bjorn and blocking his path.

Bjorn growled, gripping his axe tightly. "Enough!" yelled Yuthura. "Everyone but Jayce get out, we can worry about this later!" Bjorn glared at her, but she ignored him, immediately grabbing a drip bag and a blood bag marked with Jayce's name before hooking them up to her arm. "Doc!" Bjorn called out. "Bjorn! Out!" she responded, stepping forwards and shooing him out of the room, before slamming the door behind him.

"Thank you," Jayce said quietly. Yuthura shook her head, stepping back next to Astris and beginning to flush the burns across her body. "He might be right," she said quietly, glancing towards the silver scalpel resting on her workbench. Jayce glared at her and she looked away, shaking her head. She returned to flushing the burns, only to falter as she watched the blood bag quickly drain, the burnt skin slowly regenerating. "Fascinating," she muttered, her fear immediately replaced by curiosity, until Astris began to move.

Yuthura then grabbed a large needle, inserting it into Astris's neck, her body relaxing. "Do we know her blood type?" Yuthura asked. Jayce shook his head. "Okay, grab another bag with either mine or your name and hook it up to her." Jayce followed the instructions, the bag draining quickly once more, her wounds fully healing over. Yuthura began to take notes, observing the regeneration closely. "Will she be okay?" Jayce asked.

Yuthura nodded. "I believe so. The sedative I've given her will last a few hours, but I can wake her up sooner if we need to. Help me strap her down," she stated, pointing to the straps lining the bed. Jayce looked at them before looking back up at Yuthura. "Jayce, we don't know what we're dealing with. I've never treated a vampire before, I don't know how long the sedative will actually last. We also don't know what her mental state is, we don't know if she's dangerous, and we don't know if she's still Astris. Do this, worry about how she'll feel later, or else Bjorn may actually kill her before we can find out anything."

Jayce nodded, helping to strap Astris down, before he leant back against the wall, holding his head in his hands. "How did this happen? Why is she here?" he

questioned. "Did Alara not say anything?" Jayce shook his head. He hadn't heard from her in a while, and as he looked towards Astris sleeping soundly he began to guess why. "Do you know why Bjorn was so against bringing her on board?" Jayce eventually asked. Yuthura shook her head. "I assume it's due to his time in the Navy, but I'm only guessing. Talk to him, I can see him hovering through the bottom of the door."

Jayce nodded, standing up and heading to the doorway, almost the entire crew waiting outside. "Well?" Bjorn immediately asked, looking past Jayce inside. "She's asleep. We've strapped her down and we'll find out more when she wakes up," Jayce stated, leaning in the doorway to block Bjorn, his axe still in hand. "We need to put it down," Bjorn growled. Jayce shook his head, looking up at his First Mate.

"We can decide something like that after we've spoken to her," Jayce stated. "All vampires were made by Strigon, they are only loyal to him. They are irredeemable monsters. That's not Astris, not anymore. Please listen to me," he begged. Jayce shook his head. "We don't know that. We need more information. At least wait until we're sure. We know Astris. We fought together against the Church. She deserves at least a chance. If it was the other way around wouldn't you hope for the same from the Marines?"

The others around Bjorn began to question themselves, apart from Ordo who had spent the entire time leaning against the far wall. "Captain's right. You know it, Bjorn," he stated. Bjorn glanced backwards towards Ordo, challenging him with just a look. Eventually Bjorn let out a sigh, shaking his head and storming off, Marisha following after him. "Wake her now," Ordo warned, Jayce nodding to him in appreciation.

Jayce stepped back into the room, Yuthura ready with another needle. Moments later Astris began to stir, her eyes slowly opening and closing as she groaned and looked around. She tried to lift her arms, only to falter, a quick look of fear flashing across her face as she began to struggle. "Wh-what is this? Let me go!" she cried out. Yuthura immediately grabbed another needle injecting her as she began to panic, but slowly she relaxed, laying her head back before looking over towards Jayce.

A look of recognition filled her heterochromatic eyes. "Exarga?" she asked softly. He nodded, smiling reassuringly to her. "Hey, how you feeling?" he asked, stepping forwards and leaning over her. "Like shit. Where am I? What happened? Where's Alara?" she asked. Jayce's face fell, and so did hers. "Oh

Gods, it wasn't a dream – was it?" Jayce shook his head, undoing her bindings and helping her to sit up. Yuthura opened her mouth to protest, but, as Jayce's eyes glanced at her defensively, she shut it, shaking her head and backing away.

Astris sat up, tucking her legs close to her chest before leaning her head on her knees. "I'm really a vampire, aren't I?" she muttered, glancing towards Jayce. He nodded. "How did this happen to you?" he asked her. She looked up, opening and closing her mouth with no words coming out, until eventually she took a deep breath. "We were hunting vampires in the Mysts," she began, recounting her mission and the events that led to her death.

"I woke up in the claws of this giant bat-like creature. It dropped me and I swam to that island. I was there for... six, maybe seven days, until you found me," she said quietly. Jayce glanced towards Yuthura, who had been taking notes the entire time. "So you were turned into a vampire by this... God?" Jayce questioned. She nodded. "The source of the vampires? The one who made Jure Strigon?" Yuthura hypothesised. Jayce nodded in similar thought.

"Do you feel... hungry for blood? Like you want to eat me?" Jayce asked quietly. Astris stared at him with a look of horror. "No! No! Of course not!" she cried. "Are you sure?" Yuthura asked. Astris stared at the pair of them, standing up and backing away. "No! How could you even ask such a thing?" she cried out, the door slamming open behind her as Bjorn barged in. Jayce dove over the bed, tackling Astris to the side as Bjorn swung at her with his axe.

"Bjorn! What the hell are you doing?" Jayce yelled, the giant bear growling as he rounded on them. Astris started up at Bjorn, her eyes wide and her mouth slightly agape as fear tore through her, her body pressed into Jayce's chest with his arms around her, his heartbeat pounding in her ears. "Enough is enough!" Bjorn growled, bloodlust clouding his eyes, his lips pulled back over his teeth in a snarl.

"You're not laying a finger on her! That's an order, Bjorn!" Jayce called out, his back to Bjorn. "She's lying to you, waiting to kill us all!" he roared. Astris's heart sank in her chest, the fear evaporating. She looked down at the floor, tears slowly filling her eyes as Bjorn and Jayce yelled at each other, Yuthura and Marisha stepping between them. "Please..." she said quietly, droplets falling quickly from her chin.

"You don't know vampires like I do!" Bjorn yelled, holding himself back as Marisha blocked him. "Then tell me! Why do you hate them so much?" Jayce

countered. Bjorn grit his teeth, the bloodlust fading as he glanced away, shaking his head. A steady quiet returned to the tumultuous room, only broken by the soft sobs of Astris. "Please," she cried, Bjorn's eyes widening as he looked down at her as she cradled her knees. "I just want to go home."

Jayce glanced away from Bjorn, nodding to her. "Is that okay with you, Bjorn?" Jayce asked backwards. Bjorn didn't respond, but he put his axes away and stormed out of the room, Marisha once more following after him. "I take that as a yes," Jayce muttered, letting out a sigh before standing up and offering a hand to Astris. She took it. "We'll take you home, but you might not be welcome," Jayce warned her. She shook her head. "I don't care."

With calm restored, in some manner, and Astris' checkup complete, Jayce deposited her in one of the guest rooms, leaving Ordo outside as a guard as he went to deal with his crew and their many questions. "We'll take her to the nearest military base. If they take her then that's fine, but most likely they won't," he declared. "How can we trust her?" Wicke asked, Bjorn and Marisha both absent from the rest of the group. "She's not demonstrated any signs of lying, she's the same as she was," Yuthura stated. "That's not to say she isn't, or that something else isn't going on. We know nothing about her condition, but I'll begin investigating a cure."

Zeta and Wicke looked at each other before nodding, Tempest and RK uninterested by the topic. "She'll be watched and guarded at all times," Jayce reassured, glancing towards Falconer. "I assumed so. I too must admit that I find her presence... disconcerting," Falconer stated, before looking towards Yuthura. "But if there's anyone in this world capable of helping her," he said, before gesturing to the ship around them. "It's us. She deserves a chance. But Captain if that chance backfires..." he said softly. Jayce nodded in agreement. "I'll set course for the nearest island with a base. There's one only a few hours away."

Jayce returned to the guest room, Ordo sat on the floor outside as he leant against the door. "All quiet, but she said she's not hungry. Also Bjorn keeps walking past every ten minutes or so," he stated, standing up and stretching. Jayce nodded appreciatively, reaching for the handle, only to falter. "What are your thoughts?" he asked. Ordo scratched his chin. "Truthfully... no clue. I've fought vampires before – I've fought the head vampire before. She's nothing like them."

"How so?" Jayce asked, stepping back and leaning against the wall. "She's still human. Vampires are bound to their creator, even those who are higher ranking still feel... corrupted, as if they lost a part of their soul. Their

personalities are warped, more sadistic, they are egotistical – proud of their...” “Curse,” Jayce stated. Ordo nodded. “Astris said Strigon didn’t make her. She was created by the progenitor vampire. The true vampire. The one who made Strigon.”

“Then she’s either his bride, or his rival. All vampires are tied to him, he can kill them with a thought. We once had a vampire traitor, Strigon tore them apart from the inside out even whilst miles away. We need more information, are you sure about dropping her off?” Ordo asked. Jayce shook his head, looking at the extradimensional door to the guest room. “It’s soundproof,” Ordo reassured. “There’s no way they’ll take her in.”

Ordo nodded in agreement, the pair both glancing to Bjorn as he emerged from the stairs to the deck below. He looked away, almost shamefully, but as he turned to walk away Jayce whistled at him. Bjorn let out a sigh, slowly walking over. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “But...” he immediately followed up with, much to Jayce’s frustration. “Yes, yes, vampires bad, must kill vampires. I get it, but just listen for a moment.” Bjorn slowly closed his mouth. “She wasn’t made by Strigon,” Jayce said. Bjorn’s eyes narrowed.

“What?” he asked. Jayce recounted what Astris had told him. “She’s lying,” he immediately stated. “She’s not, but we’ll have to find proof later. For now we’re dropping her off at a nearby base. If they’ll take her, we’ll hand her over. If not, she stays with us. Get used to that idea, it’s happening,” Jayce stated. Bjorn let out a sigh. “Why do you hate vampires so much?” Jayce asked. Bjorn hesitated. “I just... I need some time to think. If she poses a threat...” he said quietly. “What do you take me for?” Jayce asked. Bjorn didn’t answer, but he slowly wandered off. “Don’t let him near her,” Jayce ordered, as he walked to Astris’ door. “What do you take me for?” Ordo asked, as Jayce stepped inside and shut the door.

They arrived at Longhorn’s Shadow a few hours later; Astris had slept for most of the journey and, as the island grew closer and closer, Jayce could sense the relief spreading through his crew. He knocked on her door, before taking her to the stairs leading to the main deck. As she stood in front of the beams of sunlight, she glanced towards Jayce nervously before slowly stretching her hand out into it. She winced, but her face quickly relaxed, her skin not burning. “Well that’s good,” Jayce stated. “Is it because of the blood we gave you?” he asked. She flashed a look of irritation his way. “Why are you asking me?” she muttered, slowly stepping into the light and climbing up to the main deck.

The crew stood waiting for her. She glanced towards them, most looking fearfully at her - Ordo, RK, Tempest and Yuthura the exceptions. Little Witch hissed at her, before racing off behind Wicke's legs, the cat's rejection seemingly hurting Astris the most as her face fell. She continued onwards to the edge of the deck, a cloak wrapped around her body before she glanced back. "Thank you," she said quietly. The crew didn't respond, but Jayce and Ordo stepped forwards to join her, the three of them climbing down to the pier below.

Longhorn's Shadow was a large island. The majority of it consisted of a stone fortress, with a series of large docks surrounding it. Ships sat in dry docks awaiting repairs, lifted by large cranes overlooking the harbour. The island was busy and loud, perfectly suited to allow the three of them to move without drawing attention. "Let's go," Jayce stated, leading the way as he pointed to the fortress.

They walked closely together, Astris with her head low and a constant look of unease about her. Ordo had no such unease, proudly humming to himself as he marched behind her and Jayce. Jayce couldn't help but glance nervously back at Astris as they walked. She didn't exactly stand out, but he could see, and hear, her building up her hopes. "I'm Lieutenant Commander Astris Kai," she muttered. "Please help, I'm Marine LC Astris Kai," she repeated, eventually just shaking her head and continuing to stare at the floor.

Eventually they came to the main gates to the Navy base. Jayce and Ordo looked at each other before nodding to Astris. "Thank you," she said softly, looking between them before setting her eyes on Jayce and smiling to him. "Good luck," he said to her. She took in a deep breath before she turned and pulled down her hood, walking quickly towards the guarded gates. Ordo and Jayce watched from afar, both leaning forwards as they waited the inevitable.

"Halt! Who goes there?" called a guard, noticing Astris as she approached with her hands up. "Hello! My name is Lieutenant-" she called out, only for her eyes to widen as the guards immediately lifted up their rifles. "Vampire, put it down!" ordered the Lieutenant in charge. "Wait!" Astris said, only to yelp in pain as a bullet pierced her side, the wound closing immediately. She dropped to the floor as more pierced her body, the wounds regenerating as she tucked herself into a ball. "Please," she begged.

The sounds of bullets changed, rattling off something metal next to her and, almost immediately afterwards, she felt a pair of hands scoop her up. Astris' eyes widened as Ordo grinned at her, Jayce protecting the pair of them with two large

shields. "Sorry little lady, you're stuck with us for now. Captain, let's go home," Ordo stated. Jayce nodded, glancing back at them before winking at Astris. "Welcome aboard."

Astris felt her face turn crimson, but a loud yell sent a shiver down all of their spines as a figure leapt from somewhere inside the military base down onto the courtyard. "Exarga!" yelled a Rear-Admiral dressed in red military fatigues. Jayce and Ordo didn't not hesitate, the pair turning and running as the guards continued to shoot at them. Sola and Luna melted away into their crimson forms as Jayce ran and leapt over a wall, dropping with Ordo onto a rooftop.

A siren began to wail behind them, bullets peppering the air around them as they leapt from rooftop to rooftop, dropping quickly down the fortress island as they headed towards the harbour. Ordo's neck tingled and he dove to the side, throwing Astris into the air as a huge spear tore through the rooftop he was stood on, the entire building collapsing underneath him. Jayce lunged for Astris as she screamed through the air, catching her and continuing onwards, the pair glancing back to see the Rear-Admiral armed with an assortment of colossal spears, readying his next throw.

Astris wrapped her arms around Jayce's neck, as he leapt, another spear obliterating a house behind them. Ordo dove out of another house nearby, diving through a balcony window before rolling to his feet as he landed on a rooftop next to them. "Thought we'd lost you!" Jayce grinned, only to yelp and throw Astris to him as he dove to the side to dodge another spear. "Haha, I don't go down that easy! I thought you knew this by now!"

A squad of Navy climbed onto the rooftops ahead of them, raising their rifles and cutting off their escape. "That way!" Jayce pointed, as bullets flew past him, pointing to the large collection of cranes overlooking the dry docks. Ordo nodded, leading the way as he carried Astris, her eyes wide as Jayce and Ordo revelled in the excitement of the chase. They leapt from a rooftop onto a suspended ship before racing across the deck and leaping with their Focus onto another crane, running along its arm before leaping onto a next.

"Catch!" Ordo yelled, throwing Astris as a spear split the tower underneath him. Jayce caught Astris, the pair watching as Ordo rode the falling crane to the floor before he began to run along the piers below. "Captain, what's going on?" Falconer asked through Jayce's communicator. "We pissed off a Rear-Admiral, coming in hot, get ready to sail!" Jayce responded, grinning reassuring to Astris as she looked up at him. "I don't like how happy you are!" she yelled, as a spear

sailed past them. "What can I say?" Jayce grinned back, leaping from the crane he was running along to the Stacked Hand below.

"Get us moving!" Jayce yelled, as Ordo leapt aboard, Bjorn steering the ship out of the harbour and towards the open water. "What happened?" Marisha asked, looking towards Jayce and Astris, only to frown as Jayce continued to carry her. Astris and Jayce looked at each other, both immediately turning bright red before Astris wriggled free and Jayce dropped her. "Nothing!" they both said, only to falter as they glanced at each other. "They didn't take her in," Jayce stated. "Who'd have thought?" Ordo stated, walking past them, before the ship lurched as something heavy hit it.

Jayce ran to the side, glancing down to see a large hole in the lower hull. He glanced up, a glint drawing his attention to another fast moving spear. He dove to the side, the giant weapon carving a large trench through the main deck. "Get us out of here!" Jayce called out, beginning to chant and moulding the winds. "Captain, we're taking on water. I can temporarily stop the hole, but we need to find an island to stop at," Tempest stated through his communicator. Jayce glanced towards Astris as she stood in a panic on the main deck looking for a way to help. "Grab a bucket, welcome to the Rising Aces!"

Seize the Seas Tales: A Memory from a Time Wished to be Forgotten

"What is your problem with her? Bjorn? Bjorn!" Marisha yelled, as Bjorn paced on the main deck. He turned, glaring at her with a look of rage that caused Marisha to take an unconscious step backwards. His rage melted away as he saw her cower. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, turning away and leaning on the railing of the ship. Marisha let out a soft exhale, stepping forwards and leaning next to him. "What is going on with you?" she asked. Bjorn looked down at the waters below, several small fish swimming in the shallows.

He blinked, the light above him harsh and blinding. "Get up, conscript!" called his superior, Quartermaster O'Sin, holding a lantern over his hammock. Bjorn squinted, rubbing his eyes as his body transformed back into his bear form. "Sir? What's going on?" he asked, standing up and to attention. He glanced at the other Navy sailors around him: the day crew were all being waken early – a rare occurrence, and a sign that something had gone wrong, or something important was happening.

"We're double-timing it to a nearby island. We received a distress call, organise and prepare silver ammunition for the entire crew. You have three hours. Get to

it!" he ordered. Bjorn nodded, grabbing his uniform and dressing quickly before he rushed off to the armoury, stepping to the side to allow the Navy sailors past him, his eyes to the floor, his head down. "Move it beast!" called a Lieutenant. "Yes Sir!" Bjorn responded.

Bjorn panted as he carried the buckets full of ammo clips up to the main deck, placing the ammunition carefully on the deck before heading back for the next amount. "Hurry the fuck up, bear!" yelled an officer, the sailors descending on the buckets he brought for their ammunition, a smoking island getting closer and closer on the horizon. Bjorn glanced towards some of the sailors stood around, hoping someone would help him. None did, but he had no time to waste, the consequences would fall on him if the job wasn't finished.

"Baned, is that all of the ammo?" asked Captain Osiris. Bjorn nodded, standing at attention and panting. "Yes, Ma'am," he answered. She nodded, dismissing him with a glance before turning to the sailors. Bjorn hurried below deck, racing back to the armoury to get his equipment: a chipped sword and pair of bracers. "Vampires," concluded Captain Osiris, her briefing over as the crew sailed the Bastion into port.

Bjorn's eyes widened, glancing to the other sailors as they prepared themselves. He opened his mouth to ask for clarification, but his gut told him not to, so instead Bjorn made his way to his usual position. "Are you ready?" asked his Captain as Bjorn stood at the front, holding his damaged blade. "What's the mission, Captain?" he asked, glancing down at her as she stood next to him. She grit her teeth. "Don't die. The rest isn't your concern, conscript."

Bjorn gulped, the gangplank lowering for them onto a pier covered in blood and corpses. Bjorn stepped off first, his heart pounding in his throat as he glanced nervously around for anything alive. He saw only birds: crows feasting on the gutted corpses. The stench was overwhelming, the blood pungent and rusty. "Fan out! Check for survivors!" ordered Captain Osiris. Bjorn glanced back, and she pointed onwards down the pier, towards the small village covering the tiny island.

He carried onwards, the island silent apart from the cawing of the crows and a quiet crying somewhere up ahead. The bodies around them changed from small wounds to corpses that hardly looked human. "A frenzy," muttered one of the sailors behind him. "Stow it, anyone else hear that?" asked Captain Osiris. "Crying," Bjorn confirmed, pointing onwards through the red haze covering the island.

The bodies became cleaner, the wounds lessening, but they looked drained of blood, grey and ashy. The streets was sticky under his feet and, as he took a moment to look properly, his eyes widened. The entire stone road had been painted in blood. A red road leading onwards towards the crying. "Captain," Bjorn said nervously. "Keep moving!" she ordered, a similarly nervous expression breaking through her normal stoic face.

The crying grew louder, corpses now lining the edges of the streets, strung up with words carved into their skin. 'Food', they read. Bjorn shuddered, carrying onwards until he spotted a kneeling figure up ahead in the centre of what once was a market square. "By the Gods..." muttered a sailor, Bjorn continuing onwards. "It hurts! It hurts!" cried the child, no more than eight or nine and completely naked.

Her back was to the group, with deep cuts in her skin where it looked like a blade had been carved through. 'PREY' it read, blood oozing from her wounds down her back. Bjorn glanced around her, looking for any sign of a trap. A circle of corpses were displayed around her, a complete lifecycle of ages. He circled her, her cries continuing, but, as he stood in front of her, he gasped. Two vertical lines had been cut from her forehead to her chin, across her eyes. "Hello?" she asked quietly.

"Hey," he said softly, stepping forwards and crouching down in front of her. "Are you going to hurt me?" she asked, with a look of complete surrender and acceptance. "No, we're the Navy. We're here to help you," he reassured, glancing up to Osiris as she pointed around, ordering her sailors onwards. The little girl slowly reached out, placing a hand onto Bjorn's knee, only to pull back her hand in surprise. "I'm not human," he said. "I'm baned," he told her, gently reaching out and offering a hand. "Oh," she said with genuine surprise, sliding her finger over the pads on his hand before placing her tiny hand in his. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Lynn," she said weakly. "What's your name?" Bjorn helped her to her feet, taking off his shirt and placing it over her. "Ooh," she stated in surprise, before he picked her up, her face pale. "My name is Bjorn," he told her. "She needs medical attention," Bjorn stated to Captain Osiris. She nodded, not even looking at him. "Go, she's your responsibility until we drop her off in the Capital. I babysit you all enough. Do you hear any other survivors?" Bjorn shook his head. "I thought not. Find out what she knows. Go."

Bjorn held the little girl gently in his arms, her hands clutching tightly onto the fur on his arms. "Will you protect me from them?" she asked him softly. He nodded, only realising that she obviously couldn't see him a moment later. "Yes," he answered. "From all of the vampires? Even..." she shuddered, unconsciously reaching up and touching the deep cuts on her face. "All of them," he reassured. "Do you promise?" she asked quietly. Bjorn looked down at Marisha, as she waited for an answer. "I have a promise to keep," he stated, drawing his axes and turning back towards the stairs leading to the deck below. "Bjorn! Bjorn!" Marisha called after him, following him closely.

Chapter 83: A Need to be a Hero

"How can I help?" Astris asked as the Rising Aces ran around her, cannon fire thundering from the island behind them. Jayce glanced towards her, immediately noticing her pale hands turning pink and the uncomfortable expression on her face. "Get to your room, we've got this," he told her, the ship lurching as it took another hit. She glanced around, desperately looking for some way to help, but Jayce intervened, guiding her to the stairs and nudging her onwards. "Go!" he told her, turning and running out of sight.

Astris paused on the stairs, the crew yelling above and below her. "Another breach!" yelled the voice of Marisha from the bottom deck, Falconer rushing down past Astris to offer assistance. She grit her teeth, shaking her head and following after him. She ran into the cargo hold with a splash, the floor covered in knee-height water, with more rushing in from two large holes in the hull. Tempest floated next to one of the holes as Marisha held up a temporary wooden patch. He began to chant, placing his hammer on top of the wood and helping push the patch into the water spray.

Astris ran forwards, pressing her palms on the other side of the patch and helping to seal the hole, Tempest's chant concluding with only the faintest trickle emerging from the now sealed breach. Marisha stepped back, grabbing her hand. A large gash had been opened on her palm, a quick stream of blood dripping down her arm. It smelled strong, not particularly nice, with a deep, rusty iron smell, but Astris couldn't turn her eyes away from the wound. Her mouth felt dry, and her insides twisted.

"Thanks," Marisha said, glancing up from her gash to Astris. Her eye widened and she took a step back, Astris' eyes bright red and following the blood on her arm. "Snap out of it!" Marisha yelled, Astris quickly blinking and turning her gaze away from the blood. "Sorry," Astris said immediately, with a startled expression. Marisha continued stepping away, heading over to Falconer and Tempest as they stood by the other hole. "Go back to your room!" Marisha ordered. This time Astris obeyed.

She sat on her bed, freshly washed and wearing temporary clothes that had been lent to her: mostly old tops and shorts that were either torn or had holes in. She didn't mind - at least it was something clean. Her room was plain, uninteresting, but fully equipped with a desk, a bathroom, a bed, a wardrobe, and a mirror that she couldn't touch. It wasn't the end of the world; normally it wouldn't matter, but the mirror was handheld and hurt to touch.

Letting out a sigh, Astris lay back, the ship around her quiet, despite the chaos continuing without her. It had been at least an hour since her return to the ship, and she had long washed away the tears on her face. The door slammed open, a small pouch of red liquid landing on her bed. "Drink it," Bjorn growled, slamming the door behind him. She sat up, glancing down at the blood bag before slowly picking it up. It was squishy, and cold, and labelled with Jayce's name and blood type. She gagged, throwing it onto the remains of her uniform piled in the corner of the room. "Not a chance," she stated, her mouth dry and stomach hungry.

Jayce let out a sigh a while later as Tempest floated in front of him. "The patches will have to hold until we can lose our tails. Keep us floating, we'll find an island," he reassured, the djinn nodding and floating away to check his temporary repairs. "We need to talk," Bjorn called over, as he stood steering the ship. "What now?" Jayce muttered to himself, nodding and walking towards the aft deck. "What's up?" he asked.

"I assume Astris is staying, right?" Bjorn asked. Jayce nodded, and Bjorn let out a long sigh. "I've seen what vampires can do, don't trust her... at least not yet." "Is that a sign of your acceptance?" Jayce pried, smirking as he leant on the railing next to Bjorn. "Don't prove me right, it's your problem. And if something goes wrong, that's on you. Understood?" he asked. Jayce nodded. "Say it." "Okay okay. Trust me, I'll do it myself if it comes to it. I promise."

With Bjorn somewhat appeased and the panic dying down, even with several Navy ships following them in the distance, Jayce headed to the guest room. He knocked before entering, Astris immediately standing to her feet. "Captain," she stated. "At ease," Jayce said with bemusement. "How are you feeling?" he asked, sitting on her bed. She looked down at him awkwardly, not quite sure how to respond, but she started by sitting next to him. "Truthfully?" she asked.

He nodded. "Like shit. They shot at me – shot me. I-I..." She let out a sigh. "You knew this would happen, didn't you?" He nodded, glancing towards the discarded Marine remains and the full pouch of blood sat on top of it. "You didn't drink it," he stated, pointing to the pouch. Astris's eyes flicked towards the pouch before she forced her head away. "I don't need it," she lied, her body telling her anything other. "Are you sure?" Jayce pried. She nodded and he just shrugged. "Fine, it's there if you want it. I've got plenty more thanks to Focus, Yuthura's drugs, and Marisha's cooking. Speaking of, are you hungry? Come eat with us."

Astris shook her head. "I don't think that's a good idea. I'm not... one of you. Can I have it brought to my room?" she asked. Jayce nodded, standing up and heading to the door. "Of course. Tell me if you need anything. We'll be looking for somewhere to lay low once we lose the Navy tailing us, so get comfortable." "Thank you." He nodded, shutting the door behind him and walking away to get her some food. The minute he left, Astris stood up, walking over to the blood bag and heading to her bathroom, poking a hole in it with her finger and pouring out the contents into the toilet.

They sailed through the night, and the following day, Astris growing paler and paler as she continued to refuse to drink blood. "I'm okay, thanks," she repeated to Jayce, forcing her body to remain seated as his veins pulsated in her eyes. He just nodded, ignoring the changes to her, ignoring the paleness, the vacant eyes, and the tightened skin. He shook it off. She was fine. She had to be, she said so herself.

They arrived at a small island in the dead of the night. They'd only just lost the Navy, but the waves were violent, and the patches were threatening to be give in. To all their surprise, there were no complaints from the islanders. The wind whipped around them all as Jayce stood in front of his ship with Wicke and Bjorn, the island's mayor stood in front of them in her nightgown with some others who had been dragged out of bed. "Are you sure?" Jayce asked.

She nodded. "If there's anything you need, don't hesitate to ask. My husband's cousin lives on Sunflower Island, we know it wasn't you who fired on the island and its people. Please stay, you'll be safe here. Do you need any food, medicine, supplies?" she asked. Jayce and Bjorn looked at each other, the warm welcome the first in a long time. "Thank you," they said appreciatively, the mayor smiling gently. "We'll be fine until the morning."

The morning came quickly. The wind had settled down, but grey clouds covered the entire sky, and a chill filled the air, marking the end of the summer. Jayce had slept in, but a quick and loud banging on his door jolted him awake. "Yes?" he questioned groggily, rubbing his eyes and unlocking his door with the wave of his hand. "Morning," Marisha stated, stepping inside with a stifled yawn. "Can I help you?" Jayce asked, pulling up his duvet.

"Uh, yeah, sorry for disturbing you. Tempest has begun repairs and the Mayor wanted to invite all of us to join the village for lunch. What should I tell her?" Marisha asked, leaning in Jayce's doorway before averting her gaze as he stood up. "Sounds good, get everyone involved. We're guests here, let's leave a good

impression. Please tell Miss Clara that we gratefully accept the invitation and ask if there's anything we can do to help out around here," he answered, grabbing some nicer clothes out of his wardrobe and throwing them on.

Marisha nodded, turning around before faltering. "What do you want to do about Astris?" she asked. Jayce thought to himself, looking down at the floor with his hands on his hips. "Probably for the best she doesn't join us. I'll talk to her, sort something out so she doesn't miss out entirely," Jayce answered. Marisha nodded, shutting the door behind her as she left. With Marisha gone, Jayce wandered into his bathroom, checking his now-full beard in the mirror and his somewhat messy, mop-like hair. "Not quite yet," he told himself, tidying up a little bit before finishing his preparations for the day ahead.

Carrying a plateful of breakfast, Jayce made his way to Astris' room. Ordo was sat on the floor outside, but as Jayce approached he stood up. "Morning Cap'," he said gruffly. "All quiet last night?" Jayce asked. Ordo nodded, his eyes focused on the plate of eggs, toast, baked beans and sausages. Jayce grinned. "Go eat." Ordo didn't hesitate. "Have something light! We've been invited to lunch by the village!" Jayce called after him, before knocking on the door.

There was no answer. Jayce tried again. Still no answer. He glanced around before trying the door handle, the door opening without issue. "Astris?" he asked. She didn't answer, but he spotted the outline of her body underneath the duvet on her bed. As he glanced around the room, the place a neatly organised dump, with her clothes folded away and stashed in the corners of the room, he spotted the empty blood bags he and Yuthura had provided her.

Cautiously Jayce crept across the room, gently placing the plate of food on her desk before covering it with a lid from a previous meal. He glanced towards her, the back of her head the only part visible from within her duvet. Her white hair had grown out quite quickly, still shorter than her original black hair, but quickly approaching her normal shoulder length. "Breakfast is here when you want it. We've stopped at an island to make some repairs. We're also laying low, so we'll probably be here for a few days."

There was muffled sound of acknowledgement from inside. "How are you feeling?" he asked. She wriggled a little, disappearing entirely inside her duvet until only her obsidian eye was visible, the black mixed with a bright shade of red. "Not good," she said quietly. He nodded, reaching into his bottomless bag before pulling out another blood bag. "I can send Doc to check on you?" he

offered. She shook her head, the action hard to tell from her duvet shell. "Okay, hope you feel better soon."

Jayce left her alone, pausing as he went to close the door, something telling him not to leave, but he shut the door anyway. He stood outside her room for a few moments, eventually shaking off the tightness in his chest and heading to Yuthura's infirmary. He found her hunched in front of a microscope. "Any progress?" he asked, stepping inside and leaning against the main bed. Yuthura slowly looked away from her microscope, glared at him, before going back to her work. "I take that as a no..." Jayce muttered.

"What do you think? I may be a genius, sometimes, but I don't work miracles. I've taken her samples, but there's hardly anything I can find that I wouldn't expect. She's normal, I think. I have no idea what I'm looking for," Yuthura vented, leaning back in her chair. "Have you taken any more recent samples?" Jayce asked. Yuthura rolled her eyes. "In case you didn't notice, Captain, things have been a little hectic. I've not had time to."

"Right, uh, sorry. Anything I can help with?" he asked. Eventually, Yuthura nodded, grabbing a large needle and a syringe before handing it to him. "Get a blood sample and leave me alone. I need more information, I need... something," she complained. Jayce nodded. "If there's anyone who can help her-" "Yeah yeah, I don't need coddling," she interrupted. Jayce slowly backed away with the syringe in hand.

"She's not been feeling very well, can you give her anything to help?" Jayce asked as he stood in the doorway. Yuthura frowned. "What are her symptoms?" she asked. "Uh, paleness, fatigue, I assume pain, I-I don't know," he answered. "This is all new, I'm not surprised. Her body is probably still adapting the changes, to the increased blood intake, to the lack of sunlight, I don't have an answer. As long as she's still consuming the blood we've given her, I assume she'll be fine. She has been ingesting it, right?" Jayce nodded. "Good, I'll check her over when I get time, but remember we don't know if we can truly help her. Some things may be out of our control."

"Yeah, I know," Jayce lied. Yuthura squinted, meeting his eyes until he looked away. "I'll get the sample. Thanks Doc." She nodded and he left the room. Slowly she turned back to her microscope, before she faltered and stood up, walking to her desk and pulling out a notebook before flicking to a page labelled: 'Jayce'. She glanced it over, pausing at the one of her highlighted lines, before she grabbed a pen and added an additional note. "Projecting his loss onto Astris.

