

### **Chapter 157: Amongst the Trees**

The ocean swelled and then burst as a gigantic creature rose from beneath the surface. It eclipsed the Stacked Hand, blocking out the sun above as it towered over the ship on its starboard side. "What do we do?" Bjorn asked, his nails digging into the wheel as he and the rest of the crew stared up at the Giant. Jayce didn't answer - he didn't have an answer. There was nothing they could realistically do to even graze a creature as big as this.

The Giant was humanoid: with two arms and two legs and a large horned head. Its body was covered in bright coral and seaweed - a living, moving reef. Beneath its golden reefs was a thick, plated exoskeleton with smooth, greenish-blue, slimy skin visible between the gaps. It had no clothes as such, other than its carapace, and there were no visible reproductive organs. On its face there was no nose, no mouth, only a pair of glowing orange eyes that stared straight down, straight into Jayce.

"Scholar," Jayce called out, "what are we looking at?" he asked, briefly glancing away. His crew all stared up at the Giant, other than their guide, Aster, who was holding his head in his hands - eyes wide in terror. The vertical pupils on the Giant narrowed, as it watched the Stacked Hand slowly move in front of it - its palm large enough to crush the ship. "A World Walker," Mai Lu answered, approaching and standing beneath the aft deck with her eyes locked on the colossal creature. "A Giant," she added. "At least, what's remains of them."

The World Walker let them go, turning and striding away in the direction of the Frontier but on a different path to the Stacked Hand. Jayce watched it go, spotting numerous more around the wall of trees that dwarfed even the Giant. "Go on," Jayce ordered, looking down towards Mai Lu. "A long time ago there was a war between the Demons, the Giants, the Angels and the Dragons, each holding their own dominion - their own domain: the Abyss, the Lands, the Heavens and the Skies. The Demons and