Might need intervention," she wrote, before setting it aside and getting back to work.

On his way out, Jayce knocked once again on Astris' door - she still didn't answer. Once again, he opened it and quietly stepped inside. She was still in her bed, but the breakfast he had placed for her had been eaten and pushed to the side. "Sorry, back again. Doc wants a sample of your blood. Can I take it, or do you want me to leave it for you to do?" he asked. She didn't respond, so Jayce swapped the empty plate with the syringe before he slowly retreated out of the room.

Jayce let out a sigh as she shut the door behind him, but as he turned to walkway he faltered, spotting Bjorn stood nearby. "Morning," he stated gruffly. Jayce nodded back to him, stopping and leaning against the wall. "We agreed she would have someone guarding her door," Bjorn reminded. Jayce nodded, but Bjorn just gestured around, searching sarcastically for Astris' guard. "Yeah yeah, I get it, I get it," Jayce sighed.

"Do you? Do you really?" Bjorn asked before sighing. "Look, I've accepted I'm not changing your mind - fine. But can you at least do your part of the deal. Ordo, you, Yuthura - hell even Wicke - someone needs to be there, just in case." Jayce nodded. "Yeah, sure, you're right," Jayce stated defeatedly. Bjorn nodded, standing up straight and turning towards the stairs leading upwards. "I won't take the blame if something goes wrong. It won't be on my conscience," Bjorn said, walking away. "I will do it myself if it resorts to that. Trust me," Jayce called after him. "I do. My trust in you is not the problem," Bjorn concluded, disappearing from view.

Ordo returned from his breakfast not long after, freshly showered and clothed. "All good?" he asked, looking down at Jayce as he sat on the floor. "Yeah, all quiet," Jayce answered, slowly getting to his feet and stretching. "I'm happy to watch her whilst you all are out, if you need me to?" Ordo offered. Jayce shook his head. "That's not fair to you. I'll see if Tempest can instead," Jayce stated. Ordo shrugged, sitting down in the spot Jayce had just vacated before pulling a book out of his bottomless bag. "Whatever you say Cap'."

Jayce left Ordo to his reading, heading up to the main deck before climbing down the side of the ship onto the pier below. Tempest floated next to the ship, working on the repairs as a few islander children stared up at him in awe. Every-so-often Tempest would float down, handing a broken piece of wood or some bent nails, or some other random object to one of the children before requesting a replacement. His little gaggle of workers would race off returning with the

specified item, or, more often than not, something similar but not quite what was needed.

Jayce couldn't help but grin as he passed the kids, one or two of them staring up at him in awe, their eyes towards his scars. He carried on past them, spotting RK at the end of the pier surrounded by slightly older kids using him as something to sit and climb on. As he approached, he immediately recognised his red-headed crewmate amongst them, chatting about the adventures she had experienced whilst with Jayce and the Aces. She immediately moved to dismount, but Jayce shook his head, smiling at her before carrying onwards.

The village of Sparrowhawk's Trove was very small. The island it was upon wasn't much larger. The north side held a small and thin forest, with the centre covered by the three large farms, the village sprawled across the rest. The houses were simple wooden cottages with thatched roofs. There was a large well that sat in the middle of the village, next to a community noticeboard: the most recent message a simple congratulations to a couple for the new addition to their family. It was peaceful, a place that Jayce had missed, even if he had never been there before.

He looked around the village square, stepping away from the noticeboard and walking across the cobblestone to a nearby bench where Zeta was sat strumming a guitar. He sat down next to her, glancing towards Bjorn as he stood trading with the local shop owner, a baned badger teenager stood next to him. Marisha and Falconer had also found places to explore. Falconer was walking with some of the farmers, headed towards the three farms, whilst Marisha stood chatting the Mayor.

"I like this," Zeta admitted, her garish blue dress completely out of place amongst the simple clothes of the villagers. Jayce chuckled. "You normally hate these types of places. What was it you said last time? Not enough money, not enough shops, not enough people with taste?" he stated. She flashed a crimson shade, stammering as she tried to come up with a retort, only to just let out a huff instead. Jayce grinned, leaning back and shutting his eyes.

Zeta nudged him not long after, the Mayor walking towards them. "Good morning," said the Mayor, nodding to the pair of them and standing in front of them. "Morning Miss Clara," Jayce stated, standing up and offering a hand. She shook it. "I said Clara is enough, but I appreciate the sentiment, Captain. How are you finding the village? I saw your... djinn has started their work. Did I get that correct?"

Jayce nodded. "Yes, uh, Tempest works quickly, so we'll be out of your hair before long," Jayce stated. Clara nodded, glancing towards Zeta as she continued to play. She looked back towards Jayce, her brown, almond-shaped eyes trying to read him. The Mayor was young for her role, in her early thirties, yet with a full head of long silver hair. Although she carried herself with a strong and collected demeanour, her smirk and the way she leant backwards with her hands clasped behind her portrayed a mischievous and more relaxed nature.

Her eyes widened as she glanced behind him, and Jayce stepped to the side as a small child vaulted from the bench behind him towards his back. "Woah there!" Jayce stated, catching the child and slowly lowering her to the ground, her hair a matching silver colour to her mother's. "Layla! What have I told you?" scolded Clara, her more relaxed attitude disappearing as she turned on her parent mode. Her tiny clone scowled, twisting on her feet and holding her hands in front of her as she looked at the floor. "Don't jump on people," Layla said quietly.

"And why don't we jump on people?" her mother asked. Shyly, the girl looked towards Jayce, but seeing his bemused expression and his lack of sympathy, she sighed and met her mother's gaze with a stubborn glance. "It's dangerous," she stated. "Correct. So you do remember me telling you not to, hmm?" Clara retorted before sighing. "Well anyway, Captain - meet my mischievous daughter, Layla."

"Pleasure to meet you," Jayce said, smiling at her. She curtsied, before glancing towards his hips. "Where's your swords?" she asked, receiving an immediate glare from her mother. Jayce laughed. "My swords are a little special, they like to hide until needed," he responded, tapping his wrists together. Sola and Luna liquified from his forearms, forming a viscous crimson droplet that Jayce held in front of her. Layla's eyes widened and slowly she poked the blob, numerous red and yellow eyes forming across its surface in response. She yelped, retreating quickly behind her mother's legs, but then quickly peeking out from behind her, unable to hide her curiosity.

The mimics returned to Jayce's arms and Layla reemerged. "Right, go find Daddy. I need to talk with the Captain," stated Clara, shooing her daughter away. Layla gave one last glance towards Jayce before she turned and wandered away. "Sorry about that, where were we?" Clara stated, sitting down on the nearby bench as Zeta subtly wandered off. Jayce sat down next to her, the small village bustling around them as they brought out tables and began to set up the village square for the incoming lunch.

They talked for a while, mostly about Jayce's experiences on the seas and his circumstances for being on the wrong side of the law, but eventually the conversation turned towards the village of Sparrowhawk's Trove. "It's not much, I'll be the first to admit that, but it's home," concluded Clara, waving back to the village butcher as he set up the barbeque. Jayce nodded, a deep nostalgic feeling filling his chest as he thought back to his own home. "It doesn't need to be. Last Drop isn't any different, and I'll always be happy to return."

Clara nodded, a somewhat conflicted expression dominating her face as she leant forwards, resting her chin on her hands. "Something the matter?" Jayce pried. She blinked, sitting up before chuckling. "Sorry, lost in thought. Thinking about what might have been if... anyway I should go do Mayor stuff. I'll see you for lunch; view this place as home for as long as you need to," she said, flashing a smile before standing up and walking away.

Jayce turned his attention to helping set up the village lunch, an occasion that normally happened twice a month. He swiftly found his attempts to help rejected and, with little else to do, he returned to the Stacked Hand. Eventually the crew was summoned, the strong scent of barbequed meats and vegetables drawing the crew by their noses to the village square. A soft rain began to fall, an event the villagers had accounted for as the entire table sat under shelter, the bored children taking the opportunity to splash in the quickly forming puddles whilst the countless adults socialised.

Jayce blinked and it was the middle of the afternoon, his eyes widening as he quietly and quickly excused himself, returning to the Stacked Hand once more. He made his way down the stairs towards the guest room, spotting Tempest floating outside of the door with a pen and a notebook. The djinn glanced up towards Jayce before turning his attention back to the book. "Sorry, I got distracted. Is everything okay?" Jayce asked. Tempest nodded, shooing Jayce away with a single flick of his gauntlet. "Are you sure?" Jayce asked. Tempest's eyes glowed a brighter blue as he repeated the gesture. "Thanks Tempest, let me know if there's any trouble."

Far into the evening, the crew returned to their ship, most stumbling their way back – Jayce amongst them. As he released his crutch from her duty, Jayce glanced towards the pile of recently delivered mail that had been placed on his bed. "Goodnight," Wicke sighed, shutting the door quickly behind her. The ship span around him as Jayce stumbled to his bed, picking up the letter in front of him and squinting as he tried to read it.

Unsurprisingly, it said his name, so he placed it on his bedside table before undressing and rolling under his covers. He lay there with a smile on his face, the day having gone almost perfectly until his stomach dropped, and he sat up. "I should check on Astris," he mumbled out loud, attempting to stand up only to fall back onto his bed laughing. "Or maybe not. She'll be fine. It'll all be fine," he stated, shutting his eyes and pulling up his covers. A decision he would regret until the day he died.

Seize the Seas Tales: Not Forgotten

Morgana couldn't help but sigh as she sat idly on her broomstick, staring at the sun as it set on the horizon. The Mysts stretched all around her, the islands slowly getting darker and darker, as she and twenty other prospects sat waiting in the skies. "How much longer?" asked a bored Serving Girl she hadn't bothered learning the name of. "Quiet, no more asking that damned question," growled one of the Daughters of Shade babysitting the troupe.

Another Serving Girl floated closer to Morgana, an uneasy expression on her face as she controlled her broomstick. "Hey, Morgana," stated Meredith, drawing Morgana's attention away from the Capital far beyond the horizon. "What?" Morgana asked bluntly, her dark hair whipping around her in the wind. Meredith frowned, briefly questioning her decision to engage Morgana in conversation. "Uh, sorry," she stated, angling her broom away.

"Meredith, sorry, what did you want to ask?" Morgana attempted, forcing a friendlier smile. "Oh, uh, I just wanted to ask what are you looking at? You have this intense... glare – focus - on the horizon. Um," Meredith said nervously. "Not much, just thinking of what's back home," Morgana said with a more natural smile. "Oh, nice. Home home or... the crypt?" Morgana shook her head, turning her attention back to the horizon just as the sun disappeared from view.

"Right, ladies, the Queen is joining us for this special occasion, so best behaviour or it will be your heads that roll," warned their leader, eager excitement spreading out across the group of Serving Girls. Meredith's eyes widened as she glanced towards Morgana. "The Queen?" she mouthed. "Why?" she followed up with. Morgana reached into her pocket, pulling out a pointed blue crystal. "Settle down, settle down. This is an unusual occasion, yes, and an exciting one, but, as our next generation of prospects, it is only natural for our leader to witness your first true steps to joining our convent. Do not disappoint her, she may choose some of you as her personal aides."

The chatter sparked back up, but, as Morgana glanced back towards the crystal she was holding, she couldn't help but look at its colour with disappointment. "Let's get moving," called one of the Daughters of Shade, beginning the descent towards the island beneath them. The others around her began to dive down until only Meredith, Morgana and another Witch remained. Morgana nodded to herself, throwing her crystal as far as she could. "What did you do that for?" exclaimed Meredith, her eyes widening as the Daughter of Shade frowned.

"It wasn't good enough. Someone once told me to aim for the top, so that's what I'm going to do. Selene, how long until the Witch Queen arrives?" Morgana asked. "A few hours," Selene said, crossing her arms as she sat sideways on her broom. "More than enough time, right?" Morgana pried with a mischievous grin. "Your life, not mine Morgana," Selene stated. Meredith stared between the pair with a look of horror, but Morgana just turned and winked at her before she stood up on her broom and surfed it downwards.

A few hours later, Morgana stood with a grin on her face, mud on her cheeks, and blood on her hands, a golden crystal in her grip. She leapt with joy, her boots splashing the wet mud around her before she gleefully kicked over a headstone. "Fair enough," Selene stated, nodding approvingly. "Now get a move on and begin the ritual, you've fallen behind. The others are already done with their familiars."

Morgana took a deep sigh, chanting quickly as she pointed her wand at the mound of mud around the grave she had just broken into. The dirt slumped into the open hole, covering the mangled and desecrated corpse, before she pointed at the various others and filled them in as well. She then quickly strode to an open area, reaching for her notebook, just as a figure descended from the skies and landed in the mud in front of her.

A cold feeling forced its way through her, and Morgana stumbled backwards, dropping to her knees unconsciously, as the various other Witches and Serving Girls around the Necropolis ran forwards to assemble before their Queen. "Your Majesty, welcome," stated Selene, bowing her head to the figure in front of Morgana. There was a soft sigh from in front, and Morgana tried to look upwards, her eyes unable to go any higher than the tips of the long dark hair belonging to the Witch Queen.

"Why have they not finished their rituals?" asked the Witch Queen, her voice soft and well-spoken, but with an icy chill to it. "This one decided to go on her own," stated one of the other Daughters of Shade. "Did she now?" asked the Witch

Queen, stepping past Morgana. "Was it not your responsibility to ensure everything went smoothly? To keep them in line?" Morgana couldn't help but smirk as she heard stammering from the intruding Witch. "This Serving Girl believed she could do better than she had previously, she heard of your impending arrival and sought to impress you, my Queen," stated Selene.

There was a deliberate pause, followed by a sharp inhale. "And have you?" asked the Witch Queen, as she leant down and placed her chin on Morgana's shoulder, her bright green eye staring at Morgana from the corner of her eye, her other eye hidden in the shadow of the night. Morgana nodded quickly, holding up the golden crystal. The leader of the Daughters of Shade retreated before she walked around and knelt in the mud in front of Morgana, placing a white hand over Morgana's cupped hands. "Did any others achieve such success?" the Witch Queen asked, staring into Morgana's eyes. "No," answered Selene.

Tears began to well up in Morgana's eyes as she felt her body shiver uncontrollably. "What is your name?" asked the Witch Queen softly, placing a warm hand to Morgana's face. "Morgana," she answered. The Queen nodded. "A very pretty name. I can see how hard you've worked, well done. There's no need to be afraid, you won't be punished for it, don't worry. We'll build your familiar together, how does that sound?" Morgana nodded, her eyes glancing between the Queen's differently coloured eyes. "Good. I like people who know when they can do more. I expect to see good things from you, and someday I can't wait to welcome you as a full Daughter of Shade, Morgana."

Chapter 84: A Lapse of Judgement

Jayce woke up early to a quiet but forceful knock on his door. He groaned as he glanced around for a clock, but as the knocking continued he scowled and stood up, opening it to find Yuthura stood with a grim expression. "What's happened?" Jayce immediately asked, as she softly shook her head and looked away. "Get dressed, everyone else is still asleep. Don't make too much noise," she told him. Jayce's heart pounded in his chest as he threw on a shirt and some shorts before turning to her. "What's happened?" he repeated, but she stepped backwards out of his room and disappeared from sight.

He slipped on his shoes, following quickly after her, but almost immediately he froze in place. A red haze had settled over the village, the scent of blood wafting his way the moment he stepped into the early morning sunlight. "No..." Jayce muttered, slowly stepping forwards and holding on to the railing. "She's in her room. Ordo doesn't know how she slipped by him..." Yuthura said quietly. Jayce entered into Focus, his eyes stinging as he looked across the island for anything living. There was nothing, not even the farm animals had been spared. "My Gods," Jayce muttered, lifting his hands to his face and burying his eyes in his palms.

"Jayce..." He nodded, lowering his hands and grasping Luna as she turned into a silver sword. "I'm so sorry," she added, unable to offer any condolence as his conscience tore him apart for trusting the vampire he thought was Astris. "Let's get this over and done with. I can't undo what's happened, but I can stop it from happening again," he said coldly, his mind flashing with the smiling faces of the villagers who had accepted him and his crew without question.

They made their way quietly down the stairs to the guest room. Ordo was stood outside, a defeated look on his face as he leant against the opposing wall. "I don't know what happened. I must have fallen asleep, I-I..." he stated, eventually trailing off as he spotted the silver blade in Jayce's hands. Ordo simply nodded. "I truly wish it hadn't come to this," he stated, Jayce nodding as he looked between Yuthura and Ordo before he opened the door.

The silence from the door immediately vanished, replaced by a heartbroken and guttural sobbing. As Jayce charged forwards, his foot slipped and he stopped in place, horrified by the sight in front of him. Astris screeched and sobbed as she raked her nails across her body, tearing her skin, pulling at her hair and her eyes, as she tore herself open. Blood and gore covered the walls, bits of pale flesh, nails,

bone - all belonging to Astris - as Jayce, Ordo and Yuthura watched her desperately hurt herself.

She gagged, vomiting thick blood onto the floor, an almost endless amount as she continued to cry, the wounds regenerating and sealing over, her hair and nails growing back – even her eyes almost immediately returned to their sockets. “Please,” she cried, lunging forwards and grabbing onto Jayce’s leg, her nails digging into his calf, not out of malice but simple desperation. “Kill me, please,” she begged.

Jayce held the silver blade in his hands, his heart splitting as Astris begged for him to end her suffering. “It won’t let me, please,” she sobbed. He stood frozen, Yuthura and Ordo unable to do anything other than stare at the red room and at Astris as she grieved her actions. But finally, Jayce moved. Luna liquified back onto his wrist, Astris’ eyes widening as Jayce crouched down with a look of pity and sorrow on his face. “No,” he said softly.

“Why not? I don’t deserve... please Jayce, please,” she begged, tears streaming down her face. Yuthura stepped forwards but Ordo placed a hand on her shoulder, shaking his head. “Why did you do it?” Jayce asked quietly. Astris looked down, shaking her head. “I didn’t want to. I tried so hard not to. I didn’t drink any blood, and... I don’t know what happened. I woke up and it was too late.”

“You didn’t drink those pouches?” Yuthura asked. Astris shook her head, looking at the floor. “You starved yourself, and your body took over,” Jayce stated. Astris nodded, tears silently dripping from her nose. “How could you be so stupid?” he asked, quietly, and with a cold fury. She flinched, shaking her head. “I don’t want to be a monster! I’m a person, a human, I’m Lieutenant Commander Astris Kai, a Marine!” she cried. “I don’t want to be a vampire!”

Ordo nodded, stepping forwards and kneeling in the gore next to her. “I know, Marine. But this is your life now, you have to accept it and the consequences behind it,” he stated, glancing towards Jayce. Astris nodded, sniffing before wiping her eyes with a blood-soaked forearm. “Please, just kill me,” she asked, looking up at Jayce’s eyes. But he shook his head, her face falling. “Follow me,” he told her, offering a hand.

Hesitantly, she took it, standing up and slowly following after him. She stopped as she stood next to Yuthura. “I’m sorry,” Astris said quietly, before continuing onwards. Jayce led her up to the main deck, the sunlight peeking over the

horizon. "What are we doing?" she asked, as Jayce walked across the main deck, unable to look towards the island. He opened up their storage cupboard, pulling out two shovels before throwing one to Astris.

Haphazardly she caught it, glancing down at it before looking back at him. "We can't bring the dead back to life, but we can give them the burial they deserve. Come on," he told her, walking to the edge of the ship and dropping down to the pier below. She followed after him, doing the same and shuffling behind in silence. They walked along the pier, the port guard sat with his throat slit in his chair, his eyes open.

Jayce pointed to him and Astris approached, closing his eyes before hoisting him over her shoulder. They carried on, the main square mostly empty apart from a few bodies that Astris had cut down. The state of each corpse varied, the first had been quick, ruthless, and done so for a quick drink, but as they progressed, heading into each building, it was clear that Astris had gone on a frenzy. No one was spared, and, in some way, Jayce was relieved that no one else would have to live with this memory.

Astris took the lead, taking over once Jayce froze, unable to look at the silver hair on the floor. Tears fell from her face, as they carried out body after body, putting the pieces of the villagers of Sparrowhawk's Trove back together as they lay the bodies out in the square before searching for identifiers to label each corpse. Eventually the large figure of Bjorn made his way from the Stacked Hand to the village, a few others trickling behind. He looked at the pair of them as they carried out another set of bodies, tears in his eyes as he met Jayce's gaze. He didn't say anything, he just glanced at Astris as tears continued to fall from her face and shook his head.

By the time they had collected all of the sixty-three villagers, and their numerous pets, and lain them out on the village square, it was well into the afternoon. Astris took a deep breath as she looked up at the bright, sunny sky above them. The sun was blazing down on her fair skin, but not burning her: her body was too saturated with blood. As Jayce wiped his brow of sweat, he reached into his bottomless bag, pulling out a small pouch full of his blood. "Here," he told her, giving it to her.

Astris looked down at the pouch, every bit of her being wanting to say no to it, but quietly she poked her nail into the bag, lifting it to her lips and taking a sip. She immediately recoiled, spitting it out instinctively, but wordlessly she forced it back to her lips, this time forcing it down. Jayce waited until she finished the

entire pouch before he handed her a shovel. Slowly they then headed to the nearest farm, clearing a plot of land before beginning to dig.

Jayce had intended to dig them all by hand, but after the first few hours he realised how long it would take them, and he thought the point had been made. Even with Focus it would have taken them weeks to bury the village. He called for Tempest, the djinn seemingly unaffected by the incident. With his magic the graves were created quickly, and he began to work on a memorial to acknowledge the villagers' lives. Astris and Jayce worked together to lower the bodies into their resting places, before they filled them in, one after another with RK's help. By the time they had finished, their bodies drained and exhausted, it was evening the following day.

"What should it say?" Jayce asked her, as they looked at the plinth Tempest had made. Astris looked down at the nearest grave they had filled, unable to answer as guilt continued to overwhelm her. "I don't know, something nice. They didn't deserve any of this. And I don't deserve to be buried with them," she stated, making an assumption as to Jayce's plans. Jayce nodded in agreement. "You don't, and you won't be. I'm not killing you, Astris," he said.

She looked towards him with a look of surprise. "This happened because I trusted you. I believed that you were drinking the blood we gave you, and I ignored the obvious signs you weren't. This blame falls on us, and always will. I don't want to die and meet these people again without trying to make up for it. I intend to do my best to make it up to them. If you die now, that's it. This was all just a horrible mistake that happened to good, kind, innocent people. Do they deserve that? To just be buried and forgotten, killed by an out-of-control vampire and a Pirate's mistake?" he asked.

She didn't know how to answer. "Live. Choose to spend the rest of your life trying to make it up to them. Or choose not to. It's your choice, Astris." He pulled a heavy pistol out of his bottomless bag, the grip marked with a large 'X', the weapon loaded with a single silver bullet. He handed it to her, standing up and awaiting her choice. Astris held it carefully, before she looked at the graves around her, the feeling of countless eyes watching her. Slowly she glanced towards Jayce, standing up and pointing the pistol to the sky before firing, the gunshot ringing out across the island. "Never again."

Jayce nodded, taking it from her and glancing towards Tempest. "Here lies the village of Sparrowhawk's Trove. They were kind, generous, and friendly, but their lives were cut short. May they never be forgotten, and may they rest in

peace,” he stated, pulling out the list of names they had collected. Tempest carved it into the stone, and they left the graves behind, heading back to the ship.

As they reached the village square, Jayce paused, telling RK and Tempest to go on ahead. “There’s one last thing to do,” he said, glancing around at the houses. Astris frowned, but as he began to chant she quickly realised what he intended to do. An orb of blue flame formed in his palms before he sent out a plume of blue fire, igniting the houses. He then moved onwards, ensuring every building received the same treatment, until finally, as flames filled the island, they returned to the Stacked Hand, climbing on board.

He then turned to Astris. “Follow me,” he told her, leading her to his room before opening the door. “Clean up and borrow my clothes, I need to talk to my crew. They’ll make the final choice, I hope you understand,” he stated solemnly. She nodded, catching his arm as he turned to leave. “I don’t have any right to say thank you. I’ve been nothing but a problem for you, Jayce.” He nodded. “Don’t worry, I understand,” he said, turning and shutting the door before locking it with his ring.

Jayce headed straight into the living quarters, his body and mind exhausted and his skin and clothes covered in blood and mud. “Jayce,” Marisha said quietly, as he stepped inside, a few of the others standing up and looking towards him. “Where is she?” Ordo asked. Jayce pointed upwards, before he slowly walked over to the fridge for something to eat. “Can you call everyone for a meeting? We need to talk,” he stated, nodding gratefully to Marisha as she handed him a plate of food she had set aside for him.

Jayce ate quickly, the crew spreading out across the living quarters as they waited for him to finish. Most had grim expressions on their face, with almost all of them affected by the incident in some way or another. “Where is she?” Bjorn eventually asked. “Locked in my room until a decision is made,” Jayce answered. “Is there really anything to decide?” Bjorn countered. Ordo stepped forwards. “What happened was unfortunate, but it wasn’t of her own choice,” Ordo stated.

“And that makes it any better?” Wicke asked. “What if she loses control and turns on us?” she asked, Zeta and Marisha nodding in agreement. Jayce glanced towards Yuthura, but she remained silent. “She lost control because she didn’t drink the blood we gave her. It was a mistake on her part, one that had a big cost. She’s promised to drink whatever we give her. It won’t happen again,” Jayce stated. Bjorn scoffed.

"You promised you would take responsibility if something happened," he stated. Jayce nodded. "I intended to, but I was convinced not to kill her. She deserves a chance to make up for her mistake. A chance to do something good. No one is beyond redemption," Jayce stated, glancing towards Ordo and Yuthura. "She was beyond distraught," Yuthura supported. "She tried to kill herself, over and over again. She wanted us to kill her."

"That doesn't make it right. Guilt is guilt, but the crime was still committed. She murdered those people. Sixty-three people, from the elderly to a newborn, killed because of us, because we didn't do what we should have. She wants to die, and she deserves to," Bjorn stated. There were a few nods, but Ordo stepped forwards. "I have done worse than what she did, but I didn't have a curse to excuse my actions. Any judgement you put on her, should also be put on me," he stated.

"No, that's ridiculous," Zeta stated, others also clamouring in protest. "Vexx... also probably did worse," Falconer stated, acknowledging Ordo's point and glancing to Yuthura who simply nodded. "If we murder her - and we are deciding here as a group to murder her-" Jayce stated. "Then all of those people died for nothing more than helping us. It can't be undone, but it could have some meaning to ensure this never happens again."

Bjorn shook his head, glancing around. "This isn't murder," Bjorn stated. "Isn't it?" countered Marisha, much to his surprise. Yuthura and Zeta nodded. "She deserves a chance to at least try to make up for her mistake," Jayce stated. "We vote, and that decides it," Bjorn stated, glancing towards Wicke. She nodded and grabbed some paper, tearing it into pieces before grabbing a small bucket. "Life or death. I will follow whatever you all decide," Jayce finalised.

The others all glanced around the room before they made their choices. Jayce was the first to put his vote into the bucket, and one-by-one the group placed in their votes before Wicke shook it and began to count out the votes. The first paper she opened was blank, and she immediately looked towards Jayce with shock. He nodded. "I meant it." She opened the next one: 'death'. One by one she opened up the rest, tallying up the total.

"Fine," Bjorn grumbled, the vote two to five with three members abstaining. "There will be rules put in place, and if she breaks any..." Bjorn stated. Jayce nodded. "Thank you, all of you," he said, looking in particular to Ordo and Yuthura, the pair nodding back to him. With the vote decided, Jayce headed back

to his room, unlocking the door to find Astris looking at the numerous photos across his desk and his wall.

She immediately stood up straight, and he nodded to her. "They voted to allow you to stay with us, but there will be some rules. And I know my crew too well to know that they won't be very welcoming," he stated. She nodded, sitting down in his chair with a look of shock. "They really voted to keep me alive?" she asked. He nodded. "They're good people, and everyone deserves a second chance. No one is irredeemable. Now, I need a wash, and it's probably for the best that you stay here." She nodded, smiling softly and averting her gaze as he locked the door, grabbed clean pyjamas and headed into his bathroom.

He emerged refreshed, but extremely tired. As he thought what to do, a knock drew his attention. He opened the door to find Bjorn standing outside. "Here," he stated, thrusting a set of bronze shackles into his hands and a gumshield. "She doesn't leave the room without you, she drinks a pouch of blood a day, and, when she does leave the room, she wears these shackles. She always wears the gumshield until I judge it no longer necessary – which will be never," he stated pettily.

Jayce took the items. "Anything else?" he asked. Bjorn just growled and turned around, storming off. "She always has someone with her, even if she needs the toilet!" he yelled behind him. Jayce shook his head and shut the door, locking it once more before holding up the items. Astris' face fell but she held up her wrists without complaint. "You're not wearing these unless we go outside, but the gumshield is reasonable, sorry." She nodded, slotting it into her mouth. "Thank you," she mumbled.

Jayce smiled. "No problem. Um, take my bed. Get some sleep, we'll sort things out later." She nodded, standing up and climbing into his bed, looking around to see which side he slept on before scooting to the other side. She awkwardly glanced back at him and then faced away. He shook his head, walking over to his bedside and grabbing the letter he had placed on it the night before. He then headed to his desk and sat down, opening it and beginning to read.

He immediately noticed the dried tears marking the paper, the sloppy and rushed handwriting, and as he read the contents he knew why. "Astris is dead," it stated. Jayce glanced over his shoulder at Astris, her eyes open as she stared at his wardrobe on the far wall. "Not quite," he muttered, putting the letter down and grabbing a blank sheet of paper. "Sorry?" Astris asked, looking back towards him. "Huh?" he asked, not used to having a guest.

"Oh, uh, you should probably read this," he said, handing her the letter. She slid over towards him and took it, reading it quickly before she sat back and looked up at the ceiling, tears filling her eyes. "They're okay," she told herself, a deep relief running through her. Jayce nodded. "I'm writing a response, anything you want me to tell her?" Jayce asked. Astris snapped her head towards him, her eyes wide as she bolted out of his bed. "Please don't tell her I'm a vampire!" she begged.

Jayce held up his hands. "Okay okay, of course. I won't mention it. I'll just say that you're okay," he stated. She nodded, relaxing a little and sitting back on his bed. He wrote quickly, handing it to her for a final read before handing her a pen. "They'll want to hear from you personally. I would if I was in their shoes," he told her, standing up and giving her his chair. She thought to herself for a moment and held his pen, before eventually she came up with what to say as tears dripped from her chin. With the letter written she crawled back into his bed, grabbing one of his pillows and hugging it tightly to her chest before slowly drifting off to sleep.

She awoke early the following morning to Jayce drooling in his chair. Her mouth felt strange, but she quickly remembered the gumshield she had slept in, taking it out and walking to his bathroom. She looked up at the mirror in front of her, relieved to finally be able to see herself properly, but disappointed by what she saw. She rinsed her mouth, splashed her face and leant over the sink, placing the gumshield back in before returning to Jayce's bedroom.

He half-watched her as she wiped her eyes and shook herself off, shutting down her feelings and returning to his bed, only to find that he had migrated into it. "Morning," he mumbled, burying his face into his pillow with no fear. "Morning," she greeted, grabbing a blanket from his drawers and sitting in his warm chair. It was soft and smelled nice: a somewhat sweet, wooden smell. "How did you sleep?" he asked quietly, letting out a yawn.

"Not great," she admitted, pulling up her legs and hugging them before resting her cheek on her knees. "Me neither, but that'll change. Trust me." She shook her head. "I don't think it will, and it probably shouldn't." He nodded, rolling over onto his back. "I didn't think you'd sleep. Weren't you afraid I'd hurt you?" she asked. Jayce shook his head. "Should I be? Do you intend to hurt me?" he asked. She shook her head vigorously. "Of course not."

"Then why should I be afraid?" he asked, rubbing his eyes and sitting up. "Because I'm a vampire," she stated, uncertain as to what he was actually asking.

"Astris, to be blunt, who cares? So what? You're more than just a vampire. You are a vampire, but so is Jure Strigon, are you two the same?" he asked. She shook her head. "You made a mistake, you let yourself become only a vampire. Will that ever happen again?" he asked. She shook her head once more. "Then get your head into gear, because if we're going to find a way to cure you, I need you to be a member of this crew – not a prisoner. Understood?" She nodded. "Aye Captain," she answered, standing to attention and performing the Marine salute. "Good, wake me in two hours."

Seize the Seas Tales: A Spark of Hope

Alara stood up, knocking her chair backwards onto the floor with a crash, her eyes wide and her heart racing as she clasped the latest letter from Jayce in her hands. "Wulf! Riley!" she yelled, turning and racing to her door and dragging it open, the bright sunlight blinding her for a second. "Witchford! Brett!" she yelled, her crew looking towards her with alarm. "Commander?" asked Witchford, as he stood next to the wheel, Wulf emerging from the deck below with Riley in tow.

A few moments later, the five of them stood in her quarters, stood around her desk as Riley sat reading the letter out loud. "Hey, I'm alive. I'm badly hurt, but I'll live. I'm sorry for making you all worry about me, and I hope you're all okay. Jayce and the Rising Aces found me and took me in. I don't know how long it will be before I can come home to you all, but I hope to someday. Please tell my brother and sister I'm alive, don't give them specifics, or they'll come find me. I'll be okay, if there's anyone who can fix me, it'll be these guys. Love you all, don't come after me, I'll see you when I'm ready. Sincerely, Lieutenant Commander Astris Kai."

Riley lay the letter down, tears dripping from her chin. "That's not possible," stated Witchford. "It's her, it's her writing," Alara said. "And Jayce wouldn't lie about this." The group looked at each other, the image of Astris' blown open head filling their minds. "She died. We saw her die," Brett muttered, shaking his head. Wulf slowly reached for the paper, lifting it up to his nose. "I smell him and her on it, she's a little different, but it's her. Somehow she's alive."

"Could they have brought her back to life?" Riley asked, wiping her nose on her sleeve. "I don't know. Why would they not use that on Caelie or Xander?" Alara answered. "Unfortunately, until we see her, this is all conjecture. But she told us not to search for her," Witchford stated. Wulf slammed his fist on the desk.

"Screw that, we search for her, bring her home!" he stated, looking desperately at Alara.

But Alara slowly took the letter back, holding it tightly to her chest. "She asked us not to. We trust in Jayce to look after her, and trust in her to find us when she's ready. Imagine what sort of injuries she has, she doesn't want us to see her like that. We will respect her wishes and wait for her to come home." Wulf's chest sunk, and Riley nodded. "She will come home," Brett stated, resting a hand on Alara's shoulder. "Of course she will."

Chapter 85: The Price of Begrudging Acceptance

Astris attempted to give Jayce the two extra hours of sleep he had requested, but a little after an hour in, a knock came from the door. "Was that really two hours?" he groaned, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. "How do I open it?" Astris asked, as she tried the handle on his door, only for it to not move an inch. "You don't," he answered, standing up and grabbing some fresh clothes before walking into his bathroom.

The knocking continued. "Just a minute," Astris responded, her words gummed up by her gumshield. There was an audible sigh from the other side. "Food's by the door," stated Wicke. "If you've eaten him, you have my thanks." Astris smiled slightly. "He's in the bathroom, two secs." There was no response, but Astris spotted the figure of Wicke walking past the tinted windows. Her face fell a little and she let out a sigh, turning around and heading back to sit on his bed.

Jayce emerged from his bathroom freshly showered and clothed, he'd even shaved his ragged beard. "Oh, you got rid of the beard," Astris stated, speaking without even thinking. Jayce raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, should I have kept it?" he asked. Astris felt her face heat up, but she quickly pinched her leg – she had no right to comment on his appearance, she'd already slept in his bed – she didn't know him. "Uh, no, uh, never mind. Wicke brought food, it's outside of the door," she answered quickly, glancing away.

Jayce nodded, not quite certain as to why Astris was actively avoiding his gaze. "Cool. Marisha's a really good cook, I'm sure it's something nice," he said, walking over to the door and opening it to find two freshly baked baguettes, both dripping with melted garlic butter. Jayce could smell the garlic even as the bread sat on the floor, and he immediately grit his teeth. "Um," he said awkwardly, picking up the tray the plates were sat on before turning back inside the room.

"What's wrong?" Astris asked, cocking her head as she looked at the - albeit unusual - breakfast provided for her, whilst struggling to see a problem. "Is this fine for you?" Jayce asked, holding out the tray of garlic bread, fresh apple juice, yoghurt and a singular pouch of Yuthura's blood. Astris nodded. "Yes, thank you," she answered, her stomach rumbling. Jayce nodded, carrying the tray over to his desk and nudging the daesang bronze shackles aside.

He pointed to his chair, carrying his own plate and sitting on his bed. "Drink the pouch first, mix it with the juice or the yoghurt, but as long as it's consumed, I can state that to the others. You can take out your gumshield whilst eating," he

told her, as she sat in his chair. Astris looked at the red pouch glumly, but she nodded in acceptance, the terms more than fair. She picked up the cold blood bag, looking it over and reading the makeshift label upon it. It was half a litre, and the blood type was universally accepted.

"You're also a universal donor, right?" she asked, poking a hole in it with her nail and taking a deep sip before recoiling. Jayce nodded, taking a bite of his very potent bread before similarly recoiling. "How much did she put in it?" he muttered, taking another bite as Astris continued to drink her blood, a disgusted look on her face. Astris drank almost all of it before she mixed the remainder into her juice, cleansing the metal taste in her mouth with the mixture.

Jayce sat nibbling on his bread as he watched her pick up her baguette, taking a quick and large bite into it without hesitation. "Oh yeah," she moaned. "That's good bread." She glanced backwards, Jayce hastily taking another bite as he hid his relief that she did not react to the attempted poisoning by his crew. "A little on the strongside, is it normally this garlicy?" she added, causing Jayce to choke on his food.

He hastily coughed out the blockage, shaking his head. "No, sorry about that. I assume it was Marisha making a statement," he admitted, as he took a deep gulp from his drink. "Oh," Astris said softly, only just realising what had happened. "Well... I guess... it's good to know garlic isn't poisonous to vampires," she stated, smiling slightly. They finished their bread in silence before Jayce stood up and grabbed his bowl of yoghurt along with his silver spoon.

He sat back down, concentrating on the last part of his breakfast until he heard a rattle. "All good?" he asked, glancing towards Astris. She forced a smile, picking up the silver spoon and lifting up the mouthful as the spoon scorched her palm. Jayce shrugged, turning back to his food until the tiniest of whimpers slipped out from Astris. He glanced immediately to her hand, her knuckles white as she clenched the spoon, trying not to let go of it.

"Oh shit, Astris," Jayce stated, standing to his feet and slapping the spoon out of her hand, spraying yoghurt all over the photos covering the wall. She took in an unconscious breath, shuddering before she immediately glanced to the mess on the wall. "Sorry," she said quietly, rubbing her palm as the spoon-shaped burn slowly healed. Jayce's face turned bright red. "Don't apologise! This is not your fault!" he yelled, snapping her out of her absent expression, her eyes widening as she looked up at him.

He turned and headed to the door, but she immediately stood up, placing her bowl back on his desk and rushing forwards, stepping between him and the door. His eyes widened as she appeared before him in a blur of red, her arms clasped before her in a begging manner. "Please don't say anything. It's not their fault – I get it – I'm a monster for what I did. I don't deserve to complain – I-I-I don't mind it," she begged.

Jayce stopped in his tracks, looking down at Astris as she pleaded. "This isn't right, and I don't stand for bullying on my ship. You're here to stay, they need to get over it. That was deliberate, and I'm not letting it go unpunished," he stated. "Please, Jayce, Captain – I-I don't want them to hate me any more than they already do. I can take it, I promise; I've had so much worse." She looked up at him with desperation, and slowly Jayce shook his head.

"You're not here to be tortured or punished. We'll go talk to them, we need to anyway – we can't hide away in here forever. Okay?" he asked. She looked down, eventually nodding. "Go put your gumshield in, and hand me the shackles." After binding her wrists in the daesang bronze shackles, Jayce noticed he hadn't been provided with a key to unlock it. He let out a sigh as Astris adjusted the heavy cuffs. "I'm sorry for making you go through this," he told her, opening his door and stepping outside into the soft daylight. "It's not a problem," she stated, following after him.

Jayce watched her as she stepped out into the light, she initially braced herself, but, once immersed, there was no sign of discomfort or pain. "How do you feel?" he asked, as she took a deep breath of fresh air. "Better now that I can breathe, you should really get some incense for your room – it smells of sweat," she said with a small smile. Jayce laughed, shaking his head. "Ouch." Astris glanced beyond him, her smile immediately fading as a soft smell of smoke wafted over the pair of them. Jayce looked down, biting the inside of his lip before he nodded and looked up at her. "Stay close, we have a lot to do."

They made their way down to the living quarters, pushing open the door to find Marisha, Zeta, and Wicke cleaning up after the crew's breakfast. Their chatter immediately silenced as Astris stepped inside after Jayce; Wicke and Zeta in particular glaring at her with distrust and disgust. "Morning," Jayce stated, receiving lacklustre responses from his crewmates. A hard tension filled the room as Jayce carried the breakfast tray over to the sink. He placed it silently next to Marisha before backing away.

"Th-thank you for breakfast, Marisha," Astris stated, almost desperately. Marisha glanced over to her, her eye wide before she looked towards Jayce. "You're... welcome," she said softly, as Astris cowered away, unable to lift her eyes off the floor. "The garlic was a little excessive," Jayce stated, leaning against the fridge with his arms crossed. "Uh, yeah," Marisha said awkwardly. "Sorry," she added, as Jayce glared at her. "The silver spoons were also a little cruel," he added.

But Marisha frowned. "I made sure they weren't silver. I'm sure I grabbed a set of gold spoons. Right, Wicke?" she asked, turning towards Wicke who flinched when Jayce set his glare onto her. Wicke began to stammer as she tried to come up with an excuse, glancing desperately to Zeta for help. Jayce slowly turned his attention to Zeta, who, unlike Wicke, stood her ground, shrugging unsympathetically. "Accidents happen, right?" she stated, glancing towards Astris with a continued look of disgust. "That was too far," Jayce stated.

"I think killing all of those people was 'too far', but what do I know?" Zeta stated, turning on her heels and walking to the door. "Zeta!" Jayce called after her, but she ignored him and kept walking. Wicke followed quickly after her, disappearing before Jayce could call out to her. Slowly he let out a sigh, stepping up and grabbing a drying cloth as he took over their duties and helped clean up. "Breakfast was strange without you," Marisha admitted, glancing every-so-often in Astris' direction as she stood awaiting orders. "Yeah, sorry."

Marisha shook her head. "It's not your fault," she stated. "It's hers," she added quietly. Jayce let out a sigh. "It is, but it's also mine. It always will be." "You can't put this on you, you carry enough burdens on your shoulders already." Jayce glanced towards Astris, pointing to the spot next to him before holding out a drying towel. Silently she joined them, taking it and helping to dry up the many bowls, plates, and cutlery. She didn't notice Jayce taking all of the silverware and drying them first, but Marisha did and subtly she glanced across Jayce to the quiet Astris stood by him.

"I don't carry my burdens alone, do I? I have all of you after all," Jayce stated to Marisha. She smiled, nodding in agreement. "But there's some I can't put on you, and some you can't ease from me. Some things just need to be carried," he added, taking some of the dry dishes and putting them away, deliberately crossing in front of Astris to force her to take his place. There was a flash of hesitation from Marisha, but she spotted Jayce's slight nod and shook it off.

As Jayce continued to put things away, Marisha mumbled something inaudible. "Sorry?" Astris asked, as Marisha said it vaguely towards her. Marisha then cleared her throat. "Are there any foods you don't like, or are allergic to?" she repeated. Astris' eyes widened. "Don't get any funny ideas, just because I asked, it doesn't mean anything. You'll eat what I give you, if it is roasted garlic with garlic sauce and garlic bread. Understood?" Marisha stated, turning her head away. "Um, I'm not the biggest fan of olives or pickled things," Astris stated. Marisha nodded.

"Fine, what things do you like?" Jayce smiled to himself as he crouched with his head in a cupboard next to Marisha, only to receive a soft kick from her. With the tidying up finished, Marisha grabbed a pen and noted down Astris' likes and dislikes, adding them to her notebook alongside the rest of the crews'. Jayce knew it wasn't a full acceptance, but it was at the very least an invitation to dinner and that was a start.

Jayce then stepped outside, Astris continuing to follow closely behind. Wicke was stood by the ship's railing, staring out onto the remains of the village of Sparrowhawk's Trove. Jayce followed her gaze, spotting Falconer and Bjorn stood in what remained of the village square, before he walked over and joined her, indicating for Astris to sit down on the grass of the main deck. Wicke looked up at him angrily, her jaw clenched and her eyes brimming with tears.

"Hey," he said softly. She quickly looked away, wiping her eyes, but eventually she let out a sigh. "Are you going to punish me?" she asked. Jayce shook his head, looking outwards. "You don't need punishing, you know what you and Zeta did was wrong, and I understand how you feel," he stated. She clenched her fists. "You do, do you?" she goaded. He nodded, looking down at the scar on his arm. "You've been through so much, lost so much. It's okay to be angry, Wicke."

She unclenched her fists. "Your sisters, your friends, Vexx, Xander, Caelie, these people. That's a lot to lose, but taking your anger out on others won't make you feel any better," Jayce told her. She slammed her fists down onto the railing. "Won't it? What am I supposed to do? Walk away, ignore that she killed all of those people, force a smile and welcome her onto our ship? She killed them all, murdered them all! How is that fair? How is it fair that we just leave them behind, go on with our lives as if nothing happened? How can we just - just pretend it didn't happen? Caelie is dead! Xander is dead! I'm sick of losing people, and I don't understand how you can just--"

Jayce slowly reached out, pulling her closer into a gentle embrace. "I know. I'm angry too and I wish it didn't happen, any of it. But if revenge was going to fix anything, our first stop after we lost Caelie and Xander would have been the Capital. And this was an accident - my mistake - one I can only try to make up for," he said quietly. Astris continued to stare at the floor, unable to not hear his words. "It's not fair!" Wicke cried. Jayce continued to hug her.

She eventually settled down, by which point, Bjorn and Falconer had returned to the ship. "Everything okay?" Bjorn asked, as he looked at Jayce holding Wicke. Jayce nodded, releasing her. "Go wash your face, tell everyone to meet on the main deck in fifteen minutes," he told her. She nodded, glancing warily towards Astris as she continued to sit on the deck with a dejected expression, before running off. Bjorn and Falconer nodded to each other before Bjorn stepped closer to Jayce, his eyes on Astris.

"She's chained, she's had her daily blood, and she's got her gumshield in," Jayce stated matter-of-factly. "That's the bare minimum. Don't make it out like it's an achievement, Jayce," he stated with a sigh. "Do you have a plan?" he then asked. "Nope, but I've got some ideas. Are we good to sail, Quartermaster?" Jayce asked. "Yeah, I got most of the supplies I arranged for, before you burnt the rest."

Jayce looked down. "Ah, sorry. Spur of the moment," he admitted. Bjorn shook his head. "Burning down a village was a 'spur of the moment'? Do I need to keep an eye on you too?" he half-joked. Before Jayce could answer, Bjorn held up his hands. "Don't answer that. Fifteen minutes, I'll be back. You better have something more concrete than ideas. And you," he said, pointing at Astris. "You will make yourself as useful as you can. Pose a threat, cause problems, complain, and you're done – understood?" Astris nodded, and he glanced towards Jayce before heading below deck.

As Bjorn wandered off, Jayce turned towards Astris. "How are you holding up?" he asked her. "I've been worse," she stated, with almost a smile. He nodded, stepping forwards and offering a hand to her. She took it. "Come on, let's go clean my room whilst I come up with a plan." She nodded, following closely behind him as they made their way up the stairs to the aft deck before entering his quarters. Yoghurt still covered the walls, but it didn't take them long to clean up.

Eventually they returned to the main deck where the rest of the crew stood waiting. "Any reason we couldn't do this indoors?" chattered Zeta, shivering

slightly as a cold wind blew around them. "We're setting sail," Jayce declared, a few expressions of relief spreading around. "Where to?" asked Wicke, watching Astris with a cautious eye. "We carry on our previous path. We previously achieved our – my – goal of finding the Marines. We also discovered and destroyed the Demon's Eye, preventing the Church from obtaining it. And well..."

"We had our asses handed to us," stated Ordo, bluntly interrupting the silence. Jayce nodded, subconsciously touching the scar on his arm as flashes of that horrible day lit up his mind. "Language," muttered Falconer, prompting a soft smile from Jayce. "We were hurt bad. Lost... family. But we still remain, and we still have our previous goals," Jayce stated, looking towards Wicke. "We set out to explore the Dungeons, to find out what was at the bottom. And that is what we will continue to do."

"The Dungeons?" questioned Astris, drawing a few eyes. Jayce glanced back towards her before nodding. "We know the location of three, a fourth sits somewhere in the Capital, and - according to the rumours - the last is somewhere on one of the main islands in the Mysts. We need to scout the Myst's Dungeon, figure out a plan as to how to break into it, and then find the one in the Capital," Jayce explained.

Astris held up her hand, once again drawing several eyes – this time with mild expressions of irritation. "Um, I know where the one in the Capital is," she said shyly. The expressions of irritation vanished in an instant. "It's in the Imperial Palace, hidden inside the main tower," she stated. Bjorn folded his arms. "How do you know this?" he asked. Jayce stepped to the side, inviting her closer to the group, and she stepped forwards. "I've seen it."

Bjorn scoffed. "A white tower, runes marking each stone, vibrating with energy, a pair of colossal metal doors, right?" she questioned, Bjorn's face immediately darkening. "Shit," he muttered. "Well, we knew it had be one of three locations. I just don't know if it's better or worse that it's not the Holy Palace or the Citadel," he stated, Jayce nodding in agreement. "It's better we know now for certain. How did you get to see it?" Jayce asked.

"You haven't seen it?" Astris asked, frowning before she then looked towards Zeta and Ordo. Jayce shook his head. "I never had an invite to see the Emperor in his throne room," Jayce said, glancing towards Ordo in particular. Ordo just shrugged. "I was never informed we were looking for Dungeons. I thought we

were after the title of Pirate Lord," he stated. Astris' eyes widened, her gaze immediately flicking towards Jayce. "What?"

Jayce nodded. "Kitty Deliver suggested it a while back. And if we intend to enter the Dungeons we need the status and the power of a Pirate Lord to do so. Especially if we are intending to break into the Imperial Palace at some point." "That's suicide," Astris stated, drawing a few faint smiles as they nodded in agreement. "Nothing new," Bjorn muttered. "So what then, we find the location of the last Dungeon, scout it out and then go about getting the title of Pirate Lord. Do we even know how we get that?" he asked.

Jayce shook his head. "Kitty said they were waiting until the time limit for Pirate Lord Valentine to return runs out. She said she'd present me as a candidate when the time comes. But that requires us to still be capable of holding that title." "Easily done," Ordo stated. "You only need to be able to defeat a Vice-Admiral." "Only," muttered Marisha, shaking her head. Wicke clenched her fist before pumping her arm. "We've got time, and someone who trained the Vice-Admirals, and if we're going to destroy the Church we need to be at least that strong. We can do this. We have to be able to do this."

"Since when was it our objective to destroy the Church?" Zeta asked. "When was it not? We've been a thorn in their side since I joined, and their crimes have to be answered for," Falconer stated, with an unusually fiery passion. "For Caelie. For Xander," Marisha stated, the others nodding in agreement. "For everyone else they've killed," Bjorn added. "So Dungeon, Pirate Lord, anything else?"

"I require a wind map, something that shows us the paths of the Mysts that traverse these seas, otherwise navigation will be significantly harder," Falconer stated. "We can pick one up from any major island," Bjorn stated. "It's probably also best we restock on any materials that Yuthura and Tempest cannot make for us. So a large island to resupply manufactured goods should be our first stop." "Okay, Falconer plot a route. Anything else?" Jayce asked.

Yuthura nodded, looking at Astris. "Not to point out the vampire on the deck, but... curing Astris also takes precedent. Truthfully, I have no idea how I'm going to do that, but obtaining samples from other vampires may aide my work." Jayce nodded. "Of course. We'll inevitably encounter Strigon if I become a Pirate Lord, maybe he'll be happy to help us," Jayce stated optimistically. Bjorn scoffed. "Right, okay: resupply, Dungeon, Pirate Lord, vampire cure, destroy the Church, anything else?" he asked. No one spoke up.

"Okay, good to know. Since Astris will be with us for a while she's going to be helping out around here. Bjorn and I will create a rota, and she will shadow until he deems her competent to work independently. You are to work her hard and make her feel useful. I don't want to hear of any abuse – of any kind - or there will be punishment. Understood?" Jayce asked. His crew nodded, and he glanced towards Astris. "Good, welcome aboard, Pirate."

The crew spread out, heading to their stations as they prepared the ship to leave. "Captain, what would you like me to do?" Astris asked, standing at attention in front of Jayce as she glanced at the numerous sails and the small crew across the deck. Jayce just chuckled. "Not much, just watch the magic," he stated. "Mooring lines have been cast off!" yelled out Ordo. Bjorn nodded from behind the wheel, sliding his finger across the glyph on one of the handles. The sails unfurled, the lines moving on their own until the sails went taught, catching the wind and beginning to pull the ship forwards. "We are off!" Bjorn yelled out. Jayce grinned smugly to Astris as her mouth hung open. "How was that?" "Okay, I could get used to this."

Seize the Seas Tales: A Long Awaited Reunion

Damian groaned as he pressed the cold cloth to his bruised cheek. "Quiet. You got punched – get over it," stated Corina Liu with little sympathy, as they sat together in a quiet restaurant. "Thanks for the sympathy, Corina. I took that punch for you, you know. You could be a little more nice to me," he stated, glaring at her as he sat opposite. She shook her head. "And do you think that will make it any better?" she asked. He opened his mouth to respond, but she glared at him and held up a finger.

"You took that punch because you disobeyed my orders. You overstepped, were rude to our client, flirted with his daughter – who, might I remind you, is Jayce's age and would never have any interest in a young boy like you. You drew attention to yourself, and, as I've told you before, that's dangerous and stupid," she berated. Damian slowly sank further and further into his seat as he tried to find some means of interrupting her that wouldn't continue the lecture. "So no, I don't have any sympathy for your own foolishness."

"Ah, but we did get a good deal afterwards, right?" he countered, going for Corina's weak point: money. She sighed, nodding with a reluctant acceptance. "Crying like a child in a room full of adults was not your most... graceful tactic, but it worked. So well done, I suppose." He beamed with pride, and she struggled to hide a smile. "I don't like seeing you hurt. It's fine if it's for purpose,

muscles need breaking down to grow larger, but you are... in my care. And I have a duty to your parents to look after you. So when I tell you to do something, or, more realistically, not to do something--

"Okay, okay – I get it," he stated, lowering the wet cloth and looking away. She shook her head before she stood up and moved around to sit next to him, grabbing her purse and pulling out some concealer. He immediately began to protest as she attempted to cover his bruise, but the soft steps of a figure approaching interrupted them. The restaurant was silent, all other patrons and staff completely absent from the previously busy restaurant.

Damian's eyes widened as he looked up at the gaunt figure, a quick smile spreading as he recognised the glasses-covered face. "Dad!" Damian exclaimed, escaping Corina and entering into his father's hug. "Hello son, it's been some time. Corina, how's his education coming along?" he greeted, taking the seat opposite them. Corina cleared her throat, putting the concealer away and sitting up straight. "He's a bit thick-headed, but we knew that," she said, Damian's face falling. "He continues to surprise me and has been a welcome aide, mostly," she added.

Damian tried his best not to grin, his eyes to the floor, but as he looked up he spotted a hidden conversation occurring between his two guardians. His father nodded, turning his attention back to his son before smiling. "I'm glad to hear. Cassandra will be pleased too. Anyway, I have some time before I'm due to meet some people, so order what you want from the menu, no one will disturb us," he said, a waiter appearing out of nowhere. "Tell me Damian, have you heard from your brother?"

Chapter 86: Blessings

Jayce was pleasantly surprised by how well the first few days went. There were only three arguments, all caused by Wicke and Zeta – nothing new, and none of them involved Astris. She spent the rest of the first day with Jayce, shadowing him and seeing what he actually did during his days, but she ended the day disappointed. His workload - if it could be called that - consisted of, as he put it: 'whatever I want to do'. The Marine Lieutenant Commander didn't find that amusing, so instead they spent the day cleaning the guest room, getting her sized and measured in Tempest's workshop, and inspecting the ship from top to bottom.

She was immediately assigned to Ordo the second day, who – to her abject horror and Bjorn's anger – snapped her shackles and pushed her to her limits in the training hall. They finished the day in Tempest's workshop, repairing the chains they had broken, all the more curious of Astris' new, and still hidden, gifts. The other two days consisted of hard labour under Bjorn's watch, cooking and cleaning under Marisha's, and reading under Falconer's.

The sun shone brightly over the ship on the fifth day. The weather was mild, slightly chilly, with a soft breeze, but it was still warm enough to relax outdoors. And that was what Jayce found himself doing. Wicke stood nearby, leaning over the railing as she stared out towards the fog floating their way. "No ships inside," she stated, squinting as she used Focus. "Are you sure?" Jayce asked, doing the same. She leant forwards, standing on her tiptoes. "Yeah?" she stated uncertainly. "Correct," Jayce stated, grabbing her wide-brim maroon hat and putting it on, prompting her to scowl.

A squeaking call echoed from above, a large bird circling the ship before making a long descent down onto the main deck. "Mail's here!" Wicke called into her communicator, stepping forward to greet the Guild delivery bird. It squeaked at her, presenting its satchel and taking her payment. She then fed it with its assigned fish tin, before she handed over the crew's letters in her charge. "Thank you. Safe travels," she told the bird.

As the albatross took off, Marisha and Ordo made their way out onto the main deck. "Nothing for you Ordo," Wicke stated, handing Jayce two letters before giving one over to Marisha. "Thank you," Marisha said, taking hers and wandering off, as Wicke began to read the newspaper. "Anything of interest?" Jayce asked, looking at his letter from Alara. Wicke read quickly, scanning the front page. "Nothing to do with us. No mention of Sparrowhawk's Trove."

Jayce let out a sigh, nodding in acknowledgement before he put away Alara's letter and looked over the other letter. It was in a handwriting he didn't recognise. Shrugging, he tore it open. "Come to the Open Tap, on Lillith's Confession. Bring your Old Dog and the Marine," it read. Jayce's eyes widened. It had no name, no indication as to who it was from. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but we are headed to Lillith's Confession, right?" Jayce asked. Ordo nodded and he let out a sigh. "Great."

"Something wrong?" Ordo asked, only for their attention to be drawn away as Wicke burst into laughter, continuing to howl until she doubled over and dropped to the floor. Jayce's mouth fell open as Astris stepped onto the main deck in her new clothes with Tempest floating behind her. "What do you think?" she immediately asked, a shy and nervous demeanour about her as she slowly showed off her new outfit.

Tempest had taken the remains of her Marine Jacket, remodelling it into a dark grey crop jacket with crimson highlights. It in itself looked good, but underneath the jacket was a large dress. The dress matched in colour, dark grey with splashes of red. It had long sleeves with a high collar that covered her entire neck in a tight layer, fingerless gloves covered her hands. The bottom half was a bell-shaped hoop skirt that touched the floor, with platformed boots underneath. Astris had then been given a preposterously large hat and a black parasol.

Jayce was speechless. "It's... certainly something," he admitted. Wicke continued to laugh, descending into a mad giggle as she hugged her stomach. Astris grimaced slightly, adjusting her skirt as she tried to find some positives to the look. "Are there any changes you wish Tempest to make," Jayce offered, sensing her hesitation. Astris immediately nodded, turning to the djinn next to her. "Thank you so much for this, and the other one... I have some ideas if you don't mind," she told him.

"Oh, I took inspiration from the books and the advice Wicke provided me on vampires. Is this not what your kind wear?" Tempest asked. Wicke's laughter ceased immediately. "Did she now?" Jayce asked, slowly turning to look at her. "I apologise if the design is not to your liking," Tempest stated, bowing his head as he continued to float. "It's really comfy, and the protection from the sun is really appreciated. Can we work on the changes together?" Astris offered. Tempest nodded. "I would appreciate any insight into the clothing of your kind."

They departed and Jayce let out a sigh of relief, before his attention immediately returned to the letter he had received. "I got a summon," Jayce stated, stepping

forwards and presenting the letter to Ordo. "We got a summon," Ordo corrected. "What's this?" Wicke asked, snatching the letter and reading it over. "Ooh that's not good," she immediately stated, glancing around and scanning the skies above the ship. "Do we know who's watching us?" Wicke asked. Ordo and Jayce looked at each other, both entering into Focus and scanning the deck.

"No," Jayce stated, seeing nothing. "We'd have seen something, right?" he asked. "Yes - at the least I would have - unless it's some kind of powerful magic," Ordo stated. "Our destination was only decided recently, and the fact that they know we have Astris on board... hmm." He crossed his arms, thinking. "Any ideas?" Wicke asked. Ordo shook his head, dismissing the question with a wave of his hand. "Only one way to find out: we'll find out when we get there."

Astris had the chance to show off the alterations later that evening. Like usual, most of the crew tried their best to ignore her, but the few who had begrudgingly accepted her all nodded in approval. The dark grey and red crop jacket had been untouched, and the design of the tight, long-sleeved, high-collared top remained unchanged, albeit the colour had been dyed black. Her gloves had been reinforced – they were still fingerless to allow her to use her sharp nails as a last resort, but the knuckles now had a metal cover.

It was then clear to see where Zeta had been begrudgingly brought in to help. The bell-shaped hoop skirt had been shortened, it now stopped at Astris' knees and the front quarter had been cut out. The ribbing inside had been lessened, making it more flowy, lighter, and easier to move, now acting as covers for the two pistol holsters strapped to Astris' thighs – both currently empty. She wore thick, reinforced leggings that matched the colours of her outfit and her platform shoes had been swapped for heavy boots. To finish off the look, her large hat had been skimmed down, it was still wide enough to protect her from the sun, and to hide her face, if she tilted it.

The evening ended like it normally did. Those who wanted to help tidy away did so, others headed to the baths and Jayce dropped Astris off in her room. "Well, this is me," she stated, with a soft joking smile as she opened her door. "So it is. Did you give Tempest any suggestions for modifications to your room?" he asked. She nodded, inviting him inside. "I, uh, got yelled at for not doing so by Ordo. 'No self-deprecating bullshit under my watch, Lieutenant,'" she mimicked.

"He's not wrong. You're going to be with us for a while, might as well get comfortable," he said, extending his hands out and taking hold of her wrists.

"What are you...?" she questioned, her face turning crimson and her words falling away before Sola and Luna unlocked her shackles. "You don't need these anymore. And we're arriving in a few days so shackles will only draw unwanted attention to you," he told her, taking them away and putting them in his bottomless bag.

She shook her head. "Bjorn will get angry at you, I-I haven't earned the right to take them off without permission," she stated uncertainly, glancing towards the doorway as if waiting for a trap to be sprung. "He'll get over it. You showed a willingness to wear them, that's enough. Anyway, you need your hands if you're going to be given weapons to use," he stated, backing off. She smiled, nodding in appreciation before lowering her head as doubt filled her mind.

"I'm not... welcome, how could you trust me to have weapons?" she asked. Jayce scoffed, gesturing to the mirror made of water on the wall, at the modifications already made to the room, before he finally pointed at her clothes. "You must have missed the memo if you think you're not welcome. Tempest has already changed all of the mirrors on the ship, the silverware has been melted down and replaced."

Astris shook her head. "They won't forgive me for what I've done," she said. "Should you be?" Jayce asked bluntly. Her eyes widened and her mouth hung half open, before she closed it and shook her head. "They won't forget what you've done, but they will accept you with time. They've already begun to. Just be you, accept that they will be wary of your fangs, and be an Ace. The Ace of Blood," he stated. She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. "That's stupid."

Jayce laughed. "Maybe so, doesn't change that you're now a part of this crew. Someday they'll ask you to join us, just continue to get them to like you." "How do I do that?" she asked. Jayce shrugged, a dumb grin building on his face. "That's one of the greatest mysteries this world has to offer. You're so unlikeable, I understand why Alara told me to keep you," he teased, turning and heading to the door before dodging out of the way of a pillow thrown at his head.

Once he had gone, Astris collected her pillow and shut her door, turning back to her room before walking over to her new mirror. It was excessively large, and sometimes as the ship moved, it would ripple, but she could see herself. She extended a finger outwards, touching its surface. It was cold, a large magic bubble filled with water, that, no matter how much she prodded and poked, wouldn't break.

She glanced down, touching the pendant that had been given to her: a communicator. She headed to her bathroom, picking up the nail clippers specially made for her. The item was gold, apart from the tips which were silver. A smile spread on her face as she cut one of her sharp nails, the silver stopping the nail from regenerating. A matching file had also been provided, to keep the regeneration in check every few hours. She sniffed as she felt her eyes water. He was right, of course he was right.

"This is such a bad idea," Astris stated a few days later, as she stood by the ship's wheel with Jayce and Bjorn. "I agree," Bjorn stated reluctantly, as the trio watched their destination grow larger and large. "What if it's a trap?" he asked from Jayce's right. "Are we pretending it could be anything other than a trap?" Astris questioned from Jayce's left. "If it is a trap then we just run away," Jayce stated boldly.

Astris leant forwards, meeting Bjorn's gaze. "He's not normally this dumb, right?" she asked. He chuckled, but quickly caught himself, clearing his throat. "It's a bad idea, Jayce. We don't even know where this Open Tap is, what time to meet this person, or persons. What if it's the Church?" Astris asked. "Ordo's going to go regardless, so I'm going with him. It's up to you to decide if you want to join us," Jayce stated. She chewed on her gumshield, shaking her head. "Fine, but this is a bad idea."

They docked the ship in the main harbour of Lillith's Confession, the crew assembling like usual on the main deck. "Right," Jayce called out, drawing their attention. "New island, new people, usual rules. Feel free to explore, but stay together and stay in contact. Keep out of trouble, we'll stay here until the morning after tomorrow," he declared. His crew glanced at each other, deciding their pairings before heading out to grab their things.

Jayce stepped back, turning towards Astris and Ordo as they stood waiting. "Are we ready?" Jayce asked. Astris shook her head, looking towards Tempest as he floated next to Bjorn. Moments later, Tempest floated over to them holding a large wooden box. She struggled to hide her smile as he opened it, showing off two new pistols for her to use. "As requested, here are your weapons Lieutenant Commander," Tempest stated.

Astris hesitantly picked one of them up, it was heavy, much more-so than her previous pistols. They were larger, with a thicker rectangular barrel, but they were still revolvers, with a six cylinder chamber. The grip was custom, moulded perfectly to her right hand, the other gun to her left. She checked the cylinder,

swinging it out to the left, unsurprisingly it was unloaded. She put the hand cannon back, checking the other – its cylinder swung out the other way.

“They’re perfect,” she stated. Tempest nodded, presenting twelve rings of ammunition. She took it, loading her weapons one after another before putting the rest into slots on her legs. “Two pistols is a little excessive, isn’t it?” Jayce queried. Astris shrugged. “I don’t always use both, and when I do I don’t normally intend to use more than twelve shots. As a Marine I rely on my squad to cover me when I reload. I’m sure I can do the same with you,” she stated. “Xander provided numerous designs for other weapons, with time I will create a solution to remove your need for support, but until then I hope these will do,” Tempest stated. “Thank you, I look forward to testing them when we get back.”

The djinn floated away, leaving the trio to get on with their adventure. “Right, let’s get moving, we should ask around for this Open Tap,” Ordo stated. As they made their way towards the ladder, Bjorn glanced warily at Astris before he pointed at Jayce and Ordo. “Nothing goes wrong,” he warned. Jayce nodded in agreement. “Don’t worry, it won’t, and if it does it won’t be because of us,” he stated. “Better not be,” Bjorn called after him.

They stepped onto the busy pier, beginning the long walk towards the island. Lillith’s Confession was quite flat, and considerably large, but it had no farmland or forests and was entirely covered in buildings. A somewhat constant fog loomed over the island, bringing an artificial darkness to the otherwise bright day, and if it weren’t for the many people wandering around, it would have been quite spooky.

Astris stuck close behind Jayce, tilting her hat down to hide her face as much as she could, with her hair loose to hide her pointed ears and a gaiter over her mouth. She mumbled something, pointing ahead, and both Jayce and Ordo turned to her with confused expression. “Huh, what are mumbling?” Ordo asked. She pulled down the gaiter. “Marketplace is that way according to the sign. Should we go that way?” she repeated, her gumshield causing some of her words to be misheard over the noise of the town.

Jayce and Ordo looked at each other before back at Astris. “Take the gumshield out and say it again,” Ordo stated. Astris looked mortified by the request, shaking her head. “I’m not supposed to, what if something happens?” she asked. Ordo sighed. “Take it out for now,” Jayce told her. She did so, pulling it out and holding in her hand. “The marketplace is that way, should we go there?” she repeated. “Sure, but lets ask around first, just in case,” Jayce stated.

Astris nodded, moving to put her gumshield back in, but Ordo snatched it out of her hand first, throwing it as hard as he could. "What did you do that for?" Astris cried. "Such a shame someone knocked it out of your hand," Ordo stated. "Yeah, pity. Oh well," Jayce added, as Astris shook her head. "Come on." Astris put her gaiter back up. "I better not get in trouble," she muttered, hiding a smile beneath her mask.

They made their way through the streets, asking for directions to the Open Tap, but most people had no idea what they were talking about. However, as the streets became cleaner and the buildings more luxurious, they found someone who knew of the place. "That bar? Uh, towards the centre, look for a fountain of a veiled woman. Its near there, down an alleyway," said the local. Jayce gave him a blue pearl, and they quickly headed on their way.

They found the fountain with some further questions, eventually standing in front of it with curious expressions. "So who was she?" Jayce asked, looking at the placard beneath it. "A Witch, from the old days," Ordo stated, glancing around to see if anyone was observing them. "How do you know that?" Astris asked. "All of the islands in the Mysts are named after monsters. This is Lillith, so she has to be a monster of some kind, why not a Witch?" he stated, pointing away to an alleyway. Jayce nodded, glancing back at the statue before looking at the waters beneath. There were no coins, they'd float after all, but instead people had offered old jewellery. He had nothing to offer, or to ask for, so he turned and followed the pair to the alley.

A bouncer stood in the alleyway, leaning against the wall and smoking a cigarette as he stood next to a red door. "Don't cause any trouble," he warned, looking down at the trio as they stepped past him, entering into the Open Tap. Immediately, a soft jazzy music reached their ears. It was unintrusive and clearly just for atmosphere. They found themselves stood in a small entrance, the walls red and gold with a carpeted floor. A cloakroom sat to the side, manned by a somewhat bored, young woman, who sat up straight as soon as she saw them.

"Welcome to the Open Tap, the best known secret in all of the Mysts. Is there anything you wish to store?" she asked. Jayce looked at his two companions before he shook his head. "We're here to meet someone. Is there anything we should be aware of?" he asked. Her eyes flickered between the three of them, settling on Astris before quickly looking back to Jayce. "Uh, no. Just start a tab with the bartender, and find some seats. We don't serve food here." "Gotcha, thanks."

They carried onwards, following the sound of the music to a simple barroom. The room was quite dark; hanging chandeliers offered light to the main areas whilst keeping the numerous booths on the first and second floor in variable shadow. The place was all open, the two floors separated by stairs as they surrounded a large bar on the main floor. A jukebox sat in the corner, but there was a small platform for live music as well.

As they glanced around they spotted several small groups of patrons scattered around, but the bar was empty apart from an elderly barkeep. "Welcome," she said. They gave their quiet greetings one after another, whilst looking for anyone who seemed to be waiting for them. "I don't see anything," Astris muttered, stepping towards the bar and taking a seat. Jayce nodded, his heart pounding nervously in his chest. Ordo seemed unbothered, and immediately ordered a whiskey.

"What can I get you two?" asked the barkeep. Jayce pointed to a rum sat on the shelf behind and Astris held up two fingers. "I'll start a tab for the three of you," stated the barkeep, handing them their drinks before wandering off. "Drinks already? It's hardly gone noon," Astris muttered, as she looked at the strong spiced rum in front of her. Jayce shrugged, sipping his drink. "Enjoy it before something goes wrong," he stated.

Ordo glanced behind them, immediately noticing that the other patrons had disappeared. "Well, we're here now," he muttered, downing the rest of his drink before placing a hand on his club. Astris' eyes widened as she too noticed the empty room, the barkeep still absent. "Jayce," she whispered, glancing around. He nodded, taking a deep breath before the door behind the bar creaked open and a tall figure walked in.

In unison, Jayce, Astris and Ordo slid back off their seats taking a hold of their weapons before freezing as they looked at the man behind the bar. He was a tall, gaunt figure, a pair of black sunglasses on his face, with green eyes hidden behind. He had fair skin, neat, dark hair under a black beret, and a soft bit of stubble on his face. He wore a black three-piece suit, adorned by a pair of ruby cufflinks.

Vice-Admiral Exarga looked over the trio, all of them surprised in different ways. "Dad?" Jayce questioned first, the other two immediately standing at attention. "Hello Jayce. Chief, Miss Kai, please, at ease," he stated, glancing at their drinks before selecting a pair of bottles and placing them on the counter. Astris and Ordo

relaxed, Ordo not hesitating to sit back down as Astris stood shaking in fear. "What are you doing here?" Jayce asked, stepping forwards and sitting down.

"Your mother said she'd warned you I'd come and meet you at some point, correct?" asked Jayce's father. Jayce thought back, trying to think of when she'd said that before his eyes widened. "This was months ago. I assumed it was in the Capital. There's no way you planned for this?" Jayce stated. His father shrugged. "Perhaps not. Anyway, it has been some time. I was sorry to hear about Xander and Caelie."

Jayce grit his teeth, looking down at his drink. "It happened," Jayce stated. "Regardless, I'm glad you've pulled through," stated Philip, before he looked towards Astris as she continued to stand away from the other two. "Miss Kai, please sit," he invited, smiling reassuringly to her. Astris' heart thumped in her chest as she stared nervously at the Vice-Admiral, her reflection staring back at her in his glasses.

"Please do not feel threatened by my presence, I am here on multiple fronts and I'm not here to take any of you in," stated Philip, refilling their glasses one after another. "What are you here for then, Glasses? We trained you better than to affiliate with Pirates," Ordo stated, picking up his glass. Philip chuckled, stepping back and leaning against the counter. "That you did, Chief. So, acting as Philip Exarga, I'm here to check on my sons. But as your student, I wanted to verify your survival," he said.

"Well, I'm alive," Ordo stated, finishing his drink before grabbing the bottle. "That I'm glad to hear," stated Philip, clicking his fingers. A figure emerged from the shadows and placed a box on the chair next to Ordo, before vanishing into thin air. Ordo frowned, quickly opening the box. "I took your warning and worked to rescue the other Old Dogs before it was too late. I couldn't save Bendak or Vizla. But the others are safe."

Ordo slowly pulled an old photo in a frame from out of the box; his face was hidden to Jayce and Astris, but from the way his shoulders dropped it was clear it meant something to him. "You young fool," he muttered, turning to look at Philip. "Had I been aware you'd try and take your things yourself, I would have left them for you. But I suppose I can't read everyone," Philip said with a gentle smile, as he looked at Jayce. "Thank you," Ordo said, placing the photo in his bottomless bag. Jayce frowned as Ordo took nothing out of the rest of the box. "We broke into the Citadel for a photo?" Jayce questioned, with deep alarm. Ordo nodded. "What of it?"

"Miss Kai," intercepted the Vice-Admiral, standing up straight and adjusting his tie. "Yes sir?" she asked, taking a nervous gulp, only to flinch as he rested a hand on her shoulder. "You have my sincerest sympathies. I know little of what you've gone through, and I'm sure it's not been easy. I hope my son treats you well, and finds a potential cure for your condition," he stated, taking his hand back and nodding to Jayce. Astris looked down. "Thank you, Sir."

"However," he added, prompting her to look up. "I cannot sit by and do nothing. Unfortunately, I found little information that may aid you on your search for a cure, so I hope this helps instead," he stated, pulling out a file from his jacket and placing it in front of her. She frowned, opening it up to find a single document inside. Her eyes widened as she read it. "I wish you luck on your mission to infiltrate the Rising Aces, it is understood that this must be done so through any means necessary and that you are under deep cover. We await your return once your mission is complete, Commander Kai."

Astris stood to her feet, saluting the Admiral. "Yes sir!" she stated, struggling to hold back her tears. "A promotion, how fancy. Any pardons for the rest of us?" Ordo asked. The Vice-Admiral shook his head. "Unfortunately not, but I trust you will use your new found freedom to bring about changes that we on the other side cannot. You did not see me today, but I advise you to head onwards towards Raknar's Mausoleum," Philip stated, turning towards the door he came in through.

"You're leaving, just like that?" Jayce asked. His father nodded, looking back to him and his crewmates. "You've grown beyond needing me to solve your problems, but know that I will always support you, son. On another note, there's some people here on the island who will want to see you. Stay out of trouble. Chief, Commander, Captain," he said, stepping through the door and disappearing out of sight. Moments later several patrons walked back in, sitting back down at their booths before the barkeep returned. "Your tabs have been paid for, is there anything else I can get you?" she asked.

Seize the Seas Tales: Becoming Prey

William didn't know what to think as he stood dressed in his new purple robes. He had been made a Bishop - an actual Bishop - but, as he stood in the inner sanctum of the Holy Palace, he couldn't take his eyes off the Archbishops as they stood around the Pope's throne. He grit his teeth. He deserved to be there, after everything he'd been through. It was his right, his destiny. "Hmph," he uttered, turning his head away towards the various other members of the Priesthood

stood guarding the room. Several members shook slightly, their eyes fixed on the main entrance doors.

With a slam the doors opened, a heavy breathing filling the room as the light from outside cast a huge shadow that reached almost to the throne. William pushed up his glasses, holding his hand over his newly obtained spell book. "You may enter," stated the Pope from his throne, his deep voice echoing around the room. The figure took a step forwards, the floor rumbling with each heavy step. Two other figures walked behind the giant creature, one basked in wispy shadows, the other only as tall as a person's knees.

Whereas William hadn't been intimidated beforehand, that changed as the Oni took a deep breath and looked around the room. "Strange throne room you have," he declared, continuing to walk right up to the throne, the four Archbishops standing defensively around their leader. "Kneel," stated the Pope, his words commanding everyone in the room to do so. William fell to his knees, unable to stop himself, but the Oni, the Ronin, and the Willow all stood tall.

"I make my deals with equals," stated the Ronin. "If you have a problem with that, then hire someone else." Pope Alexander looked at the three stood before him; even from his elevated position on his throne the Oni looked down on him. "You dare talk to his excellency that way!" stated one of the kneeling Archbishops. "Big talk for someone on their knees," smirked the Willow. "Enough!" declared the Oni. "Why have you asked for us?"

"Be grateful you have been allowed the luxury of life, creature," stated the Pope, slowly standing up from his throne to meet the Oni's eyes. "My patience is not unending, human. Answer his question," stated the Ronin, his body miniscule compared to the ogre. "I asked for hunters. You were the three recommended. Are you truly the best?" asked the Pope. The three in front of him looked at each other before looking back at the Pope. One after another they shrugged.

The Pope's eye twitched as he forced a smile. "Prove your capability to me," he stated. "No," said the Oni, his voice rumbling around the room. The Pope's smile faded. "I'm not some beast for you to entertain yourself with. I do not kill for free. State the job, or kneel for wasting our time." Silence followed, the entire room frozen as the onlookers waited for the Pope's response. But he laughed, and the ability to breathe returned quickly to William and the onlookers.

"Some... interlopers have gotten involved in our affairs. We are handling those we can, but some continue to allude us and are not in positions for us to...

engage. Our hands are tied, so I ask for yours,” Pope Alexander stated. “Who’s the mark?” asked the Willow, folding her arms as she glanced towards the still-kneeling Archbishops. “The Rising Aces, a group of renegades led by-” “I am familiar with them,” stated the Oni and Willow in unison, glancing towards each other with confusion before the Ronin looked up at them with bemusement.

“Then I take it you will have no issues taking out Exarga and his crew,” added the Pope. “What’s the pay?” asked the Ronin. The Pope dismissed the question, turning to sit back in his throne. “An amount large enough to warrant your interest,” he said softly. The three bounty hunters looked at each other. “We will have a written contract, you will pay double the official bounty to whoever claims. And the amount paid will be for each Ace,” the Willow stated. “Fine. My people will have it ready for you by the time you reach the front gates. You may go. Find the Rising Aces and crush them.”

Chapter 87: An Invitation and a Party Crasher

Jayce, Astris and Ordo sat in silence for a while after the Vice-Admiral departed, thinking on what had just occurred. Astris had pushed her gaiter back up to cover her mouth, and she found herself unable to blink away her tears fast enough as she held her new mission – her excuse for her absence, and a chance to go home. Ordo leant backwards onto the bar, struggling to read his two companions as they sat deep in thought. But eventually Jayce stood up, the other two mirroring him. “Come on, let’s go.”

They thanked the staff on the way out, all three of them trying to read if they were indeed employees, or something more secretive. Nothing stood out, and that scared Jayce most of all. Once free of the alleyway, they began their long walk towards the Stacked Hand, deciding to cut through the marketplace to speed up their journey and to help hide their conversations through the noise. “A photo?” Jayce questioned once more as he read Astris’ mission briefing.

Ordo just chuckled, nodding with a somewhat abashed demeanour. “Here, if it’ll stop your inevitable questions,” he said, reaching into his bottomless bag and handing it over. Jayce passed over Astris’ orders in exchange, before he and Astris quickly looked at the photo. It was an image of a ship’s crew, or at least part of the crew: a large Navy warship sat in the far background indicating a crew size significantly beyond what was shown.

Jayce stopped in his tracks, his eyes narrowing towards two figures of similar age to him, amongst several others. One had short red hair with a broad smile as she flexed her muscles, the other had black hair and a pair of shiny glasses on his face. He saw others he recognised, others Astris recognised, all of them now leading figures within the Imperial Military. Behind the youngsters stood an array of older people, ranging from one short, square-headed man in his thirties, that they both recognised, to a much older woman in her fifties. Jayce counted twenty-two figures, two Navy squads’ worth.

Astris pointed to a figure stood to the side on the back row, a figure recognisable to almost anyone, even with the image being nearly thirty years old. “You were on the same ship as the Fleet Admiral?” Astris stated, looking to Ordo. He nodded, looking away. “For better or for worse. He was one of us. One of my mentors, a trusted aide of the Captain.” Jayce frowned, glancing across the image until he found the answer, his eyes widening even more.

"I know that man," Jayce stated, pointing at a huge muscular figure in his forties. The sleeves had been torn off his shirt and he held a long coat over his shoulder as he leant over his apprentices. He had a mane of long dark hair, partially tied back in a bun. "Evandril?" Jayce questioned, prompting a bemused smile from Ordo. "You seem surprised," he said. "I'd have thought you'd be familiar with the man you're named after."

"What?" Jayce questioned. Ordo stepped forwards, taking the photo frame back and opening it before showing Jayce and Astris the back. There was a long list of nicknames: glasses, pumpkin, antlers, hound... but alongside was the list of the elder crew. Jayce spotted 'C. Ordo', but Ordo pointed to another name: 'E. Xarga'. Jayce's eyes widened and his mouth fell open. "I-I don't understand. He's my grandfather?"

"Yes and no. I'm surprised you know so little about your own family," Ordo stated. "My parents weren't always around and there were topics that they didn't like to discuss," Jayce stated frustratedly. Ordo nodded, glancing around at the busy streets. "We'll talk about it later, but Captain Xarga practically adopted your parents. Your mother was disowned when she enlisted and your father-" "Is an orphan," Jayce concluded, putting the pieces together.

"Why don't I remember him? Maybe I do. There's so much I need to ask." Ordo nodded, putting the photo away. "I'll do my best to answer, but no answers I give you will change anything. The people who raised you will have better answers than I can give you." Jayce nodded, catching Astris' curious glances from the corner of his eye. He looked directly at her, confronting her glances. "Uh, sorry. It's good to know other Admirals are also weird with their kids," she said. Jayce rolled his eyes, shaking his head. "Come on, back to the ship."

They carried onwards, but as they glanced around the marketplace Astris spotted a large baned polar bear stood next to a shop talking to a similarly large baned otter. She pointed Bjorn out, but as they approached, Jayce's eyes widened. "Ottar?" he questioned, recognising the voice as he spoke with Bjorn. "Jayce, it is you," Ottar stated stoically and without a single hint of surprise. "Jayce, we were just talking about you," Bjorn greeted.

"You were, were you? Ottar, what are you doing here? Where's Corina and Damian?" Jayce asked, only to lurch as a figure tackled him from behind in a tight hug. "You're here! You're actually here!" stated Damian, almost immediately releasing Jayce as he noticed others around, Astris in particular.

"Damian, it's good to see you. Wh-why are you here of all places?" Jayce stammered, only to flinch as a figure cleared her throat.

"Call it planned coincidence," stated Corina Liu, as she carried the bags Damian had left behind. "Corina, it's... been a while," Jayce stated, immediately taking the bags she thrust towards him. "That's one way of putting it, Pirate Captain," she stated, crossing her arms. Bjorn, Ordo and Astris all exchanged a series of glances, all immediately noticing Jayce's almost shy demeanour. "You could have written a little more frequently. Something that lets me – us – know that you're still alive," Corina scolded.

Ordo cleared his throat, unsubtly drawing everyone's attention. "Right, uh, Corina, this is Ordo, Astris, and Bjorn. They're members of my crew." Corina looked all three of them over, taking an extended look at Astris, and a shortened look at Ordo, before setting her eyes on Bjorn. "My apologies for the lack of introduction. I am Corina Liu, one of Jayce's... guardians," she stated, nodding to them before setting her eyes back on Jayce expectantly. "Uh, would you like to see my ship?" Jayce asked, feeling that the choice had already been made for him. "Yes, where is it?" Damian immediately answered.

Letting out a sigh, Jayce pointed towards the harbour. "This way," he said, glancing towards Ordo to lead on. The old man just grinned, sampling Jayce's awkwardness and discomfort like a fine wine. "Damian, was it? Take the lead and tell Astris and I all the things your brother wouldn't tell us about himself," Ordo stated. Damian beamed, stepping forwards and leading the way as Ordo grabbed Astris and dragged her with him.

Jayce looked at the bags he was holding before back at Corina as they began to follow, Bjorn and Ottar walking a few paces behind. "I'm sorry about not writing," Jayce said quietly. Corina nodded in acknowledgment, her nose held high as she looked away from him. "I see where I lie on your priorities," she stated snidely. "I've been busy, sorry." She pinched his arm, not painfully, but - given his arms were occupied - he couldn't defend against it. "It's not me who you've let down," she stated, pointing onwards to Damian as he walked with Astris and Ordo.

Jayce looked down, nodding in acceptance. "Yeah... he seems happy though," he said. Corina rolled her eyes. "You were so much less work," she muttered. Jayce chuckled, thinking back to his old lessons before his body entered into Focus defensively. Damian's body glowed in his vision as he flexed his arms in front of Ordo. "He knows Focus?" Jayce exclaimed in surprise. Corina scowled.

"That moron," she muttered, only for her eyes to widen as Ordo did the same, completely eclipsing Damian. "Tell me about it," Jayce muttered, looking upwards to the sky as he groaned.

"Why does he know Focus, Corina?" Jayce asked, turning his attention back to her. "Why shouldn't he? We'd have taught you if your parents didn't tell me not to," she answered. Jayce frowned, but she held up a finger to interrupt him. "You proved it necessary for him to be taught. The name Exarga is now used in many circles, not always positively. Enemies of you will use him against you, enemies of your parents would also. Ottar taught him to protect you."

Jayce looked down, his shoulders dropping. "Damnit," he muttered. She pinched him again, this time with a little more force – he didn't feel it regardless. "He learnt it for you. He wants to join you and not be a deadweight," she stated. "Your father planned this encounter to give you an opportunity to decide if you want him or not," she explained. The smell of smoke rolled across Jayce's nose, along with screams in the distance. Splatterings of blood specked the streets in front of him, the corpses of Caelie and Xander appearing in a pile in front of him.

Almost immediately they vanished, replaced by Corina's brown eyes boring into him. "Have you had anything to eat?" she mothered. He shook her off, stepping backwards into Bjorn. "Sorry," Jayce immediately called backwards, stepping forwards haphazardly. "My father planned this?" he digressed, dodging Corina's concern. She nodded, observing him closely. "We met him for dinner last night. He told me you'd be along soon enough, and – unsurprisingly - here you are."

"Sons," Jayce muttered. "He's always one step ahead. Yeah, I'm not taking Damian, it's too dangerous," he stated bluntly, his face pale and his heart pounding. "He'll be disappointed, but I agree, especially since my contacts say you have bounty hunters after you." Jayce looked at her in surprise. "Jayce, step up. I raised you better, and your family's gifts are being wasted if you didn't know that already."

"Who, when, how?" he asked, only for Corina to point ahead at the rapidly approaching harbour. "Not long ago, but an inquiry went out a week or two after Sunflower Island," she stated. "I know little more, other than it's the big three." Jayce's stomach dropped. "Oh Gods. Okay... um, that's really not good." She nodded in agreement, placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "You chose this path, you'll figure it out. Well, you better, or it looks bad on me."

"Woah!" Damian exclaimed, looking up at the Stacked Hand as they headed towards it. "That's your ship?" he called back towards Jayce. Jayce nodded, forcing away his look of dread and putting on a smile. "Climb aboard, welcome to the Stacked Hand," Jayce stated, handing the bags he was carrying to Ottar before beginning the climb upwards. Corina nodded to Ottar before following after Jayce, the two baned heading off in the direction of the Heavenly Hand, Corina's yacht.

Most of the crew were absent, all enjoying their leisure time somewhere across the island. Gratefully Ordo took the lead with Damian, leading him on a long-winded exploration around the nearly empty ship, whilst Jayce, Astris and Corina headed inside the living quarters. As soon as Corina stepped through the threshold, her eyes immediately flicked towards Astris. "Miss Kai was it?" she asked, Astris immediately flinching upon hearing her surname, all the more concerned since it hadn't been mentioned. "Uh," Astris began, looking desperately towards Jayce.

"Have you two met?" Jayce asked, equally surprised and curious. Astris shook her head. "No, but Alara mentioned a friend called Astris. So I guessed," Corina stated. "Oh," Astris and Jayce said in unison. Corina chuckled, standing up and heading to the kitchen before rummaging around in the cupboards. "Is there-" Jayce began. "If you're seeking to hide your identity, I would advise not using your real name. Your father is well known. As I similarly advised Jayce, those looking to harm him would look for you, and, as such, would be familiar with your name," Corina stated, opening a pot and pulling out some leaves before smelling them. "This will do," she added.

"Right, uh, Corina was it?" Astris asked. Corina nodded, grabbing a kettle and filling it up. "Don't worry, I won't let slip that you're here," Corina reassured, answering Astris' question before she could ask. "Thanks," Astris said quietly, glancing towards Jayce with swiftly increasing curiosity. He nodded, before miming taking off a hat and taking off a mask. Astris hesitated before she took off her hat and mask, sitting nervously at the centre table whilst Corina prepared some tea.

Eventually Corina turned around, jumping slightly at the sight of Astris. "Oh," she stated, almost immediately looking towards Jayce. "That explains a lot." Astris looked down. "Sugar?" Corina asked her, tapping the table in front of her with her nail. "Uh, yes please. Two," she answered, trying to read Corina's

curious expression. "I can only make assumptions as to why you are a vampire, Miss Kai, but for what it's worth I believe you're in good hands."

Astris took the cup of tea, glancing towards Jayce and smiling slightly. "Better than I deserve," she stated, quickly looking away as he smiled back. Corina pointed to the seat next to Astris, placing another cup down for Jayce. He sat down, taking a sip: it was exactly how he liked it. "Am in trouble?" he immediately asked. "I'm not going to pretend to be happy with your situation," Corina stated, glancing past him to the photos of the crew mounted on the walls.

"But, for what it's worth, you're doing well. I assume you have a plan?" she pried, taking a sip of her tea. "I'm looking to become a Pirate Lord," Jayce stated. There was a distinct lack of surprise from Corina, so much so that Astris and Jayce glanced at each other as she set down her cup. "I see," she said softly. A quick silence followed as Jayce waited expectantly for a scolding. "What?" Corina asked. "Nothing, I just thought you would be more... vocal about my goals."

"Should I be? You'd be aiming for Admiral had you followed the correct path and joined the military, albeit that would have taken far longer without a little nepotism. I see this as doing the same, just on the other side. Why shouldn't you strive for the top?" she stated, folding her arms. Jayce's mouth hung open a little. "Correct path?" Astris pried. Corina glanced towards her, a cold shiver running down Astris' back. "Is it not expected for a legacy child to follow their parents' path? It is what Alara is doing."

"I see," Astris said quietly, picking her cup back up and trying to hide her feelings in it. "So you support my ambitions?" Jayce queried. Corina let out an excessive sigh. "I will support you regardless of your choices. You've always been destined for big things, I have seen to that. I wish you had safer ambitions, that is true. But, Navy, Marine, Pirate, or other, I know you will shine brightly wherever, and I hope you use that light for something meaningful." Jayce nodded. "I'll try my best."

The air seemed to tense around them, before a thunderous boom rang out somewhere in the distance. Jayce immediately got to his feet, racing to the door and stepping outside to see the faint conclusion of a large explosion somewhere on the far end of the island. "What the hell was that?" Jayce called into his communicator. "Not us," came Wicke's voice in response, followed by several other confirmations from the rest of the crew.

Corina and Astris stepped outside, immediately heading to his side. "Well, I take that as a sign to leave," Corina stated, reaching up and pulling Jayce down before planting a soft kiss on his cheek. "Stay safe, don't blow anything else up. Write more," she stated. "Damian!" she yelled, summoning him from further along the deck. He ran over, looking at Jayce expectantly. "Not this time, brother. But soon, I promise," Jayce stated, hugging his brother.

Damian hugged him back, shaking his head before pushing him away. It was only then that he noticed Astris without her mask and hat, his eyes widening and mouth falling open as he pointed at her. Corina grabbed him, dragging him away towards the ladder. "Until next time!" she called back, pulling him down and out of sight. "I dread to imagine what you were like at his age," Astris said quietly, putting her hat back on. "I was a delight," Jayce said, with a grin. Astris scoffed, glancing upwards and spotting Wicke on her flying carpet alongside Zeta, and Falconer flying with Marisha and Yuthura.

The crew landed, Bjorn running quickly along the pier as several other ships began to depart. "I assume we're leaving too?" he yelled upwards as he climbed the ladder. "Definitely. I don't want to get the blame for whoever did that. All crew to stations, we're getting out of here!" Jayce called out, his crew nodding in acknowledgement and racing off to get the ship ready. Jayce headed to the wheel, steering the ship away before unfurling the sails using the associated glyph. The ship began to move, and quickly.

He glanced around, looking towards the smaller vessels also making their escape through Focus, as Falconer took to the air aboard Wren to give out specific instructions. "Hard to port," came one such instruction, Jayce quickly turning the ship's wheel to avoid a collision. Eventually they found an open line of water and headed towards it, ignoring the harbour beacons in an attempt for an accelerated getaway.

Before too long, the isle of Lillith's Confession began to sink away, smoke billowing from the far side and a swarm of ships leaving as quickly as possible. Wren flew back down, depositing Falconer back onto the deck. "Do we have a heading Captain?" Falconer asked, heading up the stairs to join Jayce by the wheel. "Raknar's Mausoleum was where my father recommended we go," Jayce stated. Falconer frowned. "Your... father?" Jayce nodded. "Very well, I shall use the charts I obtained to set a route. I'll have it for you by this evening."

Jayce angled the ship east, taking the opportunity to think over the last few hours and everything he'd been told by Corina and his father as he manned the helm.

Bjorn offered to swap but Jayce shook his head, more than content with steering his ship. The rest of the day fell away, Bjorn eventually taking over and dropping the anchor near some sea stacks not too far away from an island. The crew then assembled as usual in the living quarters, summoned by Marisha for another delicious dinner.

"So your father? The Vice-Admiral?" Zeta asked, looking towards Jayce as they all enjoyed their roast dinner. "Yeah, that's my dad for you. But it seems he was here more for you two," Jayce stated, pointing to Ordo and Astris. Astris nodded in agreement, reaching into her bottomless bag and pulling out her mission briefing, passing it around. "Well, that certainly helps you," Bjorn stated, reading it quickly and passing it onwards. "Did the Admiral say anything else useful?" Wicke asked.

Jayce shook his head. "No, but Corina gave a warning. The Church, at least I assume it's them, put a personal bounty on us. They hired the big three," Jayce stated. A sharp silence followed. "Shit," Bjorn muttered. "That might have been good to know earlier," he added, looking over everyone with suspicion. "We'd know if anyone snuck on board. We put measures in place to ensure the Willow can't do what she did again, and the Oni and the Ronin wouldn't be hiding on our ship," Jayce stated. "We're fine."

The door opened and Tempest floated in. "Captain, one of my sensors was triggered. I have captured an intruder," Tempest declared. Jayce looked towards Bjorn smugly, but Bjorn glared back at him. "Define captured," Ordo stated, continuing with his dinner. "They are sealed within an extradimensional shard. The very same one I tested on you," Tempest stated. Ordo chuckled. "Did you fix the air issue?"

Jayce stood up. "Bjorn, Astris, with me. Let's go investigate," Jayce declared. Astris nodded, standing up immediately with little concern to her food. "Aye Captain." Bjorn stuffed his face with a large piece of chicken, before he pointed his knife threateningly at Wicke and Zeta who were sat on either side of him. "I know what's on my plate," he warned through a mouthful, heading after Tempest, Jayce and Astris.

They headed quickly down the stairs to the hold, deactivating the defensive glyphs scattered around using the secret switch by the entrance. Tempest lead them onwards, pointing to a small purple crack on the hull, a flashing red symbol sat next to it. "Astris, stay out of sight, just in case," Bjorn stated. She nodded, pulling out her pistols and taking cover behind some crates. "Ready?" Jayce

asked Tempest and Bjorn. Bjorn nodded and Tempest floated backwards, his gauntlets sparking.

Jayce pressed the symbol, the crack glowing before spitting out a screaming person. They hit the floor with a crunch, rolling over onto their back and taking in deep gasps of air. Jayce held out Sola, now in the form of a thin rapier, towards the intruder's forehead. "Who are you?" Jayce asked, glancing over the young man lying on the floor in front of him. He had light-brown skin and somewhat long messy hair - a similar colour to Jayce's, but with shaved sides. His eyes were wide and brown, and he had a small patch of dark hair on his chin.

"Uh, parley?" he asked, holding up his hands in surrender. Jayce flicked the rapier forwards, gesturing for him to sit up. "Back to the wall! Who are you and what are you doing on my ship?" Jayce asked, glancing towards Bjorn as he crouched down and picked up a thick leatherbound tome sat on the floor. "Hey, that's mine!" called the intruder, reaching forwards only to hesitate as Jayce reminded him of his sword.

Bjorn opened it, his eyes widening. "Definitely not the Willow," he said, showing off the sheets filled with incantations and spells. "You're a Mage – a Wizard!" Jayce stated. "Uh, yeah. You're the Rising Ace, Jayce Exarga, right?" he asked. Jayce nodded. "That I am, who are you?" he asked once more. The young man stood up slowly and cautiously, before he dusted off his travelling clothes. "I'm a monster hunter in training, I need your help."

Seize the Seas Tales: A Long Year

Alara lay on her bed, late in the evening. She couldn't sleep, she couldn't quieten her mind. The day hadn't been particularly special, it wasn't really a day to celebrate. The rest of her squad had joined before her, so their anniversary didn't align with hers. She rolled over onto her side, grabbing her pillow and squeezing it to her stomach as she stared at her far wall through the darkness, a photo hung up somewhere ahead of her.

She sniffled, rubbing her nose and blinking away the blurriness. She didn't need to cry, she didn't want to, she had nothing to be sad about. She rolled over onto her other side, kicking her legs in frustration before spreading out as far as she could across her bed, the empty space overwhelming and lonely. "Ugh," she groaned quietly, lifting her pillow up and burying her face in it. She could faintly hear her Marines working outside her room, the ship never truly silent.

She sat up, throwing her pillow off her bed in frustration, but almost immediately regretting it, standing up and retrieving it. But she didn't return to her bed, instead she dragged her feet across the fluffy rugs she had purchased on Astris' advice, heading to her desk and turning on her lamp. She turned to her wall, glancing at the photo of her and her squad at the Crucible, smiling faintly. It felt like a lifetime ago, and – as her eyes inevitably turned towards Axel and Astris, their losses unearthed as if she lost them only yesterday. Her chest tightened, and she looked away.

She turned back to her desk, unlocking it and retrieving her personal photos from a hidden compartment. She turned the light down, a soft glow partially illuminating the room as she returned to her bed, one photo in hand. She looked at him, her heart continuing to ache before she set it to stand up on her bedside table and forced her eyes shut. "Here's to one year, Commander Vanathur," she said quietly, tears slowly dripping down the side of her face. "And to many more..."

Chapter 88: Ace of Blood

"Our help?" Bjorn asked the strange stowaway in the cargo hold. "Did you even know whose ship this was?" The young man glanced nervously between Bjorn, Jayce and Tempest, his eyes subtly flicking towards his spellbook in Bjorn's hands. "I admit, I may have not been aware that this was your ship as such, but I can't help but acknowledge that people as famous as you are exactly who I am looking for," stated the stowaway. "The name is Timothy Kane, perhaps you've heard of me?"

"No." "No." "Who?" Timothy let out a sigh, looking at the floor before taking in a deep breath. "That's fine, perhaps you've heard of my grandfather, Jonathan Kane?" he attempted. Bjorn and Jayce looked at each other before back at Tempest – it was then that Timothy lunged forwards for his spellbook. Bjorn didn't even turn his head to look as he grabbed Timothy by the throat, lifting him up and holding his spellbook away from him. "I've never heard of either of them," he stated nonchalantly, as Timothy gasped for air.

"You're not getting your spellbook back until we get some actual answers," Jayce stated, as Bjorn dropped him. "You said you're a monster hunter. What are you hunting?" Jayce asked. Timothy gasped for air as he clutched his throat, only to watch in horror as his book disappeared into Bjorn's bottomless bag. "I wasn't given the full details, just that it was called the Weaver. We were hired to kill it by some guy, but on route we were told some ogre was causing trouble, so we split up."

"We being your grandfather and you, right?" Bjorn asked. Timothy nodded, glaring at Bjorn as he continued to rub his neck. "Why did you sneak on board?" Jayce asked. "The monster I found turned out to be some actor called Onyx." Jayce and Bjorn looked at each other. "You didn't kill him, did you?" Jayce asked. "What, no, of course not. The ogre was harmless, and the problem was unrelated. Anyway, some property damage occurred, I got blamed, and most people aren't too fond of Wizards. So... I'm kind of wanted by the Navy and need a way east."

Jayce let out a sigh, lowering his sword. "Should have asked, but fine. We're headed that way and it's too much hassle to take you back," he stated. "We could throw him overboard," Bjorn suggested, much to Timothy's horror. Jayce shook his head. "Thanks," Timothy said quietly. "My grandfather headed to the Spinner's Nest Archipelago, so if we could go that way as soon as possible that would be best."

Jayce and Bjorn looked at each other. "We never said we'd help you with that," Bjorn stated, handing back Timothy's spellbook. "Surely you'd be interested in hunting a legendary monster? I mean, we won't take any of the treasure, we're getting paid anyway," Timothy countered. Jayce and Bjorn once again met each other's gaze. "Maybe we could offer some help," Jayce stated. Bjorn crossed his arms. "If we're heading that way anyway..."

Astris watched the conversation from her hiding spot, her heart pounding in her chest as she watched the monster hunter talk to Jayce and Bjorn. But eventually their conversation seemed to come to a close and a voice entered her mind through her communicator. "Head upstairs and stay out of sight until we know more about this guy," said Bjorn. Her eyes widened, and she spotted him nod slightly. She didn't hesitate, and she headed quickly out of the hold.

"Right, Tempest can you prepare one of the guest rooms for Timothy. Tim?" he asked, looking at him. "Tim is fine, so is Timothy. Thanks." Jayce just nodded, spotting Astris darting out of the hold from the corner of his eye. "Right, uh, we're going need any and all details you can provide us about this Weaver and your grandfather. There's also some rules to follow. Most importantly, don't go into people's rooms without permission. Common spaces are fine, just don't steal anything. If you want something other than food, ask. Don't fight anyone unless they give consent – that's non-negotiable," Jayce warned.

Tim nodded, holding his hands up. "Don't worry, I doubt you keep monsters on board," he said with a chuckle. Jayce forced a smile, nodding in acknowledgment and pointing ahead to the stairs. Bjorn took the lead, guiding Tim away. Jayce then turned to Tempest. "Reactivate the defences, there's a chance we may get additional intruders." Tempest bowed, floating away to follow out Jayce's commands.

Jayce returned to the living quarters, finding Bjorn introducing Tim to the crew. Almost immediately, all of the eyes looked towards Jayce. In response he held up two fingers before he rubbed his thumb against them, answering all of their questions in a singular gesture. Astris had put her gaiter and hat back on, hiding herself near the back of the room and quietly observing. Jayce nodded to her, and she stood up, walking past Tim before stepping outside.

Jayce followed after her, walking her back to her room. "A monster hunter?" she asked. "Yeah, sorry, I know you're not a monster but until we can... reveal you, in a way that doesn't cause problems, it's probably best if you keep your head down." She nodded, letting out a sigh before pushing open her door.

"And here I thought things were looking up," she muttered, walking inside and shutting the door behind her.

The morning came quickly and like usual Astris remained in her room until someone came to collect her. The rules were the rules, and normally she didn't mind it, but as a knock came from her door and she opened it to find someone she didn't know, she immediately realised the danger she was in. "Gotcha," stated Tim, thrusting a silver dagger towards her face. She yelped, slapping the blade to the side and pedalling backwards as Tim chanted and stabbed at her.

Her eyes widened as his book began to glow, four rotating rings appearing on either side of the cover. "Wait, wait, wait!" she cried out, as large spears of ice formed above him. "I don't know how they missed a vampire, but your plans end here!" Tim yelled, flicking out his wrist and launching the icicles towards her. She weaved around them, the spears imbedding into her mirror, her drawers, her wardrobe before shattering everything they touched.

"My room!" she cried, rolling forwards before thrusting both her palms into his stomach. He grunted, doubling over. The remaining icicles evaporated away as his concentration broke. She lunged forwards, attempting to disarm him, but he swung his dagger wildly and ferociously, gasping for air. His body glowed in her eyes, his Focus bright and potent, and his blood red and alluring as it pumped across his body.

She began to salivate, but she shook herself off as her Focus fought against her instincts, stepping away and racing towards the door. "No you don't, fiend!" he yelled, leaping after her and attempting to stop her, only to impale his dagger into her door as she slammed it shut behind her. "Help! Help!" she yelled, her vision flickering red and white as she ran towards the training hall. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end and she dove forwards, a large disk of spinning ice flying over her.

She rolled, glancing upwards to see Wicke step out of her room further ahead, unaware of the attack heading towards her. Her body moved on her own, a strange lightness overwhelming her as she shifted, envisioning where she needed to be, before she appeared in a fog of red mist on the ceiling above Wicke, diving downwards to shatter the disk from above with a barefooted kick. She crouched as she landed on the floor, turning desperately towards Wicke to ensure she was alright.

Wicke stared at Astris in shock as she dropped from the ceiling surrounded by red mist, before she crouched on the floor and looked towards her, Astris' eyes glowing red, white, and obsidian, her mouth open and hungry. Wicke backed away instinctively, fear racing through her until she noticed the shards of ice melting away on the floor and Tim running towards her. "What's going-" Wicke began.

Astris shoved Wicke into her room, yelping as a large shard of ice impaled her back, tearing her new pyjamas. "Bastard!" she gasped, snapping the shard and pulling it out of both sides – the hole swiftly closing. Tim had already begun to prepare his next spell, his chants quick and efficient as he maneuvered around the hallway to block her escape. She stepped backwards, only to yelp as she stepped onto a spiky ball, the silver spikes embedding into her heel. It burned, agonisingly so, but she shut it out, looking desperately for a way to escape without hurting him.

The door to the training hall opened and Jayce stepped outside, a confused look on his face. "Stop her!" yelled Tim, but Astris had already turned into red mist, reappearing inside the hall behind Jayce. She limped, desperately pulling out the spikes in her heel - even as they burnt her fingers, but as she glanced backwards she bumped into a large person in front of her, a pair of large hands grabbing her shoulders.

Bjorn stared down at Astris, blood staining her top, cuts and scrapes across her legs and hands, and a terrified expression on her pale face, her eyes glowing red. "Behind me!" he ordered, pulling her behind him before spreading his arms. Astris stumbled, dropping to her knees as her legs gave way. Tears streamed from her face as she cowered behind Bjorn, unable to bear the pain in her stomach and foot.

"Stand the fuck down!" yelled Jayce as he barred the doorway, a hot fiery anger burning through him as he stared down the ice blade in Tim's hand. "She's a vampire! A monster! Why are you protecting her?" Tim asked, pointing the blade at Jayce. Jayce looked at the blade, before slowly looking towards Tim. Jayce stood up straight, looking down at Tim as he calmed his anger and concentrated it into a cold and violent warning. "Put the blade down - last chance," Jayce threatened, as Wicke emerged from her room with an orange tome.

Tim glanced past Jayce into the training hall. Astris continued to cry as Ordo pulled out the remaining spikes in her foot; Bjorn stood in front of both of them with a snarl. His chest tightened. "This is wrong, vampires aren't people," he

stated, lowering his ice blade. "She is. And she is one of us. If not, you'd be dead already!" Jayce stated, shaking his head and stepping back. Tim grit his teeth, his blade melting away back into his silver dagger before he stepped into the training hall and folded his arms.

"You have a vampire on your ship, why?" he demanded. Jayce ignored him, walking onwards towards Astris before crouching down next to her. "Are you okay?" he asked. She nodded, wiping tears from her eyes before grabbing her stomach in pain. Jayce glanced towards Bjorn, pointing towards his bottomless bag. Bjorn nodded, reaching inside to pull out a spare blood bag before handing it to Astris. "Drink," he stated.

She looked up at it, her face ghastly white and sunken, her eyes bright red, before she took it, nodding in acceptance as she poked a hole in it and drank. She coughed, splattering a small portion onto the floor before she continued to force down the rest, the colour and fullness slowly returning to her face. Jayce placed a hand onto her back, nodding to her before standing up and turning back to Tim. "You had no right to attack her. If you had a problem you should have said something, challenged her to spar, spoken to her. Instead you ambushed her in her room, with a silver weapon and magic," Jayce stated.

"That thing is a vampire, do you not understand? Vampires don't have souls, they aren't people. Her kind kill and butcher for pleasure, they wipe out entire islands without thought or care!" Tim stated, his words piercing into every person in the room as they immediately thought of Sparrowhawk's Trove. "She is more than a vampire!" Ordo stated. "If she wasn't, she'd have fought back – she should have fought back," he said, looking directly at her with a glare.

Astris just looked at the floor, hugging her legs. "It's playing you all, a vampire cannot hold back its bloodlust. If you didn't feed it just now, it would have turned on you all without a second thought. Don't believe me, let me show you! Fight me!" Tim declared, pointing his silver dagger towards her. Astris' eyes widened, her gaze flicking from Tim to the others around the room and the others entering the hall, all looking at her. "No," Jayce stated, shaking his head.

"Will you let this slide?" Ordo asked Astris quietly, drawing her gaze towards him. She looked at him with wide eyes. "Is what he says true?" he pushed, offering his hand to her. She shook her head. "That thing will bite you, turn you against one another, slaughter you the moment it's told to!" Tim stated. Ordo met her eyes. "Kick his ass," he told her, winking and pulling her to her feet. "That thing is a monster!"

"No I'm not! If I can only prove that to you by fighting you, then fine! I'm Astris Kai, Ace of Blood, and you will see that I'm still human! A Marine, a Pirate, a person!" Astris declared, pointing at him as her wounds sealed shut. The other Aces stared at her in shock, stunned by her outcry. "Astris, you don't have to," Jayce told her. She shook her head, wiping her face and looking beyond Jayce to Marisha by the door. She nodded, running off to retrieve Astris' weapons.

"What can I say to change his mind?" she asked, looking towards Tim as he tried to read the rest of the crew. "Their minds..." she added more quietly, taking her pistols from Marisha as she ran over to her. Jayce nodded in acceptance, stepping forwards and placing a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry, this is my fault," he said quietly. "Stop blaming yourself for things you had no control over," she told him before stepping away. "Tempest! I need some stun rounds," she called out.

Astris loaded her pistols with training rounds, all the while Tim watched her. "These will hurt, even with Focus," she warned him. He ignored her, his silver dagger still in his hand. "I guess that will hurt me more..." she muttered, stepping into the arena built into the training hall. "Ready?" called out Jayce nervously. Tim began to chant and Astris raised her pistols, a shimmering barrier encasing them in a large bubble.

The arena was nearly twenty metres wide, a large flat circle that could be made smaller and would be made smaller once activated. The shimmering barrier had already begun to shrink, not by much, but in the span of a normal bout it would force the two fighters together. Astris charged forwards, six seconds until he could cast his spell she reminded herself, aiming for his knee as she fired her first shot.

Tim stepped to the side, keeping his distance whilst chanting, but Astris fired another two shots, this time aimed at his chest. He slapped the shots aside with the flat edge of his knife, his blade glowing with Focus, before he let go of his spellbook, the grimoire floating in the air as he channelled his magic through it. An orb of swirling snow formed in his right hand before he slammed it down onto the floor, a blast of cold mist spreading out quickly across the entire arena.

He disappeared, the magic obscuring him and the coldness of the air hiding him from her vampiric gaze. "I'll show them all the lies you've told them," came his voice from somewhere to her right. She shot at him, hitting no mark. His chanting filled the air, echoing all around her. She twisted on her feet, scanning for him as she backed away towards the encompassing barrier. The mist condensed, her

eyes widening before she dropped to the floor and rolled as a hail of sharp shards of ice flew at her. She shot twice more, her shots hitting nothing.

"Think Astris, think," she muttered, standing to her feet and feeling the barrier begin to push her forwards. She lifted her foot to take a step, but she hesitated, spotting a faint glimmer on the floor. She crouched, tapping the metal object with her pistol, her face falling as she recognised another silver trap. The chanting continued, the barrier pushing her forwards. She grit her teeth and put one of her pistols in its holster. She dug her nails into her pyjama bottoms and tore off one of the legs before she used it to pick up the ball, holding it in her hands as she waited.

The mist distorted once more, a large spear of ice launching towards her, and she threw the ball towards the centre, aiming and shooting with her other hand. The ball and the shot collided, the spiky silver ball exploding outwards and showering the area in fragments as she was impaled by the ice spear. There was a yelp of pain, mostly hidden by her own cry, and the mist disappeared as Tim's concentration broke.

He grit his teeth as he stared at Astris, several pieces of silver embedded in his skin. She aimed her pistol at the icicle in her waist, firing a shot into it and shattering it before drawing her other weapon and firing at him. Pain screamed across her body, the ice spreading across the wound, freezing her blood and halting her healing. Tim began to chant again, this time moving directly towards her with his dagger in hand.

Her vision pulsed, his arteries glowing in her eyes, his heart thundering in her gaze as she felt her body lust after him, a desire to devour, to consume, to feast on him, overwhelming her senses as she continued to bleed from her wound. She unloaded the remaining four shots in her pistols, two hitting their mark, the impacts notable but unhindering due to hitting his hip and shoulder. His spellbook sparked as his concentration broke, but he carried onwards, darting between the traps he had scattered around them.

Her mouth hung open, her eyes locked on his neck and her empty pistols falling from her grip onto the floor. "Bite me!" he yelled, lunging at her with his knife. But as Astris stepped forwards unconsciously, she snapped herself out of it, dropping to her knees and lifting her hands to protect her face as she turned away, shutting her eyes. She took in a sharp gasp of air, the barrier falling down as she cowered.

Silence surrounded her, apart from a faint growling coming from next to her. She felt no further pain, and as she slowly turned her head and opened her eyes, she saw the tip of a blade pressed between the gaps in her hands, an inch from her eye. A large, furry, white hand had locked itself around Tim's wrist, his arm entirely immobilised by Bjorn. "That's enough!" he growled, staring Tim down before pushing him away.

Tim let out a sigh, shaking his head before putting his blade away. "Fine, fine, she's proven her point," he stated, grabbing his spellbook out of the air and putting it back in its holster. Astris stared up at Bjorn in silent shock, unable to believe what she was seeing. He looked down at her, grimacing as he looked more closely at the large opening in her stomach. "You saved me?" she asked weakly. "And? You think the others would recognise when someone is holding back?" he asked, crouching down and pulling a healing potion out of his bottomless bag.

She smiled weakly, before bracing herself as he poured it over the ice. The wound melted, blood spurting out and a wave of agony barrelling through her. She dug her nails into her knee to hide back her scream, the wound slowly sealing itself, but Bjorn took her hand, offering a brief comfort through the pain, until it eventually numbed. He reached down, scooping her up and carrying her over towards Yuthura. "Take her to the infirmary," she told him, glancing her over, before glaring at Jayce.

The three of them left, leaving Tim in front of the remaining, and very angry, Aces. "I was wrong," he immediately admitted, bowing his head. "It was my loss, and had she not been holding back, I would probably have died from her shots," he stated, showing the two marks from her last shots, as well as an earlier one on his chest. He looked down, letting out a sigh. "Vampires do not act that way when trapped, I don't know why she didn't fight back. What is she?" Tim asked Jayce.

"She's one of us. And truthfully we don't know. When she's in a position to talk, you will apologise to her and this will not happen again," Jayce told him. Tim nodded. "Sorry, it's been less than a day and I've only caused problems." "That you have. Next island we stop at, you're also buying her new pyjamas." Tim nodded once more. "That's more than fair."

Seize the Seas Tales: A Managerial Meeting

Arthuria rubbed the bruise on her jaw as she sat eating her dinner. "Leave it alone, you baby," stated Athena with a smug smirk. Arthuria scowled at her, drawing a few quiet laughs from the other Sisters at the dinner table. "I blame you for it," she said, wincing slightly as she poked and prodded the mark. "That's fair. Next time we spar you can have some more padding." Arthuria rolled her eyes, shaking her head as she went back to her food: a simple soup, water and some bread.

A knock at the door drew the small quintet's attention. "Apologies for the interruption, Sisters. Sister Arthuria, a letter was delivered for you," stated one of the ungloved Sisters. Arthuria nodded, taking it from her. "Thank you." "Of course, enjoy your dinner," she said, hurrying away. Arthuria frowned as she returned to her chair, immediately recognising the seal of the Paladin Elder. "Is that something you should open in private?" warned Athena.

Arthuria glanced at the other Sisters at the table: Anzu, Mona, and Nami. All were aware of her mission, all were full Sisters. Arthuria carefully popped the seal, pulling out the letter and glancing it over. "A formal request for council, this evening, in an hour and a half," she clarified, reaching out and holding the letter over the candle in the centre of the table before walking over to the sink and burning the rest. "They haven't given you much time to respond," stated Anzu, leaning on her wrist. "No response is needed," stated Arthuria. "It's not a request."

Arthuria made her way across the Isle of Sanctity, heading along the main road towards the Holy Palace, as she did almost every day. Her heart pounded in her chest, a cold wind blowing through her habit. The evening lamps had already begun to glow, and - for a weekday - the streets were surprisingly empty. Glancing around and spotting no one, she twirled her staff as she walked, enjoying the blissful moment of nothingness in an attempt to still her racing thoughts.

A Paladin Knight rounded the corner and she immediately stopped, lowering her head and walking past them with an increased expediency. She carried this expediency all the way to the Palace, taking the off-shooting path to lead her towards the Paladin's quarter. Arthuria then followed a set of stairs upwards, walking past the courtyard containing the Tree of Oaths, until eventually she came across a large set of gold and black sliding doors, guarded by two high-ranking Paladins, whose names she had long forgotten.

"State your business," said one of the two women. Arthuria looked at them directly. "I was summoned by Lady d'Arc, the purpose of which is private and at her own discretion. Can you please let me through?" Arthuria requested. The two guards looked at each other before one knocked on the door. It slid open and another guard stepped through, the two conversing before the door fully opened to let Arthuria inside. "You are expected." Arthuria bowed to the two guards, struggling not to grit her teeth before stepping inside. The doors shut behind her.

Jeanne lay on a large sofa, dressed in a loose and flowy black top and a high-waisted pair of flared black trousers. She had a book in hand as she lay on her front, her legs kicking in the air. Arthuria glanced towards the two guards by the door before she cleared her throat, drawing Jeanne's gaze. "Leave us," Elder d'Arc ordered, her guards bowing before stepping outside of the doors. She then sat up, turning to face Arthuria before glancing around the room.

"Thank you for coming, Sister. I've been having some... doubts about myself and was hoping for some counsel," she stated, standing up and walking over to a nearby desk before pulling out a bronze orb. Arthuria bowed to her. "Of course. If there's any aide I can offer you-" Jeanne activated the antimagic field, Arthuria's vision going black as her blindfold lost its magic. "Thank you for coming, Arthuria," Jeanne said softly, pointing to her sofa before walking over to her ginormous bed and sitting upon it.

Arthuria looked at the sofa, her mind split as to whether or not she should sit or kneel. Eventually she sat down, looking nervously towards Jeanne. "Of course, always ready to serve Elder d'Arc," Arthuria stated. Jeanne smiled, nodding in appreciation. "I appreciate that, in more ways than I can express. First of all, do you have any news? Have you discovered anything worth reporting from your contact – Morgana?" she asked, sitting up straight.

Arthuria looked down, shaking her head disappointedly. "My contact has been absent for several weeks now, she left to undertake a trial to progress her standing amongst the Daughters of Shade." Jeanne frowned, resting her chin in her hand. "I have instead been working inside of the Warlocks of the Blind Mother. They are... the most vile, incorrigible beings I have ever met. They are devoted to a monster of horrendous power that they call a Goddess. They torture, maim, and manipulate beings, both alive and dead, to serve their means and have no loyalty to each other – ever willing to betray each other for power."

Jeanne nodded, the news little in value. "This Goddess, the Blind Mother - if we were to find it and destroy it then their cult would lose all of its power. But the

members claim to have only ever experienced her presence through visions.” “Well that’s something new, good work. Anything else?” Jeanne asked, only half interested as she observed Arthuria. “Uh, I should be transferring to observe the Priests before too long and... do I have something on my face?” Arthuria trailed off, reaching up to touch her cheek as Jeanne continued to stare intently at her.

“Oh, no, sorry, not at all. You look great,” she said with a smile, only for the pair to both stare at each with confusion. “Uh, I mean, great work. As always you’ve continued to be a great asset,” Jeanne stated, the tips of her ears flashing red. “Elder, is there something else you needed from me? I apologise for failing to obtain more relevant information,” Arthuria asked. Jeanne shook her head. “Truthfully, I just wanted to see you.”

Arthuria’s face burned red. “I wanted to ensure that you were doing well, and that you knew I hadn’t forgotten you,” Jeanne quickly stated. Arthuria nodded. “Yes, yes I am doing well – thank you. I miss the Order, and I long to return to your side, Elder, but as long as I can continue to be of service to you, I will be happy,” Arthuria said, desperately trying to look anywhere other than Jeanne’s face. “Good... good. Your orders - well the orders charged to Paladin Pendragon - are due to continue for at least another year. I’m sorry, I wish I could shorten it, but you’re still in danger.”

“I understand Elder. Please do not worry yourself with me,” Arthuria said softly, her heart sinking. Jeanne shook her head. “I worry about those closest to me, and there are few that I can truly trust, I hope... that you could be a friend, rather than a servant – if that would be amicable to you?” Jeanne offered, her eyes flicking to and from Arthuria’s face to anywhere else in the room. “A... friend?” “Only if you wanted to be, there’s only so many other Paladins our age, and-”

“Of course I will, I’d love to be, Elder,” Arthuria answered, Jeanne continuing to talk even as she answered. “I mean, I understand if you wouldn’t want to. It’s a lot to deal with, and I’m sure you meet so many other wonderful people, so I-” “Lady Jeanne, yes,” Arthuria stated, interrupting her. Jeanne met her gaze, a smile spreading across her face. “Oh goody, um, here,” she stated, rolling over her bed and reaching underneath, before rolling back with a small box in hand.

“I finished the Noire Lucinda books,” she stated, opening the box to reveal a complete and up-to-date collection. “Wow, is that volume five? I thought it hadn’t released yet in the Capital,” Arthuria asked, standing up and walking over as Jeanne patted her bed. “Technically, it hasn’t. The Church declared it sinful, so

I managed to sneak an early copy. Here, read it and tell me what you think," Jeanne stated, shoving it into Arthuria's hands. "I will, Elder."

"Jeanne. Please just call me Jeanne when it's just us, or Lady Jeanne if you must. I hate it, and I'm nothing special," she said, smiling softly. Arthuria shook her head. "You are special, Lady Jeanne. But Jeanne sounds nice." They both sensed the knock at the door before it happened, both jumping to their feet as the knocks rang out. The door opened almost immediately as Arthuria put her blindfold back on and stashed her gift inside her habit as Jeanne shut the box on her bed.

"Elder?" questioned Sentinel Dauphin, entering the room in full armour. "Did I give you permission to enter?" questioned Elder d'Arc, crossing her arms. "Apologies Elder, I received a report your surveillance was down and came to check on you," he stated, glancing from her to Arthuria. Jeanne walked over to her antimagic generator, turning it off and allowing Arthuria to see again. "I was having counsel, which you interrupted. I apologise Sister, you'll have to come back some other time. Perhaps this time next week?"

Arthuria looked at her, stunned. "Ahem," Jeanne said, clearing her throat. "Of course, Elder," Arthuria said, bowing her head. Dauphin frowned as he immediately recognised her voice, although he wasn't sure where from. "Leave us, Sister. I must have a word with my subordinate about respecting privacy. Until next week," Jeanne stated. Arthuria nodded, glancing towards Dauphin before heading for the door. The doors shut behind her and she quickly walked away, struggling to hide the smile on her face.

Chapter 89: The Necropolis

Jayce left Tim in the care of the others, certain he would cause no further issues and sure that his crew wouldn't let him if he tried. He headed straight to the infirmary on the deck below, a quick feeling of reassurance rolling over him as Astris smiled at him from the main bed. She sat propped up, a blanket covering her lap and her stomach still torn open, but slowly sealing as she sipped from a blood bag through a straw. Bjorn stood next to her, but Yuthura quickly shooed him away – taking his spot before presenting a large needle.

"How are you feeling?" Jayce asked, watching Yuthura as she tied a tourniquet around Astris' arm before stabbing the needle into her. She yelped and Yuthura slapped her arm. "Don't be a baby! I can see through you, that didn't hurt," she scolded. Astris glared at her as she continued to sip her blood before she turned back to Jayce. "Do you want me to speak honestly?" she asked, gesturing vaguely to the large hole in her stomach that was closing surprisingly quickly. "Glad to see you're okay."

She nodded, glancing towards Bjorn as he quietly made his way towards the door. "Bjorn - thank you," she called after him. He flinched, turning and nodding to her. "Of course," he replied. As he began to move onwards, Astris tried to sit forwards only to receive a forceful push back down by Yuthura. "Why did you?" Astris asked, a little more quietly. Bjorn looked down before he met Jayce's gaze. "I already answered you. Don't assume there's more to it."

Astris watched him leave, speechless until Yuthura let out a gasp. "I'm a genius!" she exclaimed, pumping her fists in celebration. "Doc? This isn't like you," Jayce stated. She scowled, immediately returning to form, before she pointed to her microscope. "Take a look," she stated, stepping forwards and poking the new and slightly pink skin on Astris' stomach. Astris hugged her belly defensively, only for her eyes to widen as Yuthura pulled out a huge needle before attempting again. This time Astris let her.

Jayce looked through the eyepiece, frowning as he looked at a series of round shapes intermingled with grey spiky balls. He frowned: it wasn't a field he was overly familiar with, and he didn't know what he was looking for. "Okay, you're all clear," Yuthura told Astris, grabbing a robe from a wardrobe and passing it to her. "What am I supposed to be seeing?" Jayce asked, stepping to the side, afraid to touch anything.

"That is a sample I just took from Astris. You might notice that her red blood cells are a little darker than expected. For comparison - this is yours," Yuthura stated, letting Astris look before switching slides. They both looked, Astris first, then Jayce. "They do look different, why doesn't Jayce's have those spiky cells?" Astris asked. "That is a toxin, created by your cells. I haven't named it yet but for now I'm calling it the Antilife Toxin."

Yuthura opened a small case and took out three more slides. "Ask questions at the end, if they're needed. This first one is from when we first rescued Astris." Jayce took a look, some of the cells were darker than others and there was quite a lot of the Antilife Toxin. Once Astris had looked, Yuthura switched the slide for another one. "This was after she fed." The mixture of cells remained the same, but the amount of Antilife Toxin had decreased, significantly.

"Now I didn't quite understand what I was seeing at first, but I now hypothesise that vampirism is a viral infection, one that overwrites your DNA." Jayce and Astris stared at her blankly. "By the Gods, read!" Yuthura groaned, pulling out her philosopher's stone and chanting. Green smoke billowed around her before forming a glowing outline of her body; she spread her arms into the form, shattering it into tiny pieces before continuing to break down the illusion until a double helix structure glowed brightly before them. "The stuff that makes up you. The vampirism injects a little into you, changing yours to make you into them."

Astris stared at in horror, her body itching as she listened. "The new cells you produce are near immortal, they regenerate but they don't produce antibodies. The things in your body that fight disease, toxins," Yuthura explained, showing examples from her own body before showing the next slide. "This was from you when you refused to feed." The slide was almost entirely toxin. "Your vampiric cells create these toxins, they degrade your body and make you vulnerable. So you ingest blood to absorb antibodies to break these down."

"But what does this toxin do?" Jayce asked. Yuthura took the slide and headed to her window, holding the slide out into the sunlight. It shattered in her hand, and she quickly pulled it back in, showing the damage. "The Antilife Toxin breaks down in sunlight, destructively. Meaning that sunlight and hungry vampire equals death." Astris sat back down on her bed, too stunned to speak. "That's... quite something," Jayce admitted. "Great job, Doc."

Yuthura nodded proudly. "I will most certainly write a paper on this. But it's good news, Astris. Now that I know you're just lacking antibodies I can work

with that, try to create an injection, or gas that provides what you need. It also explains why universal donors are best for you." Astris slowly nodded. "I'm actually just sick?" she asked. Yuthura nodded, resting a hand on her shoulder.

"Just a dirty disease. It's already changed your cells and is continuing to, but once they're all changed the virus should leave your body. I think. Once that's happened I can see where you are and try to undo it," Yuthura stated. "Really?" Astris asked, her eyes widening as she looked towards Yuthura. "No promises, but I'll do my best. You know that." Astris nodded. "Right, get out."

The door shut behind them, the pair slowly walking towards the stairs in silence. Astris coughed and Jayce leapt to the side. "I might get infected now," he joked. "You asshole!" she exclaimed, struggling to not smile back at him. She shoved him once he stepped back into range, but he didn't budge, only smiling as he looked down at her. "It's good news," he told her, knowing that she needed to hear it once more. "It is, isn't it?" she asked. Cautiously he placed an arm over her shoulder, loosely pulling her towards him.

At first she hesitated, his smell overpowering after his workout and the absence of a shower, but his heart thumped into her head reassuringly as his arms wrapped around her. Her shoulders began to shake, her eyes watering as the emotions she had been unable to process detonated in a loud wail. He held her tightly, a weak smile on his face as he silently comforted her, guilt ravaging him as he felt the dried blood on her head.

"It's okay," he reassured, eventually releasing her. She stepped back, wiping her eyes and nodding. "Thanks, uh, right. No more tears, I can only wait and see right?" Jayce nodded, continuing up the stairs. She followed him, but not towards the main deck. "Not coming? Breakfast should be ready." She shook her head, lifting her arms. "I need a bath," she stated. He chuckled. "So do you," she added, his face falling. She turned to walk away, but faltered. "Jayce - I'm safe here, right?" she asked. He nodded and she turned back towards her room, not looking back.

Astris didn't leave her room for the rest of the morning, but food was brought to her, along with a few sympathetic gifts – mostly more food, but also a book on vampires and their powers that Wicke had found. Jayce figured it was probably best she had time to process the already long start to the day. So he left her to it,

instead collecting Bjorn, Tim, and Falconer together to plot out the next stage of their journey.

"Right," Jayce stated, looking over the map of the Mysts and the route Falconer had laid out to the Spinner's Nest Archipelago. "That makes things easy. We have enough supplies for a straight route?" Jayce asked. Bjorn nodded. "Cool." Bjorn and Falconer looked at each before both looking at the large island named the Necropolis just a little away from their intended route. Jayce looked between them before back at the map, crossing his arms. "Hmmm."

"Don't you dare," Bjorn warned, shaking his head. Jayce opened his mouth and tilted his head. "I mean, it's right there... why shouldn't we?" Jayce provoked, leaning forward and altering the route. "I also vote we go to the Necropolis," inserted Tim. "Your vote doesn't count," Bjorn stated bluntly. Tim scoffed. "Rude," he muttered. Falconer shook his head as he made the formal adjustments. "We'll arrive in a week."

They sailed quickly, Tim humbly putting himself to work anywhere that he was required, however it was Wicke that asked for him the most. She found herself enamoured; not by him - she thought he was a moron - but by his magic. He found her strange more than anything, the pair sharing as much and as little as they could with each other as they traded spells from their spell books.

An explosion shook the ship, followed almost immediately by a loud crack, as the Stacked Hand bulldozed its way through a frozen wave. "Wicke!" Bjorn yelled, as she leapt with joy at the ship's bow. "I'm going to kill her," he growled as she ignored him and cast another spell, but a different person intervened. The ice melted away as Tempest dispelled her magic, the large djinn folding his arms as he floated in front of her.

Tempest didn't say anything. It wasn't needed. "Sorry," she said quietly, putting the light blue tome in her hands away, before turning around and walking away from the bow. Tempest immediately began to inspect for damage, just in case his enchantments weren't enough for her magic. "Wicke!" Bjorn yelled, as she stepped closer. She flinched, looking towards him and preparing for a scolding. To her surprise, he instead sighed and waved her away. "Go help Astris with her magic, or cast your spells behind us. We're nearly there."

She didn't hesitate and quickly disappeared inside the living quarters to head to the ship's stern. "That was... restrained of you," Jayce stated, as he stepped out

of his quarters. "She's bored, we all are. It's been one depressing or boring thing after another. And between me and you, I can't wait to find this Weaver – whatever it is," Bjorn stated, locking the wheel before stretching. Jayce chuckled. "Even if it's a massive spider?" Bjorn shuddered, shaking his head as he felt something crawl on his back. "By the ancestors, I beg that it isn't." Jayce nodded in agreement, all the more concerned by the continued lack of information Wicke had managed to find and Tim had failed to provide. "Let me know when the Necropolis comes into view," Jayce stated, heading past Bjorn towards the main deck. "Aye aye."

Jayce headed below deck, walking slowly to the training hall as he searched for something to occupy his own bored mind. The sounds of battle drew his immediate attention, as he had hoped for. Astris was training with Ordo, guns versus his club, but every time Ordo seemed to close the gap Astris would teleport away in a red mist. Jayce could see they weren't fighting with any particular intension – it wasn't for a win or loss – but they fought with terrific intensity, sweat pouring down both their faces.

Jayce walked casually into the training hall, heading over to the benches and sitting down as he continued watching them, until eventually Ordo seemed to notice him. A smile spread across Ordo's face, his entire body loosening up as he went on the offensive. He surged forwards, blocking Astris' shots with his club and leaping before slamming his club hard onto the floor where she was. She shifted away and he followed her red mist, swinging the moment she reappeared. She shifted away again, desperately avoiding his attack and retreating much further away, far outside their training ring.

"My win," Ordo stated proudly, drawing a line in the arena's sand. She stared at him in shock. "We weren't limiting ourselves to the ring! And weren't deciding winners or losers," she retaliated, firing the last shot from her pistol at him. Ordo caught it, rolling it in his hand before flicking it back at her. "I made you leave the training ring. If this was the deck of a ship, you would now be in the sea. You fought well, but you need to figure out how to reload without hiding away. Either speed up and utilise your Focus better, which will work against normal opponents, or figure out an alternative with Tempest."

She opened her mouth to retaliate, but caught herself and nodded in agreement. "Thank you, Chief," she stated with genuine appreciation. He grunted in acknowledgment, turning to Jayce as he watched the pair. "Thoughts, Cap'?" Jayce shook his head. "Your magic has come along well, quickly at that," Jayce

stated to Astris. "Thanks. I wouldn't call it magic as such, it's a bit different." "Magic is anything that seems out of reality. I would say teleporting in a blood mist counts."

"Yeah, fine. The book Wicke gave me has been really helpful, I don't like how it whispers when I'm alone with it, but whatever works here I guess," she stated. Jayce chuckled, nodding in agreement as he looked at the burn marks on the walls, the bullet holes, and Ordo's giant weapon. "Get what you need from it and give it back to Wicke is my advice. Anything worth reporting that you've found?" She nodded enthusiastically, looking towards Ordo who let out a sigh before he pulled out a large knife and made a cut in his arm.

"Woah," Jayce stated, only for his eyes to narrow as Astris cut her fingertip and held it over the wound. Droplets of her blood floated over the wound binding to it before evaporating away, sealing the wound. "That's... interesting," Jayce said quietly. "I can lend my regeneration. Most vampires wouldn't use this – why would they need to - but if we need to make up for Yuthura it could be helpful." Jayce nodded in agreement. "Only problem," Ordo chimed in, tapping his finger onto Astris's forehead, much to her annoyance. "It drains you. As does all your blood magic."

"Couldn't she just drain our enemies in battle to make up for it?" Jayce proposed. Astris' face darkened as she looked down. "Oh shit, sorry. It's just an option, I know you're not comfortable with the idea of feeding on people," he quickly added. She shook her head. "No... no, this is... my reality. It's a viable strategy, and if it's needed to save lives then so be it. Why shouldn't I embrace being... a... vampire?" As Jayce opened his mouth, their communicators called out. "The Necropolis is in sight, get ready to dock. Jayce, I need you now," Bjorn stated. Jayce nodded to the two of them. "Find what works for you, that's all I can suggest and ask for," he said, turning and heading quickly away.

"What's up?" Jayce asked Bjorn as he stepped out on the main deck. Bjorn simply pointed ahead. "Huh," Jayce stated, as he got his first look at the Necropolis. It was a very large island, covered in several large ring-like structures and walls that Jayce assumed were tombs for more significant people. It was the middle of the island that drew his main focus. A huge red and jade pagoda sat in the direct centre of the island. It must have been nearly a hundred meters tall and at the very top was a large golden bell.

But it wasn't the pagoda that Bjorn was drawing his attention to, it was the two Navy ships docked near one of the piers. "Oh," Jayce realised. "It's unlikely

they'll recognise us. Head to one of the other docks. We'll only take a small party," Jayce decided. Bjorn nodded in agreement, turning the ship's wheel and following out his orders. It didn't take them long to dock, and no Navy ships attempted to follow them or attack them, much to their joy.

"Right," Jayce called out, drawing his crew's attention. "There's Navy here and I don't particularly want to sleep next to a city of dead people, so only some of us will go, the others will stay here," he declared. Zeta let out a sigh of relief, immediately holding her hand up. "I volunteer not to go play with dead things," she said. "Fine," Jayce stated, "anyone else?" Bjorn shuddered and stepped back. "Something doesn't feel right here, no thank you."

Jayce struggled to hide his disappointment, but he nodded in acknowledgement. "Okay fine, Wicke, Falconer, Tim, Yuthura and I will go. We'll set ourselves a limit of four hours and then we'll get out of here." His crew nodded, the away team heading to get their things. "You didn't want me?" Astris asked Jayce as the others dispersed. "I thought looking at corpses wouldn't be something you enjoyed." She nodded in agreement. "You're welcome to come along if you want to?" Astris glanced towards the island, a chilling whisper carrying along the air. "Nope, have fun."

"I volunteered not to go, why do I have to come?" Wicke complained, as she stood on the pier with her spellbook in her hands. "Because you enjoy scary things," Jayce stated. She glared at him. "Come on, it'll be fun – just like old times," he stated, putting an arm around her shoulder. She did not agree, but, as Jayce guided her forwards towards the island, she sensed she had no choice in the matter.

The entrance to the Necropolis was marked with two very large metal pillars, both topped by large glowing yellow lanterns. A pair of signs sat next to the entrance both marked in ancient Arcanum. 'City of Dead', read one. 'Do Not Awaken', read the other, much to Wicke's horror. "I have a bad feeling about this," Wicke muttered, only heightened by a whispering that seemed to surround them the moment they passed through the entrance. "Wh-what's that?" she chattered.

"It's just the wind," Yuthura stated, rolling her eyes and taking the lead. "What is it we're here for?" she then asked, turning to Jayce. He shrugged, not quite sure himself. "Just to explore - this is the main burial site of the Empire, have you not been curious to see what it's like?" he asked, subtly entering into Focus as the whispers continued. "Not in the slightest," Yuthura stated, stopping in front of a

map. She tilted her head as she looked it over. "Actually I take that back. The old Emperors are buried here."

Jayce stepped forwards to take a look. The central pagoda was surrounded by four rings, connected by curving walls. Each ring held the tomb of a famous Emperor from the past. There was then an outer circle, which they were currently stood in containing the rest in similar tombs. "Well, shall we take a look at the family that created the Empire?" Jayce asked. There was a soft whimper from Wicke, but the others begrudgingly accepted.

Tim took the lead, taking a path that lead them deeper towards the centre of the island. "Hold on," he eventually said, holding out his hand and stopping Jayce. Eyes widened as they saw what he was pointing at. A green, translucent body floated across the air above the path they were walking. It whimpered slightly, but otherwise ignored them. "A ghost?" Jayce asked with surprise. Tim shook his head. "Ghosts are normally echoes, that was a spirit. Spirits only occur in places where souls can't pass on. We're in the Necropolis, that shouldn't occur here," he explained.

"Will it attack us?" Falconer asked. Tim shook his head and Falconer lowered his bow. "They don't have the power to. Not really," he responded. Wicke frowned. "What do you mean not really?" she asked, before letting out a scream as a spirit of a small boy floated over her. "The natural energy living people give off can disrupt their bodies - even if they try to hurt you they'll hurt themselves more," Tim answered, pulling out his spellbook in anticipation as he continued forwards. The Aces looked at each other nervously before they followed after him.

As they continued forwards, the air filled with more and more spirits. They were oblivious to the party, continuing to float around in dismay whilst paying no attention to them other than a quick glance. However, some take did notice of the group. Jayce initially ignored the two young children following after them, they floated from tombstone to tombstone, hiding poorly out of view whilst talking loudly to each other – seemingly oblivious to their pathetic hiding technique.

"They're going to get in trouble," whispered the small green girl wearing rags. "Let them, it'll be funny," giggled the young boy dressed in a torn suit. The other Aces, and Tim, seemed to not notice the pair, their attention too focused on the other spirits floating in the air. Jayce slowed his pace down, dropping to the back of the group and silently gesturing for the others to carry on with a simple flick of two fingers.

The spirits continued to watch the group, unaware that Jayce had also taken to hiding amongst the many tombstones that lined that pathway. "Boo!" he yelled, startling them both. "Ahhh!" they screamed, floating quickly away before faltering and looking at each other. "What's this about getting into trouble?" Jayce asked them. They sank into the ground until only their eyes were visible, watching Jayce with suspicion as he crouched down in front of them. "Well?" he asked.

They looked at each other before back at him. "We don't know anything, mister," lied the young girl. "Yeah, nothing. We haven't seen anything weird here," said the boy. "Shh, you idiot, that makes it sound like we did see something," chastised the girl. "Which we haven't," she quickly added, glancing back towards Jayce as he raised an eyebrow. "Uh huh, this weird thing you didn't see, was it that way? Or that way?" he asked, watching their expressions as they attempted to lie. "There's nothing that way, don't go that way," stated the dead boy, almost too quickly as the other spirit covered her eyes with her translucent hands.

Jayce nodded to them, walking over them and heading to the others as they came to a split in the path. "Some spirits said not to go that way," he stated, pointing to the right. "So let's not go that way," suggested Wicke, only for her to let out a sigh as Jayce immediately ignored her and began walking forwards. "Why do I even bother?" she muttered, the others following after him. The path curved towards a central tomb, the entrance marked by tall lanterns similar to the beginning, only significantly older and more derelict. Even with holes in the glass, they glowed in their entirety, illuminated by a strange light source buried within the central pillar they stood on.

"Wait, wait! Mister, wait!" called the spectral girl after them, quickly floating in front of them and spreading her arms. "It's dangerous, really dangerous that way. It's dangerous all over this place, you should leave," she stated. Jayce crossed his arms. "Why?" he countered. She blinked at him, her eyes still visible even with her eyelids shut. "What?" she asked. He repeated the question. "What's dangerous about this place?" he asked.

"People with sticks and guns, they're digging, waking up evil people," inserted the spirit boy. "Jayce, maybe we should listen to the dead people," suggested Wicke. "Why are they digging up corpses?" asked Tim. The two kids put their fingers and thumbs together to make a diamond. "Stones," they both said. "What kind of stones?" Yuthura asked. The girl shook her head and the boy shrugged.

"If it is dangerous, why do you seek to stop us?" inquired Falconer, observing the children with great curiosity. The girl pointed at Jayce before she put her hands behind her and twisted on her feet bashfully, even as she floated in the air. "You're not afraid of us," she said quietly. "It's been a long time since someone wasn't afraid." The Aces glanced at each other, each taking the information in different ways. Yuthura asked first. "How long have you been... awake for?" she asked gently. The children shrugged.

"Who is the current Emperor?" Jayce asked. The girl looked confused by the question, but the boy's face lit up. "Ooh ooh, Lin the Gracious," he answered. Jayce, Tim and Yuthura glanced at each other with alarm. "She died nearly a hundred years ago," Jayce stated. The two spirits looked at each other with confusion, that quickly turned into panicked alarm. "Why haven't you passed on?" Falconer asked.

"We can't leave. The others won't let us," stated the girl. Glances spread across the group once more. "Who?" Jayce asked. Both spirits pointed onwards, towards the Emperor's tomb. Jayce simply nodded. "Okay, we'll sort it out," he stated, continuing onwards and leaving the pair behind. "Don't!" called the young girl, but Jayce ignored her, and the others followed behind him.

Seize the Seas Tales: Wrath

The monster hissed as it stumbled forwards through the rain, dark red blood spurting from the stump where its arm should have been. Its skin was pale, almost translucent, and covered in a spiderweb of dark veins. Its ears were pointed and long and its fangs now sat broken in its maw. "Aim!" called out Wulf, the Marines under his command raising their rifles without hesitation. "Hold," Commander Vanathur said coldly, her eyes unwavering from the vampire as it continued to limp away.

The Marines remained steady, their rifles still raised, but Alara stepped in front of them, walking slowly after the creature with her glaive in one hand. The vampire glanced back, its eyes bright red and terrified. Alara stared back at it, and slowly she raised a fist to the air before she clicked her fingers. A burning bullet flew through the air, leaving a faint blue trail in its wake as it blew off the creature right leg.

It dropped to the floor in a splatter, writhing in pain in the mud as Alara continued forwards. In desperation it clawed ahead of it, dragging its corpse

through the mud as its reaper approached, her hair wet and dripping as she looked down with nothing but disgust. "Ugh, no," hissed the vampire, only to yelp as Alara cut a line in the mud in front of him with her glaive. She kicked him onto his back, placing a boot onto his remaining arm and pinning him whilst holding her glaive over his chest.

"Mercy, I beg of you, mercy!" cried the vampire captain. Alara spat on him. "Please, I'll tell you anything," he begged. She raised her glaive a few inches higher. "Where is Strigon?" she asked. The vampire's eyes widened, and he shook his head. Slowly she lowered her glaive. "Wait, wait, he's-" he attempted, only for the vampire to gasp and begin to convulse. Alara leapt backwards as the vampire exploded into small chunks and a lot of blood.

"Damn," she muttered, only to frown as the blood and viscera began to float, swirling in the air to form a face. The blood visage stared at her with curiosity. "Commander Vanathur, I presume?" came a cold and deep voice that seemed to echo in her mind. "Strigon, I'm guessing?" countered Alara, unfazed by the visage and unsurprised by the vampire's destruction. "Need I any introduction?" he asked.

"No, I suppose not. You keep killing your goons when I try to interrogate them - can you please stop, so I can kill you?" she asked nicely. He laughed, the blood eyes glowing fiercely in the darkness of the night. "I will not. I don't waste my time with spawn. But, I must admit, your persistence is... fascinating. Perhaps you would like to serve me?" She spat into the mud. "I take that as a no." "Where are you hiding?" she asked bluntly.

"I have no intention in picking fights against the Empire, and I know of the Bloody Barbarian's fondness for you, so no. I will not tell you, and you will not find me. But I must admit, I find myself curious as to why you seek me. Did I touch something of yours? Take one of your precious New Era?" he goaded. "You bastard!" she said through gritted teeth. He chuckled, laughing slowly, loudly, and for far too long, before, in an instant, the image of the face transformed. The blood shifted into a tall, dark-skinned man that towered over her, his fangs an inch from her eyes and hand around her neck.

Her eyes widened, her heart racing in her chest as she stared directly at the Pirate Lord. "And so I'm here, Vanathur. What will you do now? Fight? Die? No. I think not," he said, her entire body frozen in his grip. "Perhaps you do desire to serve me, to become my bride? I could treat you well, and you would live forever." "Commander!" called a voice behind her, a silver bullet sailing through Strigon's

head. It reformed, his gaze unbreaking. "I know not why you hate me so much. But, honestly, I don't care for it. End your hunt, or I'll begin mine."

His grip loosened, and Alara dropped a few inches to floor, only then realising she had been held in the air by his hand. She coughed, gasping for air, but in the second it took for her to look up, he had gone. "Commander?" called Wulf as he ran over. "Are you okay?" he asked, looking around as the other Marines spread out to form a perimeter. Alara looked up at him, her heart continuing to race in her chest. "He was here, Strigon was here," she stated. Wulf nodded, glancing behind him nervously. "Your orders?" he asked. She shook her head. "We end the hunt here. Revenge will have to wait," she admitted, through gritted teeth.

Chapter 90: Rulers of the Damned

Jayce ignored the spirits calling after him as he, Wicke, Falconer, Tim, and Yuthura continued forwards towards the Emperor's Tomb. "Is this really a good idea?" Yuthura asked, as Wicke almost tripped her up from walking so close behind her. "Something is affecting the natural flow of death here, how could we not investigate?" countered Falconer, his bow on his back and fists clenched. "Precisely for that exact reason," stated Wicke nervously. Every few seconds she would open her spellbook, enter the infinite library, and switch her tome for one of another magical element.

Another pair of lantern pillars appeared before them, marking the entrance to a large circular courtyard. A sign marked the area above the entrance: 'Tomb of Emperor Shan Ilst', it read. "The Frenzied One?" Jayce questioned, quickly turning his attention to the almost decrepit area around the tomb's entrance. "What does an Emperor do to be called the Frenzied One?" questioned Wicke. "Nothing pleasant. This one had a habit of ordering executions if I remember, normally by the dozens," stated Yuthura. Wicke gulped loudly, glancing across the courtyard, anticipating an ambush.

One they triggered as soon as they entered the courtyard itself. The ground split open in several spots, releasing a small beam of green light that dissipated into smoke. Five spectral ghosts remained as the smoke solidified, rushing towards them, their bones glowing against their translucent skin. "Magic or life force, whatever you use, hit them hard!" called out Tim, rushing forwards and slamming his body into the nearest ghost. The ghost shuddered, taking the physical impact and rolling away across the floor before dispersing into green particles. The Aces glanced at each other before charging and following his lead.

It didn't take long for them to scatter the ghosts, but an uncomfortable feeling spread across the group. A presence seemed to be watching them – from above – from behind – from all around them, as if a hundred eyes had awoken to their presence. Wicke whimpered slightly, an echoing whisper floating through the grass that had grown through the cracks in the stone courtyard. "Jayce..." she said quietly. He nodded, turning his attention towards the opening in a wall in front of them, a dark set of stairs leading down into the unknown. As the whispering continued and the watching presence seemed to grow heavier, he stepped forwards, taking the first step into the darkness.

They didn't have to walk for long until a faint torchlight illuminated their surroundings. As they emerged from the darkness into a large open hallway the

air grew mustier, a dirty feeling pressing onto their bodies as a feeling of rot surrounded them. The torches lined the entire hallway, providing a faint and unequal glow that painted more of the area in shadow than light. They continued forwards, unconsciously forming into an arrow formation with Jayce at the lead and Wicke and Falconer at the back.

"This place has been disturbed," Falconer stated, noticing - along with the others - the caskets along the walls that had been broke open. Jayce nodded in acknowledgment, his eyes flickering from wall to wall, awaiting an ambush – a trap – something to attack him and his crew. Instead his eyes locked onto a beam of v-shaped light descending from a hole in the roof onto an open sarcophagus and a person sat on top of it.

"Damn," Jayce muttered, "not another mummy." He continued forwards, the others slowing down, apart from Tim who followed close behind. "Another?" Tim asked. Jayce nodded. "A long time ago, in the Rockies. However, I doubt this one is interested in board games," he responded. This proposed more questions in Tim's mind than it answered, but kept his mouth, shut his eyes focused on the skeletal figure before them.

The old Emperor was little more than skin and bones dressed in ancient and ornate red robes. His eyes were gone, replaced by a pair of glowing green orbs, and long, patchy black hair hung from his dry and crusty scalp. His chest was exposed beneath his robes, his ribs puncturing his cracked skin, and a vacuous hole existing where organs used to. His lower jaw had a sight underbite, his remaining teeth hanging over the top and visible due to the lack of any lips.

"Hello?" Jayce called out as he approached, stepping within ten metres of the creature before noticing a small and soft hand hanging over the far edge of the stone coffin. The mummy turned its head to look at him directly before it opened its mouth to speak. Nothing came out, the body decomposing right in front of them as the lower jaw fell to the floor with a rattle. The mummy looked down before folding forwards, the body collapsing into a pile of dust and bones as a spectral body floated quickly away.

"That's no mummy," Tim muttered, as the hand hanging over the coffin closed, grabbing onto the stone edge and pulling the body of a young girl to standing position. She had dark skin, short curly black hair and glowing green eyes. She was no more than a late teenager, dressed in a beige dress. Slowly she took in a long wheezing gasp of air before she readjusted her neck, currently bend at an unnatural angle, with a loud crack. "Ugh," groaned the girl. "I desire a more

appropriate vessel. Provide a healthy male, one fitting of an Emperor," she stated.

"Maybe," Jayce stated, much to the girls immediate frustration. "Who are you?" he asked. The girl hissed through her teeth. "You dare not recognise your Emperor?" she stated, spreading her arms in a grandiose fashion before pointing downwards to the floor. "Kneel." The words felt forceful, an unknown pressing down on them all from above, but they did not kneel. "I greet Emperor Shan Ilst as a king of the now," Jayce blabbed with an arrogant smile.

The girl frowned. "Which king?" she asked, seeming accepting the associated name. "King Jayce, the Rising Ace. These are my servants," he stated, much to Yuthura's particular irritation. "I live to serve," she muttered as the Emperor glanced towards her. "Hmph. Very well. Why has my tomb been disturbed? Why are you here? How long have I rested?" she asked. Jayce looked at the body the Emperor was possessing: the clothes were nondescript, there was no jewellery, no visible tattoos, nothing that stood out.

"I am here seeking wisdom as to what has befallen this land. Do you know who you possess?" Jayce asked, several further questions silently entering his mind from his crewmates as they used their communicators. "I do not. My patience grows thin, I will accept three questions only from a fellow ruler out of courtesy. You will then leave a vessel for me, and serve me faithfully." Jayce eyes widened, and he made a grandiose and serious bow.

"Why did you not pass beyond?" Jayce asked. The Emperor thought for a moment. "I could not reach the Underworld. The seas are endless for me, and no Reaper was there to guide me," she answered. Jayce thought carefully, the corpse holding up a singular finger. "What Reaper?" Jayce asked as Wicke assaulted his mind. The Emperor frowned. "You are of little faith, I see – times must have changed. A guardian of the dead, a being who guides the Underworld. This era's Reaper, the Daughter of the Dead, has joined with the Lord of Bones - her predecessors long slaughtered in the generation after mine."

Jayce frowned, trying to choose his last question. "How do you know this? How do you know what occurred after you died?" interrupted Tim. The girl grit her teeth. "Your servant dares to interrupt? I am a Celestial Lord – even in death I command!" the Emperor declared, rearing backwards before an arrow passed clean through the girl's skull, forcing the Emperor to abandon the body. "You dare!" he roared, his spectral visage floating in front of them all.

His spirit looked different from all of the others they had seen. He seemed more whole and flowing red robes covered his body. His hands and feet were grotesque, skeletal and ancient and a dark grey colour that matched his face. His eyes were no longer green, now only a flat and blank white that bore into them all. "Spectre!" yelled Tim, the others confused by what he meant as he backed up, quickly.

"Perish and die!" yelled the Emperor, spreading his hands apart, leaving a glowing and red pulsing orb in between. Jayce's eyes widened as the spectre pulled his hands backwards before thrusting the orb forwards. Falconer charged in front of him as the Emperor unleashed a beam of red energy that deafened the chamber. "Falconer!" Jayce yelled, staring in horror as Falconer braced his body in front of the beam, his wooden arm shielding himself and Jayce against the blast that just seemed to refuse to end.

Falconer yelled out in agony, the wood burning slowly burning away as he continued to shield them all. "Wall of Frost!" yelled Wicke, throwing up a barrier of ice between the beam and Falconer that seemed to hold the attack back, if only for a moment. Falconer dropped to the floor, shakily lifting his unhurt arm to his now grey and shrivelled right arm as he repeatedly took sharp gasps of air. "Falconer? Falconer!" Jayce called to him, as Tim threw up another barrier as Wicke's began to crack.

Falconer looked at him in shock before Yuthura drew his attention, looking at the injury. "Sorry," she stated, placing both hands around the wooden husk before pulling. His arm crumbled away into dust, and he immediately went limp. "I have him. Put that bastard down!" Yuthura stated angrily. Jayce nodded, thinking as to what he could use against the spectre until the answer came to him as Sola and Luna chittered in his mind. He extended them out into a pair of heavy axes, racing forwards towards the high wall of ice before leaping over the top and bringing his living weapons down on the spectre.

The Emperor hissed in pain as Jayce shallowly cleaved through him, sending him floating backwards before he attacked again with a slow and heavy pair of strikes. The ice wall crumbled, Wicke and Tim throwing shards of ice towards Emperor as Jayce continued to force him backwards. "Rest in pieces!" Jayce yelled cutting through the Emperor as his axes combined in a much heavier and larger greataxe. The spectre wailed before dispersing into green particles, vanquished from the living world.

Almost immediately Jayce returned to Falconer's side, preparing to see the worst, only to instead see the slow beginnings of budding plants growing where his arm used to be. Falconer grimaced as he came back to consciousness, a distinct lack of blood present from his wound. "Falconer? Can you hear me?" Yuthura asked. He nodded, slowly reaching towards the wooden stump that made up his shoulder. "I can, Doctor. Is everyone alright?" he asked. Wicke let out a sigh, dropping to her knees and hugging him tightly. "I am alright, a little... woozy – I think is the best descriptor."

"Woozy? You've lost your fucking arm!" stated Wicke bluntly, staring at the stump in horror. Falconer chuckled. "Yes, that is a bad thing. Captain, could we go back to the ship at the soonest convenience?" Falconer requested politely. "Uh, yeah, let's go now," Jayce stated uncertainly, taking Falconer's other arm over his shoulder, as Tim took his other side, and helped him up. Falconer seemed to tense up a little, and he grit his teeth. They stared in horror as the wooden roots embedded in his deck twisted and grew, extending further inwards as his stump extended outwards, slowly but surely beginning to reform a new arm.

They hurried quickly back to the ship, the spirit children nowhere to be found. By the time they made it back, Falconer had regrown a skinnier and smaller wooden arm, but his face was grey and sweaty, and it was clear he was in distress. "What happened?" Bjorn asked as they climbed on board, the group laying Falconer down on the deck as Yuthura ran off to retrieve additional medical supplies. "We entered a tomb and Falconer took a powerful attack. His arm was... disintegrated and he's regrown a new one. We should get out of here before the Navy notice us, or some angry spirits attack us," Jayce stated.

"Right," Bjorn stated, hurrying quickly away with Astris in tow. Slowly the Stacked Hand began to move away from the island, Bjorn steering the ship back onto their intended path east. Yuthura returned quickly, the others clearing space for her as she began to examine Falconer. After what seemed like a lifetime she simply nodded, patting his left shoulder. "I'm not going to pretend to know what deal you've made to cause your symbiosis, or why you're so comfortable with its progression but you'll be fine," she told him.

Falconer nodded, sitting up before laying back down. "Thank you Doctor." "Hmph," she responded, quickly glancing towards Jayce and tilting her head away. He followed her to the opposite side of the deck. "What's wrong?" he asked. "That disintegration beam or whatever we're calling that attack would

have killed anyone else. Falconer... the roots embedded in his body, the leyline's touch, it's regenerative and symbiotic," she stated. Jayce frowned. "It's roots are spreading within his shoulder – we already knew this, but today it grew a lot more. Do you know anything I don't? He's not said anything to me about it, nothing other than vague descriptions of Druids and a goal to heal the world."

Jayce shook his head. "No, he hasn't. Is it... terminal?" he asked. She shrugged. "I don't know what it is. I don't even know if it's dangerous. I would argue replacing one's body with plant matter would be a negative, but... he's almost exploding with life energy," Yuthura said, glancing towards Falconer as he stood up and walked over to one of the grass beds on the deck of the ship. The grass grew around him, wrapping over his crossed legs. "What can we do about it?" Jayce asked. Yuthura shook her head. "Nothing until we know more. For now we keep an eye on it, on him. We need to be more careful - in every way, not just him." Jayce nodded in agreement.

Jayce left Yuthura and headed over to Tim, who had taken to leaning against the ship's railing with a face that looked deep in thought. "Tim?" Jayce asked, stepping next to him before mirroring his leaning. "Oh uh, Captain. Hey," he said, slightly startled. "Everything okay?" Jayce asked him. He nodded, turning around and looking outwards towards the sea. "Yeah, just thinking things over." "Right, well... to be blunt, today was not good. You shouldn't have interrupted, it nearly got us all killed. A warning about a spectre's capabilities would have also been appreciated."

Tim nodded, looking down. "Shit... sorry man." Jayce nodded, glancing back towards Falconer as he meditated on the deck. "It could gone far worse, but it didn't. Thank you for shielding us." Tim nodded in appreciation. "Anything you realised from what the Emperor said?" Jayce pried, also trying to figure out anything he had missed. "To be honest, I'm stumped. It was blunt but felt like he was hiding, or burying deeper truths. Lord of Bones, Child of the Dead?" "Daughter of the Dead," Jayce corrected. "It's too vague to make any guesses. I've only met two people attuned to the afterlife, a pair of Shamans, both could be 'Daughters', but... well... there's only one now. I have no clue about this Lord of Bones."

Tim nodded. "Did you recognise the girl he possessed?" Tim asked. Jayce shook his head. "A scavenger looking for wealth?" he proposed. Tim shrugged, crossing his arms. "There were tracks indicating more people had been in and out, there was also a wand on the floor where her body had been." Jayce frowned,

he hadn't noticed that at all. "I... didn't notice," he admitted. Tim couldn't help but smile. "I guess I'm not entirely useless to you then, Captain." Jayce smiled back, shaking his head. "You're a pain, that I'll admit, but you're not a bad fighter and Mages are far and few between. I could always use a man like you – provided you don't attempt to kill any more of my crewmates." Tim nodded. "I wish I could. Maybe someday. My grandfather comes first."

Jayce left him to his thoughts, his own mind curious about who the intruders were and why a group of people were breaking into tombs. He checked in on Wicke, the teenager slightly perturbed by the whole encounter but otherwise okay and already in the care of Marisha. Jayce then headed to the aft deck, standing next to Bjorn before recounting the day to him and Astris. Both had further questions, but he had no suitable answers.

Their journey continued east, with Falconer returning to active duty a few days later. Tim took the time to run most of the crew through his knowledge on non-human entities, the new information on threats they had already encountered, and enemies they were yet to encounter appreciated by everyone. However, the new drills and tactics Ordo now forced them all to learn drew quick frustration from all but the most dedicated.

On a cold morning, in the early days of the eleventh month Venator, the crew set their eyes on their destination. "Hopefully my grandfather will be waiting for me, if not he should have left clues for us," Tim stated, shivering slightly in his thin clothes as Jayce and Astris stood by the ship's wheel dressed in more appropriate clothing. Jayce glanced to either side of the ship, looking towards the various other islands in the distance that made up the Spinner's Nest Archipelago. "How do we know it's this island?" he asked.

Tim reached into his backpack, pulling out a small and slightly damaged map. "When we hunt we always pick a starting point that allows us to move from island to island without giving our prey a chance to escape. This was where we agreed we would start, alternatively this was the other choice. But knowing the old man this is where he would start," Tim reminded them. Jayce shrugged, setting his attention back on the island in front of them.

A thin veil of fog covered almost everything around them. It wasn't thick enough to obscure most things, but it was everywhere and created an uncertain air in all of their minds as they waited for something to appear. Nothing did, but it didn't stop the feeling of tension all around them. They sailed forwards, eventually spotting the silhouettes of a village on the edge of a large and steep island. "Is

there anything we need to know?" Astris asked Tim, her eyes scanning the island for anything that stood out. She saw nothing, no boats, no movement, no signs of life. "I know as much as you do," he answered.

Jayce dropped from the side of the Stacked Hand onto the pier below as the others finished securing the mooring lines. "Hello?" he called out, much to Bjorn and Astris' immediate frustration. "What?" he asked them, noticing their glares as he looked up at them. Tim climbed down, dropping next to Jayce and looking around. "See anything?" he asked. Jayce shook his head, but he tapped Tim on the shoulder and pointed ahead. "Take the lead. This is your specialty not mine."

Tim nodded, stepping forwards and taking a quick look behind to see which members of Jayce's crew were following. Ordo, Bjorn and Astris were following closely behind, all with their weapons drawn and a nervous demeanour about them. He turned his attention forwards, looking along the sides of the pier: rope had been cut, scratches lined the wooden planks, a loose coin sat unattended. There were no boats, not even small rowing boats. "Hmm," he murmured, continuing forwards.

Jayce watched Tim examine the pier, Astris and Ordo doing the same and seemingly noticing similar things. Bjorn folded his arms, making his own observations as he looked ahead towards the island itself before he turned and looked outwards. Jayce entered into Focus, scanning the island once more – only animals were present. Tim continued forwards, his eyes taking in everything he could.

They reached the end of the pier and Tim peered inside the portmaster's hut through the window, unsurprisingly, no-one was inside. He carried onwards and Bjorn wasted no time opening the locked door. Jayce followed after Tim, leaving the others behind. He found Tim crouched down, observing an odd limb laying on the floor. "Take a look at this," he said, picking it up and showing it to Jayce. It looked like the arm of a wooden manikin, severed through the bicep by something blunt. "What is that?"

"I don't know, a manikin. Try those doors," he suggested, pointing to a nearby house. Jayce nodded, trying the handle. "Locked," he stated, heading across the street to another. "Also locked." Tim lay the arm down, standing up and looking around, eventually spotting something further along the street. "Here," he said, walking over to it and picking up a stuffed bear. "These people left in a hurry. I see no bodies, they took the time to lock the doors, there's no real signs of

struggle: no blood, no damages," Tim hypothesised. Jayce nodded in agreement, jumping out of his skin as Bjorn, Ordo, and Astris emerged from the growing fog.

"The people left for one of the other islands," Bjorn stated, holding up a log book. "We think so too. What did you find?" Jayce asked, pointing to the severed arm on the floor. Astris cautiously picked it up. "This island had nothing more than fishing boats, a small population, no big ships. So unless they're all dead somewhere on this island, they left," Bjorn stated bluntly. "This log states someone came here from... uh, Weaver's Run."

Jayce and Tim looked at each other. "That's too much of a coincidence. There's also not a Weaver's Run on the map," Tim stated. Astris dropped the arm with a clatter, the others all looking towards her with alarm. "Sorry," she stated quickly, also slightly on edge. "Here," Bjorn stated, handing over the logbook to Tim. "Your grandfather arrived afterwards. I assume an old man skating across the sea on a path of ice is him?" he asked. Tim chuckled, nodding in confirmation. "Yeah, that's the old man. Probably went to Weaver's Run after landing here. Only question is, which island is it?"

They continued searching for a little longer, but no further information told them anything different. "Falconer, are you good to fly?" Jayce asked as they began to walk back to the ship. "Of course, Captain," answered Falconer, a loud cry coming from Wren as they took to the skies moments later. "We're looking for an island not on the map, near enough for a one-person skiff to get here. Give us a direction as soon as you can," Jayce ordered. A response of acknowledgment came immediately.

"Ow!" yelled Ordo, slapping the back of his neck and drawing all of their attention. "Damn mosquito," he stated, the others apart from Bjorn rolling their eyes. He frowned, looking at Ordo intently before turning his attention away. "Come on let's go," Ordo stated, taking the lead back towards the ship. They hurried onwards, climbing aboard and setting sail. "Captain, I think I've found what we're looking for," stated Falconer.

Seize the Seas Tales: A Quiet Return

There was no celebration, no grand greeting awaiting Morgana and the other Serving Girls as they landed quietly in the middle night in the Capital. They headed quickly and silently, under threat of much worse than death, to the secret elevators hidden in the various statues across the island. Her raven, Urien, sat contently on her shoulder, his eyes taking in everything around him, the magical stone making up his core radiating a strong energy through her.

They descended in silence, the other Serving Girls debating whether to push her into the void surrounding the stone elevator whilst weighing up their fear of her as she stood with her sleeves torn off, exposing the dark green etchings that had been carved into her flesh by the Witch Queen herself. Morgana had no fear of their betrayal, they couldn't hurt her, not anymore – at least not whilst the protective wards she had printed onto her body were active.

They continued descending, the past months repeating in her mind over and over again. The lessons she had learnt, the fears that had been hammered into her, and the new freedom she had been granted by her mistress. "A Witch's greatest strength is in preparation. To have every answer, to know every outcome, to control and dominate this world that is ours to seize," said the Witch Queen in her tent, only a few days before.

"How? How can I see and know that which I don't? How is it possible?" Morgana asked, sat before her on the floor, her back to her and her head in the Queen's lap as her hair was braided. "Was there a time you can think back to when you wished for a different outcome? Wished the world had been kinder to you?" came the Queen's easy and soft voice. Morgana thought to herself, her raven watching them with curiosity. She thought back to her old home, her father leaving them, choosing his other family over theirs at the behest of his blonde girls. A finger brushed her temple, drawing her backwards to meet the Queen's multicoloured eyes. "Finished," she stated, with a gentle and reassuring smile.

Morgana sat up, standing up and walking to a mirror in the tent. Her dark hair had been braided down the middle, whilst the sides and the rest of the back had been left alone, if brushed a little. It was simple, but she immediately noticed the jet and amethyst band around the centre of the braid. It was opulent, extravagant and alluring, something she could have only dreamed of days before. The Witch Queen rose from her throne, walking across the ground to step behind her. Morgana wasn't particularly tall, but as she stood barefoot the Queen was almost an entire head above her.

She placed her hands on Morgana's shoulders. "I hope you like it. I'm sorry it may not last particularly long, but someday – once you're a full Daughter – maybe I can do this more often." The Queen's owl sat on its perch, watching Morgana's raven intently. The Queen held out her hand and Morgana's raven was pulled into it with a squawk. She unravelled the bird, pulling it apart into a nest of dark string.

"As Daughters of Shade we unravelled the string of fate," she stated, holding her arms over Morgana as she pulled apart her familiar. "We read them, manipulate them, and if there's something we don't like..." she said, pinching a single line of string before pulling it apart and discarding a piece. "This familiar is yours, it is connected to your destiny, his soul at your command. Use his energy to focus your own. Rewrite your fate; command it, Morgana."

The doors grinded open, the other Serving Girls hurrying out along with their Witch escort until only Morgana and Urien remained. "I don't like this place," he said quietly. "You and me both. But this is our home, at least for now, until I either rise to be at the Queen's side, or sit in her chair." The bird chuckled. "Such ambition, we have a lot to do then. What comes first?" he asked, as she stepped off the elevator. "Time to see a friend. Hopefully she will welcome us back with at least a smile."

Chapter 91: Woven Threats

Weaver's Run was no different from the other islands in the Spinner's Nest Archipelago. It was dark and grey, with a tall central peak that towered over the small town at the edge of the island. Spindly trees dotted the otherwise barren island, and, as the Stacked Hand approached, the entire world seemed to darken and lose its colour. The entire crew stood on the main deck, taking in everything they could see through the thin veil of fog that surrounded the island in a large ring. They saw ships clustered in the harbour, people roaming the island, life of all kinds.

"Bring us in," Jayce ordered, Bjorn nodding and following his command without hesitation. "Tempest, Astris, head inside. We don't know what we're dealing with, and I'd like to keep things as least complicated as possible." Tempest nodded, floating below deck but Astris turned towards Jayce with a shocked - almost insulted - expression. "What?" she demanded, immediately catching herself as she realised she had just questioned orders. She stood stunned on the main deck, before she quickly straightened up and nodded. "Yes, Captain," she rectified, stowing her disappointment at being sidelined again and heading after Tempest below deck.

Jayce watched her leave, before he glanced up towards the dark clouds circling around the mountain peak. He stared at it, and he felt something staring back at him. "Do we have a plan?" Ordo asked from the main deck. Jayce shook his head, turning his attention instead towards Tim as he stood next to him and Bjorn. "We know nothing," Tim stated bluntly. "We need to know more, and I'm not certain as to how we can do that. All we can do for now is find my grandfather. He will know what to do."

"You heard him!" Jayce called out. "Something feels wrong here, something has felt wrong ever since we docked at that island. Keep an eye out, keep your wits about you. We stay together unless otherwise decided. Falconer, take to the skies." Wren let out a long and loud cry, flapping her wings as Falconer grabbed onto her saddle before they both flew upwards. The rest of his crew hurried to ensure they had everything they needed before they docked.

As they did so, Jayce turned to Tim, his eyes noticing a faint silvery strand on the wind before it disappeared. "If there's anything you've held back from telling us, please tell it now," Jayce told him. Tim shook his head, glancing towards the Rising Aces as they prepared themselves. "I wish I had something to say, but I'm only an apprentice. I defer to you, Captain. Use me as you would any of your

crew. Please, help me find my grandfather and make good on our deal to kill this Weaver," Tim asked, his face full of worry and hands restless by his sides. Jayce nodded, reaching out and placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder, temporarily halting Tim's fidgeting. "From now on, call me Jayce - you've earned that right. Follow my lead, let's get hunting."

They pulled into the main harbour, throwing down the mooring lines to the workers below. Jayce held out RK's containment orb towards the rocks, pulling him inside before placing him securely inside his pocket. He then headed quickly below deck, finding Tempest and Astris waiting for him. "Orders?" Astris asked hopefully. "Nothing new. But if something goes wrong, get out of here. Stay safe, stay alive. Both of you. That is an order," Jayce told them. Tempest nodded and Astris looked down. "Keep an eye on her. Astris is in your care, Tempest." He then turned and walked away.

Jayce headed straight to the edge of the ship, dropping from the side to the pier below where his crew had already assembled. "Let's go," he stated, Bjorn, Tim and Wicke walking closely behind him. Yuthura, Marisha, Zeta, and Ordo were all at the back. The workers all stared at them curiously - all enamoured with the presence the crew exuded as they walked across the pier, taking in everything around them.

The people looked normal, some smiled, some gave nods, but Jayce couldn't help but notice the hopelessness hidden behind bright smiles - the dull eyes - the thinly-veiled exhaustion. "Hello!" greeted an overly-loud Harbourmaster, hurrying quickly towards them with a young assistant holding a large ledger in tow. He was dressed up in bright, wealthy colours - jewellery wreathed his fingers, encrusted with various expensive-looking gemstones. His smile was artificially white - almost shining compared to his light-brown skin. Dyed black hair emerged from the edges of his box-like hat, and he had a thin, curled moustache. He was stout, his stomach hanging over a belt covered in pouches containing money that rattled as he lightly jogged towards them.

"Oh no," muttered Zeta from the back. "One of these kinds of people." Jayce ignored her, forcing a smile as the man stopped in front of them, his young ward holding up the ledger. "Welcome," he wheezed, catching his breath, "to Silk Haven." He immediately glanced past Jayce, noticing at least one confused expression. "Ah, perhaps you have heard rumours of this magnificent island. Uh, please ignore anything you have heard before, Silk Haven is welcoming to all.

Even people like you," he added, gesturing towards Bjorn, who simply folded his arms.

"Silk Haven... right?" Jayce questioned. The Harbourmaster looked towards him, a flash of nervousness spreading across him before quickly disappearing. "Yes. Now, onto business. Before I can provide you with the guide to the island's local spots – ahem - we must discuss docking fees for your... fine vessel." Jayce nodded, reaching into his money pouch and pulling out the usual fee of fifty pearl.

"Oh, uh, our day fee is three hundred," stated the Harbourmaster, taking the ledger from his ward. "What?" questioned Bjorn, startling the Harbourmaster. "Ahem, the price is standard, however it comes with full access to the island and it's amenities," stated the Harbourmaster. Jayce and Bjorn looked at each other before Jayce eventually took out the extortionate amount of money. "Fine, how long does this grant us access?" Jayce asked. The Harbourmaster held up two fingers. "Two days before the fee is due again. A ship of your size takes up a considerable amount of space, and the dues are for your crew included. I assume there are others on board?"

Jayce nodded. "Ah, excellent. Please sign here, and here, and list your crew size." Jayce signed away, reading the other names carefully. Jonathan Kane was absent from the list. "Wonderful, please follow me," stated the Harbourmaster. He began to lead on, the Rising Aces holding off for a moment as they exchanged glances before following after him. "Captain, may I ask how long you intend to stay here?" asked the Harbourmaster, pausing outside of a small building attached to a warehouse at the end of the main pier.

"Not too long, a few days at most," Jayce answered, as the Harbourmaster unlocked the door. "I see. Are you on the way to anywhere in particular?" "No, just stopping through," Jayce stated, glancing around the small office as the Harbourmaster put his ledger back. "Actually, we're looking for someone. Has an old man come here recently? Mostly bald, grey hair, dark skin – normally has a cigar, a pink brimmed hat, and rainbow sunglasses," stated Tim. The Rising Aces all looked at him, all the more curious upon hearing his grandfather's description for the first time.

The Harbourmaster froze up, his face hidden from sight. "Perhaps you're on the wrong island. No-one fitting that description has come through here," he said coldly, his ward staring at the group with intense curiosity. "Are you sure-" Tim began, only for a loud crash and a loud yelling to come from the warehouse.

“Apologies,” said the Harbourmaster, turning to find the Rising Aces and Tim already racing off in the direction of the noise. “Wait! Come back!” he called after them.

Jayce skidded to a halt as he spotted a terrified man sat on the floor, staring and pointing towards a large rack of crates. Three other workers were stood around him, all trying to calm him down. “There! The eyes are watching us, it’s trying to take me!” he cried, sobbing hysterically. Jayce stepped forwards, the others taking defensive positions behind him. “What’s going on?” he asked, walking towards the terrified man whilst looking in the direction he was pointing. “Nothing, he’s not been sleeping well. Please move along,” said one of the other workers. “The eyes... it’s watching,” said the crazed man in a hushed whisper.

Jayce stepped forwards, his hands empty as he scanned the crates for anything out of the ordinary. There was nothing apart from dust and cobwebs, one strand connecting all the way up to a tiny web in the corner of the warehouse. Tim placed a hand on his shoulder, startling him. “Woah, sorry. See anything?” he asked. Jayce shook his head, glancing up towards the tiny spider sat in the web. White fur covered its body, and it had a purple underside that narrowed into a splatter on its abdomen. It was pretty, and wasn’t particularly big, and definitely not big enough to take a person.

His hand brushed the silk strand, knocking it loose, but, to both Tim and Jayce’s curiosity, before the strand broke it moved the crate it was attached to by the tiniest amount, as if resisting Jayce’s hand momentarily. They looked at each other before trying to spot the broken strand – it had disappeared entirely. “That’s... probably nothing,” Jayce rationalised, heading back to the terrified worker who had now calmed down a little bit.

“It’s nothing, get some sleep,” Jayce reassured him, as Yuthura finished checking him over. He looked at the other workers, one helping to support him to his feet before they both began to walk outside. The worker walked a few metres, beginning to follow the path into the village before he flinched, calming down immediately and walking without support as he fully settled. “Please don’t run off like that,” stated the Harbourmaster. “I haven’t given you the guide yet.”

He presented a small, crudely drawn leaflet. “There’s an inn near the base of the volcano, it has hot springs, good food, drinks. Anything you could wish for. I also recommend visiting the market, or popping into the Mayor’s house for an introduction. Right, that’s my job done. Enjoy your travels, hope you find who you’re looking for, but as said – I doubt they’re on this island.” He looked

towards his ward, the young child continuing to stare at Jayce and the others, but as Jayce followed his eyes he noticed it was actually Tim that the boy was staring at.

The pair walked off, leaving the group to stand out in the open. He looked down at the leaflet, a crude map showing off Silk Haven's village. "Shall we go to the inn or the Mayor first?" Jayce asked his crew. They were all looking around, all on high alert. "Inn seems like a good idea," Wicke stated, adjusting her hat before looking up to the sky as she tried to spot Falconer. He was nowhere to be seen, likely above the clouds. "Inn it is," Bjorn stated, looking at his own leaflet and leading the way.

The village wasn't particularly big, only around fifty-or-so buildings, and everything was built around a large singular road that lead straight towards the base of the dormant volcano. The houses were all wooden, wide and not particularly tall, with triangular roofs and sliding doors. People were everywhere, all going about their day-to-day business, and most gave almost identical nods, smiles and waves as to the workers by the harbour.

Ordo walked at the front with Wicke and Zeta, he seemed completely at ease, without a care in the world, whilst they were both on edge, ready to jump at anyone or anything that got too close. Bjorn glanced from house to house, the place almost seemed nice, if it wasn't for the artificial feeling exuding from everyone around them, and the grey and foreboding nature of the island itself. A silvery strand drew his attention, floating just above Ordo, seemingly continuing upwards into the sky. "Ordo," he called out, the older man turning towards him. "What do you want?" he asked gruffly, only for Bjorn to swipe his claws above Ordo's head, severing the unusual strand.

Jayce, Tim, and Marisha all watched as Bjorn swiped his claw though a silvery strand over Ordo's head. It disappeared instantly, as if it had never existed, but Marisha – her eye the most trained of them all, saw it retract, retreating upwards into the sky. "What was that?" she asked immediately, Zeta, Yuthura and Wicke all oblivious. "A loose strand?" Bjorn questioned. "Ordo, you okay?" The old man nodded, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah, it... hurt when you cut whatever it was."

Yuthura immediately stepped forwards, pulling down his collar to look at the back of his neck. There was a faint puncture mark, like he'd been bitten by an insect. "You were bitten by something, you'll be fine. Tell me if you feel ill at all," she stated. He nodded, looking towards Jayce. "Did you see it?" he asked. Jayce

nodded. "Are you still in Focus?" he added. Jayce nodded again. "Good keep eyes only, Bjorn saw it, but those three didn't. That strand was invisible to the naked eye."

"How do you know?" Tim asked. Ordo glanced around, the haze in his mind now missing. There were countless more in the air, some attached to people, others to buildings. "Because there's so many more, now that I can see clearly." "Okay, this changes things. Let's head to the Mayor's house instead," Jayce said quickly, his heart beginning to race as he too began to notice the countless strands.

They hurried quickly along the road, trying their best not to draw attention to themselves, but the wide smiles had disappeared, the friendliness replaced by a strong wariness that brimmed with hostility. Jayce banged on the front door, a tall and friendly-looking maid opening the door. "Hello, may I help you?" she asked. "Yes," Jayce stated. "The Harbourmaster recommended we introduce ourselves to the Mayor. May we come in?" he asked politely. She shut the door slightly, turning away. "Sir, you have some visitors. Newcomers. May they enter?" she asked.

The response was quiet, but an answer did come. "Yes, send them through," came the worn voice of an older man. She opened the door, nodding and letting them inside. "Shoes off, please," she warned them, pointing to an area in the entranceway for them to store their shoes. The crew obliged, but they placed their shoes into their bottomless bags instead. The maid then led them towards a large staircase leading upwards. She had a long silver strand floating upwards from the top of her head, one that they all immediately noticed, with Wicke, Yuthura and Zeta all forcing themselves to see it with Focus.

They found themselves taken to a large room filled with books. A huge desk sat next to a pair of doors leading to a balcony, and a fire was warming the room – despite it being a little early for the time of year. A butler knelt next to the fire, adding wood to it, and a maid was stood behind the Mayor as he sat behind his desk reading a book – both had strands attached to them, but the Mayor did not. He had light-brown skin, silver hair, and a neatly cropped, matching beard. He wore a tight, light blue shirt with black suspenders, and a black tie sat around his neck.

"Hello, my name is Mikhal. I'm the Mayor of this fair island. And you are?" he greeted, standing up to reveal a pair of beige trousers as he extended a hand to shake. Jayce shook it, noticing the lack of a silver strand above his head. "Jayce

Exarga, this is some of my crew. We were looking for a man who headed this way,” Jayce stated. The Mayor raised an eyebrow, looking Jayce and his group over. “Goes by the name Jonathan Kane. Have you seen him?” Tim inserted.

The Mayor’s eyes widened, before he quickly forced a straight face, his eyes flicking to his servants as they took a step forwards. The Rising Aces didn’t hesitate, the second the servants moved, Bjorn, Marisha, and Ordo drew and swung with their weapons through the strands over their heads, cutting them free. The servants screeched before shuddering as their flesh and clothes unravelled off their bodies into string, revealing large wooden manikins in their place that dropped to the floor with a loud clatter.

“Oh my! What have you done?” questioned Mikhal, knocking over his chair and backing away. “Wicke, what are those things?” Jayce asked her, ignoring the Mayor. She knelt by one of them, prodding the blank face with her finger and poking a hole through it. “They’re puppets, manikins. Something has made them with magic, but once those strands were cut they lost all... I don’t even know. I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

Jayce turned back to the Mayor. “Anything you can add?” Jayce asked. “Please leave, you’ll kill us all,” he stated immediately, walking around the desk and getting on his knees. “Not without my grandfather. Where is he?” Tim demanded. “All mighty Weaver, please have mercy on us,” prayed Mikhal, ignoring Tim until he grabbed his shirt and lifted him to his feet. “He went up the volcano, he didn’t come back. Please, I beg of you, leave. You’ll only make things worse for us. She sees everything.”

Ordo glanced around the room, spotting a tiny web in the corner, a small white and purple spider watching the entire encounter with unusual intentness. He grabbed a book off the nearest shelf, throwing the book at the unsuspecting arachnid and splattering it against the wall. “Many eyes are watching,” he stated to the group, as they looked at him with alarm. He then went to retrieve the book, wiping the spider’s remains on the rug before returning it to the shelf. “Why’d it have to be spiders?” muttered Wicke.

A screech shattered the air, the entire island shaking. “That’s not good,” muttered Zeta, taking her hands off her ears. “You’ve killed us all!” cried the Mayor, a loud banging echoing from the main door downstairs as something, or several things, hit it hard. “Out the window,” Bjorn stated, grabbing the desk and shoving it to side before throwing open the doors to the balcony and putting on his shoes. The others nodded, following after him as Jayce reached for his communicator.

"Falconer, come in," he called out. There was no response. "Falconer, can you hear me?" Jayce repeated. Again there was nothing. "Shit..." he muttered, stepping out onto the crowded balcony. "Falconer isn't responding," Jayce stated to Bjorn. "We have to worry about him later. What's the plan?" he responded, climbing onto the balcony ledge and jumping for the nearest roof, over the small mob that had formed underneath them. Jayce's eyes widened as he looked at the large cluster of people, nearing thirty in number, all connected to the skies by the strange strands attached to their necks or heads.

Ordo leapt after Bjorn, the others following closely behind until Jayce brought up the rear, thinking intently to himself as he strategized. There were too many unknowns. Could the mob be freed? Were they all human, or were they also puppets? Where was Falconer? He didn't know. He needed to know. "Right!" Jayce called out to his crew as they leapt from rooftop to rooftop as they fled the mob. "There's only one place it could be, right?"

"We're not seriously thinking of fighting whatever this thing is, are we?" asked Zeta. Jayce glanced at his crewmates, before he slashed a strand descending from the sky towards Yuthura with Sola. "We can't leave these people, and given it infested Ordo on another island, even if we wanted to escape, we can't," he countered. "We're also not leaving Falconer and Wren," Bjorn stated, a large axe in one hand, a cleaver-like sword in the other. Wicke turned towards the volcano, looking upwards. "Why can't we go somewhere nice? Somewhere where the offer of a hot spring isn't a deathtrap?" she asked, inadvertently bringing several smiles to the rest of the crew. "Next time," Jayce stated, stepping forwards and leading the charge towards the Weaver's Lair.

Seize the Seas Tales: Reassignment

A more sensible person would have taken the personal threat from a Pirate Lord seriously, but Alara hadn't been acting sensibly recently. Nor had any of her crew. They were angry, angry for the loss of Lieutenant Commander Kai, angry for the loss of all of the others they had lost to the vampires, and they weren't going to stop until Jure Strigon burned for all the pain and misery he had created. At least that's what they had planned to do.

Alara staggered into her chair as she read the orders they had just received. "Dammit!" she yelled, tossing it aside and clutching her head. "Why?" she asked Lieutenant Commander Witchford as he picked up the discarded orders. "Because the vampires already killed one New Era, command doesn't want to

lose another.” Alara looked at him with dismay. “Commander, we can’t beat him. And we still have no clues as to where the Pirate Lord is,” he stated logically.

“We could beat him,” she said naively, but he shook his head. The bruises around her neck still hadn’t faded, and every time she saw them she felt renewed with an unending geyser of hatred for vampires – all of them. “Fine, change course, set a heading for the fleet. It’ll do us good to see other ships flying the same flag.” He nodded, turning and heading to carry out her orders before stepping out into the pouring rain.

Alara turned back to her desk, looking back at her orders before looking at the other two letters she had received, both asking the same thing. “Where is she?” asked Beowulf and Cyrenna. She had no further answers for them. She didn’t know, and it tore her apart from the inside out not knowing. Was Astris safe? Was she recovering? Was she still alive? She was still awaiting the response from Admiral Kai, Alara didn’t understand how he hadn’t even asked, hadn’t bothered to find out more details. “Maybe it didn’t matter?” she rationalised. “Maybe he just cares that she was alive?” She didn’t know. It didn’t matter. She had new orders, a new mission. The Pirate Lords were preparing a new member, and she had to stop it. The Empire had to stop it.

Chapter 92: The Weaver

The entire island had come alive, and it was angry. As the Rising Aces, and Tim, vaulted from rooftop to rooftop, heading towards the base of the island's volcano, they couldn't help but notice the movement of the strings in the air. As if a puppet master was playing a game with them: every time they moved, crossed a street, or changed direction, the strung up villagers, and the puppets amongst them, changed direction to cut them off.

"We might have to fight them!" Tim called out, his eyes scanning the path ahead. "There's too many, and we don't know if we're fighting them or those puppets. I don't want to risk hurting innocent people," Jayce stated, cutting a string out of the air as it wormed its way towards him. He glanced across his companions, taking in their abilities, their techniques, their skills. "Tim, Wicke, can you create a wall of ice – a pathway to the base of the mountain?" he asked.

Tim and Wicke looked at each other, a competitive glint filling both of their eyes. "Only one way to find out!" Wicke declared, opening her purple spellbook. She blinked, entering and exiting the Infinite Library, and it changed to an ice blue colour. "No, switch to water magic," stated Tim. She frowned, ducking out of the way of a thrown brick. "What?" she questioned, glancing around as more bricks, knives and tools were thrown at them from nearby rooftops, as numerous puppets were lifted into the air by their strings.

Bjorn and Ordo stepped next to her, shielding her as they waited on her magic; Marisha and Jayce rushed to Tim's side. "Build the path with water, I'll freeze it. The spells we have don't work the way we need them to, this might," Tim suggested. Wicke nodded, her grimoire darkening into a blue colour. She began to chant, weaving her magic and pulling moisture from the air into a large ball. Tim made his own incantations, a chilling wind whipping around the crew. As Wicke thrust out a thin and flat ribbon of water, he combined his magic with hers, freezing the water solid.

"I don't know how long this will last!" Wicke cried out, securing one end of the large path to the roof they were all stood on, as she carried the pathway of water onwards towards the volcano. A large cloud of purple smoke enveloped the streets around them, obscuring their surroundings. "Let's move then!" Yuthura yelled, taking the first step onto the ice. She slipped almost immediately, Ordo catching her and acting as a support before he swept her off her feet and ran across the surface using his Focus-enhanced Stride.

“Who’d have thought the ice would be slippery?” Zeta said sarcastically, jumping on to Marisha’s back. “Forwards!” she declared, a bit too eagerly, her absolute terror breaking out through her panicked eyes. Wicke leapt into Jayce’s arms without hesitation, the rest of the group all able to use the Focus form Stride to get a strong grip on the ice – all apart from Bjorn. He let out a sigh, kicking off his shoes before pulling off his socks. “Don’t let me forget them,” he muttered to Jayce. “I’ll do my best,” Jayce stated, stepping onto the ice and running along the path.

They half-skated, half-ran along the ice path, Tim and Wicke, along with Jayce, heading up the front. They bridged multiple rooftops in large winding bridges, Bjorn collapsing the paths behind them to slow down their pursuers. Their path was unpredictable, but it worked, simultaneously providing a detailed look at their pursuers. “There’s too many for one village,” Ordo stated to the group, their own thoughts mostly similar, apart from the few distracted by the hot springs they were passing over.

The horde looked endless, but they were falling behind, even as they were dragged across the village by their puppet master. The eight of them dropped from the ice onto the main road, wasting no time as they separated and broke into a full sprint. Wicke glanced down towards her bottomless bag, debating whether or not her flying rug would be a benefit. The air whipped past the back of her neck, Jayce slicing a thread away. “Stay close,” he told her, acknowledging her thoughts without her saying anything. She nodded, readjusting her hat.

A large and winding path led up the dormant volcano, carved into ancient streams of cooled lava. They ran for a while, cutting the strings of any puppet that appeared before them with little difficulty. The number of puppets quickly decreased, eventually ceasing entirely as they came to a large cave, the path carrying onwards into the mountain itself. Wicke switched her grimoire, casting a spell that illuminated their surroundings in a bright, shining light.

Almost immediately, the group recoiled. Huge webs covered the cave walls, containing ancient, skeletal corpses wrapped in thick cocoons. A loud chittering whispered in the wind, along with the sounds of a hasty retreat from several large creatures fleeing the light. “Nope. Nope, nope, nope, nope, nope,” stated Zeta, holding her hands up and backing away. Jayce let out a sigh, his own heart racing and an itchiness spreading across his skin as he felt strands press onto his body. “Don’t touch anything,” Yuthura stated, the crew spreading out into a thin line as they followed after Jayce.

The tunnel twisted upwards, thick webbing sometimes blocking their path, forcing them to stop and cut through it. They lost track of the number of cocoons, a seemingly endless number of corpses sacrificed to sustain the creatures that lived on the island. Jayce glanced to his left, spotting a small passageway containing what looked like a wooden chest, partially open and full of shiny gemstones. He took a step towards it, only for Bjorn to place a hand in front of him. "I don't think I've ever seen a more obvious trap than that," he stated. Jayce's vision flashed, his body sensing a concealed presence somewhere above the chest – and a large one at that. "Yeah, right."

He shook himself off, his mind playing tricks as he saw shiny glints of treasure scattered all around them, but a yelp from somewhere near the back drew his attention. Marisha was desperately trying to pull her hand back out from a thick web. "Hang on, we'll cut you out," Tim stated, pulling out his knife and stepping towards her. The entire cave shifted, a thick band of webbing springing out from the wall like a piece of elastic. Jayce lunged forwards past Bjorn and Wicke, holding Sola and Luna up as a pair of long knives pressed against his forearms as he caught the band. It was strong, terrifyingly so, for a seemingly autonomous trap. "Cut her free, now!" Jayce ordered, struggling against the band until Ordo reinforced him with his greatclub.

They cut Marisha loose, Jayce and Ordo ducking under the web band as it constricted around the place Marisha had just been. "I hate how clever that is," Jayce muttered, letting out a sigh as he stood up. "Was it worth it?" Tim asked, glaring at Marisha as she clutched a small object in her hand. Her face turned bright red, and she looked away. "Next time it's on you to free yourself," he stated, stepping past the others and taking the lead. "What a prick!" Zeta stated.

"Are you okay?" Jayce asked Marisha. She nodded, holding up a small glass vial containing a clear but iridescent liquid. "Sorry, I-I don't know what came over me," she muttered. Jayce leant forwards, looking into her eye until he was knocked aside by Yuthura. "She's been infected," Yuthura stated, noting the glazed look. Jayce slashed above her neck before doing his own, the glazed look disappearing from her eye and the glimmering around them fading – the treasures still visible, but nowhere near as alluring. "We're vulnerable even here, keep your eyes on each other," warned Bjorn, quickly glancing back towards Tim as he continued onwards alone.

"What's up with him?" asked Wicke quietly, as the group recovered and set off after Tim. "Look around you," Jayce answered. "He's here for his grandfather..."

I... I don't know if we'll find him alive. And he's probably thinking that too." Wicke nodded, picking up the pace and weaving past Bjorn to hurry towards Tim. He glanced towards her, before he turned his attention back to the path ahead. "We'll find him," she stated. "If not, we'll avenge him," she added with a reassuring smile, leaving him speechless and overtaking him as the tunnel began to open up and they spotted grey daylight.

"Wicke!" Tim called out, lunging forwards and dragging her backwards as three large spiders snapped at her, the second she stepped outside. "Thanks," she muttered, her eyes widening as he released her, the three spiders guarding their exit. They were mostly white and covered in coarse hair, with large purple splotches on their underside that spread in irregular patterns across their large abdomens. They were all about the size of Wicke, their many eyes a bright, shining, red colour that bore into the group. "Why are they so big?" Marisha questioned, as Zeta stepped forwards and began to chant, her tongue and gums glowing along with two rings on her neck.

The spiders rushed forwards, but Zeta finished her spell before they could reach the group. She let out a loud screech, the air warping and twisting as the sound waves surged through the tunnel towards the exit. The spiders recoiled and staggered, one by one rolling over onto their backs before exploding outwards in a bright display of pale blue blood that splattered the cave walls. "Woah," stated Tim, as Zeta turned with a proud smile before flourishing. Wicke was not so impressed. "Did you really have to waste that now?" she scolded, causing Zeta to wince. "I could have taken them, and you could have saved your fifth tier spell for something else!"

"Enough," Jayce intercepted. "Falconer and Jonathan Kane are waiting on us, so is the Weaver, we don't have time to micromanage what spells to use and how many we can use. This is not something to take lightly, go all out: do not hold back, do not die!" he ordered, the nervous tension dissipating as the crew spotted just how nervous Jayce was. This wasn't their usual kind of adventure, this wasn't their usual kind of enemy. They were all in danger, and they were deep within the lair of something monstrous.

Jayce stepped forwards, Sola and Luna extending out into a pair of magical longswords, both replicating the basic enchantments from the swords they had copied. Bjorn drew his cleaver-like sword and his axe, growling as he stepped barefoot through the sticky blood and webbing on the floor. Tim chanted quickly, his dagger extending out into a large and thin blade of ice. Wicke switched her

grimoire to a fiery orange book. Ordo hefted his club, Zeta twirled her flute, Yuthura loaded her crossbow, and Marisha cracked her knuckles before drawing her spear. Together, they entered into the Weaver's home.

The second they stepped out into open air, they all took in their surroundings. The Weaver had made its home in the crater of the volcano, a high circular wall surrounding them in all directions. The walls were covered with webs, thicker and larger than in the caves, but much more barren. "There!" Marisha called out, pointing towards a pair of cocoons to their right, high up on the crater wall. Falconer was sprawled against the surface, his arms and legs pinned, his mouth wrapped in web and his body restrained.

Wren was in a similar situation, not too far away from him, but, unlike him, she was struggling against the webbing, her beak free and a panicked cry filling the air. Jayce heart wrenched, but he could see they were both still alive - and that mattered the most. He scanned the area around him. Large patches of webbing marked the ground in a seemingly random pattern, several large spiders seemed to be adding to them, but they quickly retreated upon seeing the group, fleeing across the huge open crater towards the far wall.

Burrows had been dug into the surface of the far crater wall, creating a high wall of dark holes that was mostly devoid of the white webbing present everywhere else. However, at the bottom, on the ground below, a huge burrow had been carved into the wall. It was at least ten metres wide and high and was covered in webbing, but several long strands weaved their way out from the burrow, quickly fading into nothingness in the air.

"First priority is freeing Wren and Falconer," Jayce stated, reaching into his pocket and throwing RK's ball high into the air. It shattered, reforming in his pocket, and RK dropped from the sky, shaking the ground with a crash. "Cut any strings you see," he added, a huge, white, barbed and hairy leg emerging from the large burrow. "Tim, do you sense or see your grandfather?" Bjorn asked, taking a defensive stance as another leg dragged itself out into the light. "I don't..." he responded quietly. Two more legs extended outwards, an array of glowing red eyes emerging from the shadows, all focused on the group.

The Weaver was colossal, its legs twice the size of Jayce, its abdomen big enough to crush even RK. It was almost entirely white, covered in a mostly chitinous exoskeleton, apart from a purple skull pattern that decorated the top of its abdomen. Spiky hairs were spread uniformly across its joints, but its abdomen

was entirely covered. It looked them over, its offspring emerging from their burrows above its own and spreading out across the walls.

Jayce's eyes widened as he looked at its head: it had an unusual amount of eyes, nearly twenty in number, but they sat above an eyeless, human-like face. The Weaver approached them, slowly stepping across the arena they had found themselves in, until it stopped about ten metres away from them. The mouth on the face split open into a disturbing maw and slowly the Weaver's pedipalps reached upwards, moving the flesh around. A weird groan spread outwards that twisted and morphed until, to the group's horror, words formed.

"Why have you trespassed upon my home?" she asked, her pedipalps rubbing the human-like face on her head. "Where's my grandfather, you monster?" Tim demanded, pointing his sword at her. "Grandfather?" she questioned, the hairs on her abdomen rippling as she manipulated the strings of webbing attached to her body. "I recognise you, so I recognise him. That one caused me pain," she stated, turning slightly to reveal a large gash on her carapace.

Jayce glanced to the side as several people dropped from the skies into the crater as the Weaver summoned them, strings attached to their bodies. "As will I, where is he?" Tim demanded, stepping forwards. She rubbed two of her legs, letting out a loud, warning hiss. More puppets dropped from the skies. "Jayce," Wicke whimpered. "I see them," he responded, keeping his eyes locked on the Weaver. "You enter my home, seek to harm me and my kin, release our prey – the arrogance!"

The hairs on her abdomen bristled. "Scatter!" Jayce yelled, the hairs shooting outwards and bending in the air as they flew towards the group. Each hair was still attached to the Weaver, a long ghostly strand floating in the air tethering them together. The hairs dropped towards the group, most managing to dive to the side and avoid the barrage, but Bjorn and Zeta had not been so lucky. The hairs embedded themselves into their body, dragging them into more convenient positions before the Weaver pierced the back of their necks with another hair, releasing the rest.

The crew stared in horror as Zeta and Bjorn went limp, suspended in the air before the Weaver. They then straightened in unison, their eyes locked onto the group as they lifted their weapons. "Cut them free!" yelled Ordo, a sea of spiders surging down from the crater walls and an army of puppets charging towards them as the Weaver backed away, letting her toys fight for her. "Perish, little flies!"

"Focus on Zeta!" Jayce yelled into his communicator, the chittering of the spiders, the noise of the battle, and the distance between him and his crewmates otherwise silencing his voice. As if awaiting acknowledgement of the threat she possessed, Zeta began to chant. Jayce surged forwards, his eyes locked on Zeta even as Bjorn charged at him, bloodlust emanating from him and a snarl on his face. A rumbling roar shook the ground as RK slammed into Bjorn, clearing Jayce's path and allowing him to dive at her.

Zeta stumbled backwards as Jayce twisted his body, slashing his blades towards her in a quick feint at her throat and a precise strike that severed the tether attached to her neck. She fell backwards, twisting as she fell and stopping herself from hitting the floor as she took control of the spell she had been chanting. She switched to a crouch, forcing her flute to her lips and blowing into the instrument, channelling her magic through it. The song spread outwards, cutting through the noise of battle and captivating her crewmates. A feeling of invigoration surged through Jayce and the others, slowing the world around them slightly and filling their bodies with a jolt of explosive energy.

Jayce stepped forwards to protect her as the Weaver reared upwards in anger. "I'm fine," she stated, concentrating on channelling her magic and standing up. "You can't control yourself, not easily, but you can force commands. I couldn't stop myself from casting a spell, but I chose which one I cast. If that thing gets Wicke, it's all over!" Zeta warned. Jayce nodded, backing away with her and glancing around the arena. A huge wave of fire flashed their eyes as Wicke unleashed her magic on the small army of puppets. Marisha was fighting Bjorn, attempting to slash at his tether with her spear as RK forced him backwards, ignoring the deep cuts into his stone body that Bjorn was making with his sword and axe.

Ordo leapt through the air, slamming his greatclub with a crash onto a spider, sending its blue blood in all directions before he charged towards another, battering it across the arena with a powerful swing. Tim darted through a crowd of spiders, delivering a single strike to each enemy before moving onto the next. Ice began to form in each wound, spreading uncontrollably amongst the creatures before they froze solid and shattered. Through all of the chaos, Yuthura was stood analysing a bundle of spider silk, shaking a vial in her other hand before she combined the two. The silk melted away and she nodded to herself, quickly beginning to prepare two more vials.

The Weaver continued to retreat, hurrying quickly towards one of the large patches of webbing on the ground. The webs retracted one after another, lifting high into the air with the Weaver on top, the colossal monster watching over the arena as it began to rain down more and more of its hairs. "From above, cuts its cables!" Ordo yelled into his communicator. Sola transformed into a large shield that Jayce held over himself and Zeta, the sounds of multiple impacts following less than a second later.

Zeta looked up at him, fear in her eyes as she continued to concentrate on her spell. "Jayce..." she said quietly, the overwhelming reality of how vastly outnumbered they were only continuing to solidify in both their minds as spiders and puppets swarmed the arena. "It's not over," he told her, passing Sola to her before transforming Luna into a greatsword. "Keep your magic going!" he ordered, charging away from her as a quartet of giant spiders charged towards him, spitting silk at him in an attempt to ensnare him.

Jayce twisted to the side, batted another spit of silk away from him and dove forwards between the last two, rolling and carrying his momentum into a heavy downward strike that split the nearest spider into two. He vaulted over his own strike, twisting his blade into another heavy hit that beheaded the next spider before he thrust the blade forwards through the mouth of the next, wrenching the blade through the side of the last.

He glanced around, wiping the blood off his face as Luna consumed the blood soaking his blade. A loud cry of victory rang out over the battlefield as Yuthura launched a vial onto Wren, the liquid inside melting the webbing covering her, releasing the bird into freefall. Another collided with Falconer, beginning to free him as Wren spread her wings and glided across the arena before flying quickly upwards towards the Weaver.

It was only as Wren flew over Jayce and his crew that they truly began to realise just how big the roc was getting. Her wingspan was almost the size of the Weaver, and she cleared the distance between them almost instantly. The Weaver hissed at her, bundling up some of the webbing beneath her as well producing her own and throwing it at Wren like a net. Wren dove underneath it, twisting before flapping her wings in a fast ascent, grabbing onto one of the large silk cables holding up the web the Weaver was sat on and tearing it free from its anchor on the crater wall. She continued to fly upwards, disappearing into the clouds as Falconer dropped to the floor

“Falconer, status?” Jayce asked through his communicator, surging forwards towards another group of spiders only to blink and watch them disappear as Wren dropped from the sky, leaving nothing behind but a rain of blue blood and another large web cable. The Weaver leapt to another perch as Wren tore another anchor free on her way up. “Still alive Captain, I’ve lost my weapon, but will make do,” Falconer responded, much to Jayce’s relief.

A shadow spread across the arena as Wren began her dive, but a moment later she hit the ground with a crash. “Wren!” Jayce cried, surging towards her as the Weaver fell to the floor several metres away. Wren rolled over, her wing bent, and her body battered as the Weaver let out a screech of anger, her face missing numerous eyes in consequence to Wren’s attack. Wren let out a pained cry, before she spread her wings defensively, only to quickly shrink and disappear as Jayce contained her in RK’s orb. “You did well,” he told her, pocketing her and meeting the Weaver head on.

Large twisting roots erupted from the ground around the Weaver, forcing her backwards once more as she surged towards Jayce, but they disappeared almost immediately as the Weaver threw countless puppets towards Falconer, his arm buried in the ash on the floor. Falconer retracted his arm, forming a pair of fists before he charged forwards, caving in the nearest skull with his wooden hand.

Jayce turned his attention back to the Weaver, his greatsword in hand. “Now or nothing,” he muttered, charging forwards. A heavy metal club slammed into his chest, his ribs cracking even as his Focus reinforced his body from the strike. He flew backwards, hitting the ground hard and rolling until he lay on his front, gasping for air and coughing out blood. Jayce’s vision blurred and his eyes shut on their own before he forced them open, pressing a hand to the floor underneath him as Luna melted away to free up his hand. He pushed, his arms shaking as he lifted his head.

Wicke let out a scream as a spider spat webbing onto her leg, immediately reeling her in and dragging across the floor. Zeta stared around her, Sola melting into a sword for her to hold as she stood surrounded by manikins and spiders. Yuthura stood back-to-back with Tim, one hand on his side as she transferred his numerous cuts and bites to her, her other hand holding the large open wound on her side that she had taken from him.

Bjorn stared at Marisha with wide eyes, a look of horror on his face as he slowly looked down at her spear imbedded in his side, tears rolling down her face as a

silvery strand floated above her. RK continued to fight, alone against an uncountable amount of tiny spiders, all swarming his body and wrapping his joints and body in silk, his movements slowing without any way to stop them. And Jayce looked up at Ordo as he slowly walked towards him, his club dragging along the ash on the ground, a long strand connected to his neck.

Jayce's arms collapsed underneath him, and he rolled over, screaming in pain. He fumbled for his bottomless bag, grabbing a healing potion as his other arm reached upwards for his communicator. "Astris, Tempest, run! Don't look back," he warned, lifting the potion and drinking it as Ordo stood over him. Astris said something, her words inaudible as they were whipped away by the battlefield. Jayce watched Ordo slowly lift up his club. "Damn," Jayce muttered. "So this I how I die."

Seize the Seas Tales: Call to Arms

Astris couldn't sit still as she watched Tempest work. She had to be in his view, and he wanted to work, so she couldn't even distract herself from the fact that Jayce had left her behind. She stood up, changing position to a less hot area of the workshop, again. It also wasn't any cooler. She let out a distinct and noticeable sigh, again. The djinn didn't turn away from his workbench, his gloves moulding arcane runes onto one of Astris' pistols. "Du-du-duu," she uttered, before blowing raspberries.

Tempest turned his helmet to look at her, his visor glowing with irritation. He then turned back to his work. Astris kicked her legs underneath her, eventually glancing towards the door, a thought coming to her. As quietly as she could, she began to walk towards it, only for the door to slam shut in her face the second she crossed the threshold. "Oww!" she complained, rubbing her nose and glaring at Tempest angrily.

"Captain Exarga instructed me to watch you, likely because he knew you wouldn't be able to resist going after him and the others. I have shackles, Commander, should they prove necessary," Tempest warned, not even turning around. "I'd like to see you try," she muttered under her breath. "Pardon?" Tempest asked, causing her to flinch. She looked away, pretending not to have said anything.

"Falconer, come in," called Jayce across the communicators. No response followed, Astris immediately looking towards Tempest with alarm. "Falconer, can you hear me?" There was still no response. Tempest placed down his tools,

turning to face Astris. "If aide is required, it will be asked for. Do not worry, our companions are more than capable of looking after themselves," he reassured. Astris wasn't so certain, but she shut down her racing mind.

"Behold," Tempest stated a little later, presenting Astris' newly modified weapons. Astris took the two heavy pistols in her hands, a pair of golden orange runes now marking the sides of both weapons. "Thanks, what's new?" Astris asked. "Your problem with reloading has been... solved," Tempest stated. She frowned, it wasn't a solvable problem. "Meaning?" she asked, looking them over and checking their chambers. "These runes are inscribed to allow access to a pocket dimension, similar to the ship's rooms or our bags. I couldn't create a solution that prevents you from reloading, but I have provided a means of speeding it up."

Astris frowned, handing back the pistols to him before following him to an area of his workshop containing a target range. He held the two pistols, firing the single shot loaded within them both, they both missed the targets, but the runes on the side began to glow. He dropped them both, the guns disappearing into a purple void before Astris felt something on her waist. She looked down, the pistols now sat in her holsters. "Woah," she stated, taking them out and looking inside. Both were now loaded. "Where does the ammo come from?"

Tempest held up a moon clip, a ring of ammo for her pistols, one identical to the ones she had clipped to her legs, however these ones had small orange runes engraved into them. "Your ammo is still limited, and you still have to technically reload, but I believe it is a suitable solution to your problem," Tempest stated. Astris nodded. "Thank you. If there's anything I could do to repay you, please tell me?" Tempest shook his head.

"Focus on Zeta!" rang out Jayce's voice on their communicators, the pair looking at each other as they finished trading ammo. "They must have found the Weaver," Tempest stated. Astris nodded, her heart racing as she imagined what was going on. "Follow me," Tempest stated, floating towards the doors and heading up to the main deck. They emerged into a strong wind, the clouds circling the top of the volcano. Astris' vision narrowed onto the top, a strong aura emanating from its peak as she stared through Focus. "They're there," she stated, pointing to the crater.

"Falconer, status?" Jayce asked, bringing a sense of relief to them both as he responded. "They'll be fine, right?" Astris asked. Tempest didn't answer, his gaze locked firmly on the volcano. They stood in silence, each waiting. "Astris,

Tempest, run!” Astris surged forwards as Tempest began to chant, once more disobeying orders.

Chapter 93: Killing Old Gods

Astris disappeared from the Stacked Hand in a scattering of red mist, leaving Tempest to continue chanting as he watched her teleport across the island in an instant. By the time he had cast half of his spell she was already ascending the side of the volcano, a red trail in her wake. He focused on his spell, on his destination, as he cast the spell he had been theorising for years. Now was the time, failure would be destructive to his ambitions, to his revenge - failure would kill his crew, his friends.

The wind rushed past Astris as she raced up the side of the volcano, leaping with the aid of her Focus, teleporting with the aid of her magic. She felt lighter than air, her body carrying her upwards with a singular goal: she would rescue the Rising Aces, it was her mission, her duty – to them – to her friends – to her new crew. She warped the blood in her body, using it as a medium to connect to the universe, offering it in exchange for her powers. Her heart pounded in her head, one slow beat after another as time slowed, each second dragging onwards.

The skies began to warp and twist above the arena, the circling clouds folding inwards into a lightning-charged vortex. Jayce stared upwards as Ordo hefted his club, his eyes mournful. "I'm sorry brother," he said softly, an ancient friend replacing Jayce, one battlefield replacing another. A thunderbolt lit up the sky, surrounding a figure floating in the centre of the storm and, as Ordo's club flew downwards, a fanged, red-eyed face emerged in a cloud of red mist, crouched over Jayce with both pistols crossed over each other to catch the heavy strike.

Lightning illuminated the battlefield, Astris spotting Jayce in an instant. Her eyes saw almost everything, but they locked instantly onto him, his body battered and broken, his face giving in to defeat. She dove forwards as Tempest teleported above her. "Jayce!" she cried, expending the last bit of blood she could to teleport to him. He stared up at her in shock as she grunted, catching the strike in a crossing of her guns – the impact forcing her knees either side of his chest as she shielded him.

"I told you to run," he wheezed, smiling and wincing in pain as his healing potion forced his broken ribs out of his lungs. She smiled, her fangs large, her eyes glowing crimson, and her face pale and gaunt. "Apparently I'm no longer any good at following orders," she stated, forcing Ordo's club to the side before she fired a shot straight into his chest. He grunted, landing on his back as Jayce stared at her with alarm. "Astris! He's been possessed!" he stated, as she stood up. "He'll be fine, I didn't use Focus," she stated nonchalantly, sliding her pistols

into her holsters and pulling out pouches of blood from her bottomless bag whilst simultaneously scanning the battlefield.

Jayce tried to sit up, his body refusing his commands, as Astris tore into her blood bags, pouring the blood into her mouth, most dripping down her chin. She wiped her mouth, flicking the blood into the air – each droplet darkening before bursting into a red, liquid-like fire. More blood drained from her fingers as she channelled her blood magic before she threw it onto the Jayce, the flames forcing themselves inside his chest and healing his wounds.

A chittering screech rang out as Jayce stood up, the Weaver letting out a howl of anguish as Tempest rained down lightning from the sky, freeing RK from the swarm of spiders enveloping him before he began to aim for the Weaver's children. "That djinn," Jayce muttered, staring up at the god-like visage of Tempest as he floated high in the air, his armour channelling the storm he had created. "Thanks for the save," he quickly told Astris, watching as Ordo slowly got to his feet, holding a broken rib, before brushing off a shattered bullet.

"Priorities?" Astris asked, spotting a possessed Marisha with an impaled Bjorn. Wicke had been pulled towards one of the walls and had been cocooned by a cluster of large spiders. Falconer had forced his way to Zeta and the pair were now fighting with a seemingly unending amount of puppets and spiders – Falconer barehanded and Zeta with a sword. Yuthura and Tim had been cornered, and both were injured. The Weaver was bleeding from its head, several of its eyes torn out from a claw, and it was angry.

"That thing is not going to hold back any longer. This battle won't end until it dies. Rescue Wicke, her magic and Tim's will clear the battlefield. I'll deal with Ordo, Bjorn and Marisha," Jayce stated, shakily forming Luna into a longsword. He looked exhausted, even with his wounds patched, but Astris knew she couldn't change that. "Don't die, Captain," she stated, drawing her pistols and charging in Wicke's direction.

Ordo stared at Jayce, his face red and his eyes cold. "Ordo, if you're in there, don't fight," Jayce told him, racing forwards with his sword. Ordo did the same with his greatclub. Jayce twisted to the side, awaiting Ordo's signature opening: a heavy downwards strike, but it didn't come. Ordo fainted, sweeping his weapon in a wide arc that took everything Jayce had to avoid, the tip of Ordo's club brushing Jayce's dirty shirt. Ordo didn't hesitate, he pushed forwards thrusting the heavy club towards Jayce, right into his stomach.

Jayce doubled over, his eyes widening as Ordo hefted his club, swinging it down towards his back. Jayce dove forwards in desperation, slamming his head into Ordo's waist, causing the older man to howl in pain before the pair collapsed to the floor. As Ordo lay in agony, Jayce crawled forwards, transforming Luna into a dagger and severing his tether. "You bastard!" Ordo groaned, hugging his privates. "Sorry old man, you'd have killed me," Jayce groaned, forcing himself to his feet before offering Ordo a hand. "I might just anyway," Ordo threatened, picking up his club and scanning the battlefield.

Jayce turned towards Bjorn, he was backing away from Marisha as she continued to advance towards him. Jayce surged forwards, jumping onto a spider and running over it before Ordo splattered it across the floor. He shoulder-charged a manikin, knocking it to the ground before he leapt at Marisha, swinging his sword. Her eye widened as she spotted him, but he fainted, kicking her instead before slashing his blade through her tether.

She grunted as she fell to her knees, holding a hand to her jaw. "Oww!" she complained, wiping tears from her eyes before she looked up towards Bjorn with a look of horror. "Bjorn!" she cried, stumbling towards him. He held out a bloodied hand, uncorking a healing potion and pouring it onto his wound – it sizzled, and he grimaced in pain. "Don't worry about me!" he told the three of them as Ordo tossed the wooden head of a manikin aside. They nodded, weaving instinctively through a hail of the Weaver's threads before they turned towards her, anger filling their minds as a yell spread across the battlefield, a colossal wall of fire surging into the air as Wicke was released.

Astris watched as the spiders began to flee, countless corpses littered the crater, even more filling the air as they were turned to ash by Wicke. "Thanks," Wicke yelled over the roar of her flames, the skin on the tips of her fingers beginning to melt from the sheer heat. Astris nodded to her. "Help me retrieve the others!" Astris ordered. "Right!" Wicke responded, grimacing as she changed the direction of her spell.

Tempest rained down death from above, the djinn's wrath filling the entire arena as thunderbolt after thunderbolt boomed above them. Astris surged forwards, firing off shot after shot at any enemy dumb enough to get in her way as she charged towards Tim and Yuthura, a tunnel of burning fire surrounding her as the remaining manikins charged towards her. She counted her shots, discarding her guns before drawing them from her holsters in a smooth and continuous action.

The flames died as she reached Yuthura and Tim, Wicke stumbling exhausted into the back of her, her hands steaming. Yuthura sat on the floor with her back to the wall as Tim stood guarding her, several large wounds across her body and her arm clearly broken. "Took you long enough," she chuckled before grimacing in pain. "Sorry, I had my orders," Astris responded, steering Wicke in front of her before she healed Wicke's fingers and handed Tim a healing potion. "Next time you're in the vanguard," Yuthura responded. "Although I hope there's not going to be a next time," she quietly added.

Astris nodded, glancing backwards and scanning the battlefield. Lightning bombarded a large circle in a blinding and terrifying display of power, but it faded away, leaving an injured Zeta and Falconer in its wake, surrounded by charred manikins and spider corpses. "Go, I'll be fine," Yuthura told Astris. She didn't hesitate, racing forwards once more as Wicke and Tim began to chant.

Jayce, Ordo, and Marisha turned towards the Weaver. Apart from its face, and the wound Tim's grandfather had given it, it was unhurt. It was still much larger than all of them, still capable of killing any of them, but it now had nowhere to hide. Its webbing in the air had been destroyed by Tempest. Its children were scattered, most dead or injured and it was quickly running out of manikins. "Let's make this quick," Marisha stated, accidentally smearing a dark line of ash across the bridge of her nose as she wiped her face on her sleeve. Ordo laughed. "Ten thousand pearl to the person who kills it?" he proposed. Jayce surged forwards in a blur. "You're on!" he yelled behind him, the other two splitting up as they attacked in a trident formation.

The Weaver screeched at them, the air shaking as they forced everything they could into their Focus, accelerating quickly before Jayce made the first attack. He leapt into the air, changing Luna into a greatsword as he slashed downwards towards the Weaver's main body. The Weaver stepped quickly to the side, avoiding his strike before attempting to stab him with a colossal leg. He avoided it, buying a chance for Marisha to slash the head of her spear through the joint of the Weaver's front left leg.

The leg fell away in a surge of blue blood, a shriek of pain filling the air before the Weaver rampaged, slamming its body and legs in all directions as it shot out hairs from its abdomen in desperation. Jayce rolled, and kept rolling as the hairs rained down around him, until a huge trunk of wood tore its way through the ground, throwing the Weaver aside. Another shriek filled the air as the giant

spider flailed on its back, rolling over as a ball of fire flew towards it, exploding in a large fireball that ignited the hairs on its body.

Gunshots filled the air, the burning Weaver shielding itself as much as it could with its legs as small holes opened in its abdomen. The bullets hurt it, but the wounds were negligible against its giant body. "Take out its legs!" Jayce yelled into his communicator, Astris quickly changing her aim for the monster's joints. The Weaver reared upwards, before it slammed back down, spitting out a large spray of webbing from its abdomen.

Wicke got caught, slamming onto the ground along with Falconer as they were covered in the silk. The Weaver turned towards them, but RK slammed into the creature from the side, staggering it just enough for Jayce to sever another leg, this one on the other side and further back. The Weaver began to slow, Zeta's magic filling the group with invigoration, before Yuthura launched vials of sweet-smelling smoke across the area, numbing their fatigue – if only temporarily.

"Jayce!" yelled Zeta, throwing Sola towards him. The mimic landed onto his arm, oozing down his arm before forming another heavy greatsword. He leapt high into the air, Ordo, Marisha and Bjorn charging at the Weaver from the ground in multiple directions. Bjorn roared as he hacked at another leg, cutting deep into it before forcing his axe through it with another brutal swing. The Weaver stumbled as Jayce dropped downwards, driving both his greatswords into the Weaver's back.

She screeched in agony, the toothpicks in her body agonising as she tried to throw Jayce off. As Jayce rode the Weaver, stabbing one blade after another into her, Astris took singular, targeted shots at the Weaver, aiming for an eye or a joint. Bjorn ran along the monster's underside, carving into her wherever he could. The Weaver continued to slow, the pain building throughout her and the Aces swarming her from all angles.

She bucked, throwing Jayce off. He landed, Sola and Luna melting away as he rolled, turning his momentum into a run as the Weaver attempted to crush him. He ran past Tim, his face deep in concentration as he chanted loudly. The Weaver screeched, charging forwards only for a large dome of ice to surround her. She turned, the walls decorated by endless copies of the various Aces as they surrounded her. "Tricker! Cowardice!" she cried, only for multiple sections of the dome to shatter as Jayce broke through, along with Marisha and Bjorn.

They descended upon her front legs, Jayce cutting clean through as he held Sola and Luna in a combined greatsword. Bjorn threw his axe into her side, opening a wound in her last front leg before Marisha severed it, the trio running clear as she dropped with a crash to the floor. The dome shattered as Ordo crashed through it from above, letting out a battle cry as he raised and slammed his club straight down onto her head. The Weaver's face gave way, the body jerking as Ordo splattered it across the area.

It shuddered before it stopped moving entirely, the remaining puppets falling to the ground in a clatter, the crew stepping backwards before collapsing in various states of exhaustion. "We did it?" Bjorn stated in shock as he knelt on one knee, panting heavily as he held his side. "We did it," Jayce confirmed, gasping for air as he lay on his back. "We did it!" screamed Wicke, raising her fists into the sky, as the others began to take in their victory.

Tim let out a sigh of relief as he sat on his knees, staring outwards at the remaining spiders as they fled for their mother's burrow, but his attention quickly changed as Yuthura stumbled forwards towards the Weaver's corpse. Ash seemed to be drifting off the body and, to the Aces' varying surprise, they watched as Yuthura rummaged in desperation for a needle, the ash continuing to fall off the Weaver in larger and larger volumes.

She stabbed the needle in, taking a sample quickly as the Weaver disintegrated before their very eyes. "What's happening to it?" Marisha asked, only for the remaining corpse to explode outwards in a scattering of ash. "Wicke, Tim?" Jayce asked. Wicke shook her head. "That thing likely lived far longer than it ever should have," Tim answered, forcing himself to his feet and stepping forwards in the direction of the Weaver's burrow. "The universe reclaims all things eventually," Falconer added.

Jayce's eyes flashed as he stared towards the burrow, the presence of countless more spiders of all kinds collected within. "Tim," he called out, but it was Wicke who headed after him. "It's not over, is it?" Bjorn asked, as the others forced themselves to their feet, only to turn towards Astris as she growled. She stepped towards Jayce, her face pale, her gums pulled back into a snarl and her eyes a bright red. "Shit!" Bjorn stated, looking around for his weapons, but Jayce just met her eyes.

She looked down at him, every artery in his body pulsing brightly in her vision, his heart pounding in her mind as her belly growled and the void threatened to consume her from within. The clouds above began to thin, sunlight peeking

through as she stepped forwards towards him, burns marking her cheeks. He looked up at her, not a single worry in his face as he smiled at her. "It's okay," he reassured, as she forced her eyes shut, crushing the monster within her. Her eyes remained red, but they focused on him, and he saw her humanity return.

"I need a drink," she muttered, falling to her knees as the burns grew more intense and she winced in pain, whilst forcing a smile. Jayce crawled forwards, grabbing onto her as her crewmates crowded around her, covering her as much as they could from the sunlight, whilst he searched for a blood bag, cutting it open and pouring it into her mouth as he held her tightly. She looked up at him, vulnerably, exhausted, in agonising pain and deftly aware of the others around them as the blood splashed her mouth and she forced herself to take deep gulps.

The colour on her face didn't return, but the pain seemed to ease, and her face became less sunken. "Have we got any more?" Jayce asked the group, Yuthura producing another for her until a roar of flame drew their attention away. They all glanced towards Wicke as she stood in front of Tim, unleashing a sea of fire towards the spiders swarming out of the wall in front of them. The spiders shrieked before they burst, popping in the intense heat before turning to ash, but eventually the noise quietened, and they knew the fight was over.

The sun shone over them as they sat waiting for the adrenaline to fade, for the pain to ease and their exhaustion to lessen, but Wicke and Tim carried onwards, the remaining flames melting away the webbing at the edge of the burrow. They looked at each other, both on the verge of collapse before they stepped into the Weaver's burrow, now devoid of life. They both immediately saw two different things. Wicke saw the countless pearl, treasure and artwork piled around a huge bed. Tim saw his grandfather, sat up with his eyes glazed over and unseeing, a large hole in his stomach.

"No..." he said softly, stepping towards him and crouching down before he pulled the old man into an embrace and began to sob. Wicke turned away, glancing around the darkness now partially illuminated by the daylight outside. A large, heavy, leather tome drew her gaze; slowly she stepped towards it, picking it up and opening it. Immediately a small stacks of papers fell out, mostly notes detailing observations on the Weaver, as well as several other creatures she had never heard of, but also a sketch of an old smiling man and another smiling young man that she recognised as Tim.

She picked them up, placing them back in the book before she flicked through it, glancing at the countless spells it contained. She turned back towards Tim,

quietly placing it by his side as he grieved, before she began to search the large cavern. It didn't take her long to find several things she deemed unusual. For one, the home of the Weaver was almost immaculate – deep care had been taken into how it had been kept. She found ancient lanterns that appeared to have once been attached to the ceiling. There were the remains of clothes inside a rotted away wardrobe, along with newer sets that looked almost modern. Headless manikins had been propped up to display the newer clothes, along with a mirror facing towards them. She found broken daesang bronze shackles tied to the corner of the wall and more remains of furniture.

“Wicke?” Tim asked, startling her as he wiped his eyes and held his grandfather's grimoire. “Yeah, over here,” she called back, trying to figure out what she was seeing. Eventually he joined her. “Find anything of interest?” he asked. “Other than giant pile of loot?” she asked. He frowned and she shook her head. “Nothing but... come here,” she stated, leading him to the headless manikins. He looked at them suspiciously and she tried to line him up with them, so his head fit the body. “What are you doing?” he asked with a flash of irritation.

“I... think the Weaver was once a person. She had a human face, there's older clothes, older things that no spider would want. She's got a hoard of treasure, these clothes are new - I can only guess how old she was. I'm sorry about your grandfather,” she said quietly. He nodded, looking down before glancing around. “Thanks... and for what it's worth I think you're right about the Weaver. A monster like that doesn't occur naturally - well, not normally.” They glanced around, a feeling of intrusion filling their bodies with discomfort. “She had to be killed,” Tim stated coldly. “That thing was no longer a person, and hasn't been for a long time.” Wicke nodded, trying to not look at the relatively worn out teddy bear by the bed. “Yeah, of course.”

Jayce glanced upwards as Wicke and Tim emerged from the burrow, Tim holding a grimoire, Wicke holding a marked bottomless bag. He forced himself to his feet, walking towards them. “Any luck?” he asked Tim. Tim nodded, holding up the book. “I'm sorry,” Jayce said softly. Tim let a sigh, putting the book away and standing up tall. “Thank you, Jayce. You helped complete our contract, I owe you big for that. I hope this makes up for it,” he stated, turning towards Wicke. She emptied out the bottomless bag, eyes widening and mouths falling open as an almost endless amount of treasure hit the floor in a large pile. Smiles quickly followed. “That definitely does,” Jayce stated with a big grin.

Astris stared at the colossal pile of treasure. "What do we do with it?" she asked Bjorn as he sat next to her. "What do you think? We split it. It's ours now," he chuckled. "That's... ours?" she questioned. She hadn't grown up poor, but the array of coins was no small fortune. "Ours. Yours too, crewmate," Bjorn stated, extending a hand out to her. She looked down at it, her eyes widening before she lunged forwards, wrapping her arms around him as tears flooded her face. He sat there, stunned for a moment, but eventually he accepted it.

"So what now?" Jayce asked Tim. He shrugged, looking at the various Aces before him. "I honestly don't know," he answered. Wicke met Jayce's gaze. "You could join us," he offered. Tim let out a soft chuckle, shaking his head. "I appreciate the offer, but I've learnt a lot from you and your crew. It's not my place to join you, I have my own ambitions now, so I'll start on that," Tim stated. "Meaning?" Wicke asked.

He smiled, appreciating her bluntness. "I want to reach the top," he said, taking out his grandfather's grimoire. "I want to become so powerful that I can change the world, and remove the limits on magic. I want to create a world where I can stand, not beneath you, Captain, but beside you as a Captain in my own right." Jayce nodded, appreciating the lofty goal. "Then I suppose we're on the same path. A race to become a Pirate Lord," Jayce stated. Tim laughed, nodding in agreement. "I think I'm a little behind you, so I hope you'll save me a seat," Tim stated. "No promises - you're my rival now after all," Jayce stated, extending a fist out to him. Tim bumped it back. "Understood. On a slightly different note, I don't suppose you can give me another lift?"

Seize the Seas Tales: One of Many

After recuperating, the Rising Aces - and Tim - made their way down the mountain, taking anything and everything of value that they could find. Along the way they encountered a few spiders, but, with Falconer's bow retrieved and Astris' pistols, they proved no issue for the large group. To all their surprise they found celebrations awaiting them, the freed villagers rushing to meet their saviours with open arms, open bottles, and an all exclusive pass to the hot springs.

Astris, however, headed straight to the ship, hiding her pointed ears and her sharp fangs as Bjorn walked with her, along with the bag full of treasure. They clambered aboard, the pier empty as the locals celebrated, stepping to a concealed hole in the mast where Bjorn poured the contents of their treasure bag into a hidden portal. "How long has that been there?" Astris asked. He laughed.

"Tim and you are not the only guests we've had on this ship. Our last one had a... skill for managing wealth."

He then led her to the living quarters, walking past the wall covered in photos to the noticeboard in the back plastered with the crew's bounties. He carefully took off a double-sided piece of paper, grabbing a pen and placing it on the table. "This is the crew manifest," he told her, writing her name at the bottom. "Fill in the rest," he said, handing the pen to her. She smiled as she took it, signing the document and adding her birthday: the first day of the year, before sliding it back to Bjorn.

He nodded, filling in her official role amongst the crew. "I think this makes most sense," he stated. She looked at the document: 'Astris Kai, First Mate – Ace of Blood.' "It's perfect," she said beaming. "Does that mean I outrank you?" she immediately teased, nudging him. "Don't push it," Bjorn answered. "Yes sir." He nodded, placing the manifest back on the wall before gesturing for her to follow.

He led her down to lowest deck, straight to the vault in the cargo hold. He slid the panels on the vault door, showing the pattern to her before they stepped through the door beyond, entering into the ship's vault. She stared in stunned awe at the machinery sorting their treasure before she quickly spotted a separate vault door bearing her name. "Is that mine?" she asked. Bjorn nodded, instructing her to place her hand on the golden door. It liquified at her touch, opening to reveal several huge piles of coins, each sorted by colour and value, along with other material goods.

"Against my initial decision Jayce asked for this to be made for you: anything we earn in future will be added to your vault, each crew member gets an equal share. If you want to store anything in here that you don't want others seeing, or borrowing, this is your vault to keep. We'll give you a money pouch linked to the vault, but this is all yours," he stated as she stared in awe at the thousands of pearl before her. "All mine?" she checked. He nodded. "Really?" she asked. He again nodded. "I could get used to this," she grinned. He rested a hand on her shoulder. "Welcome to the Rising Aces."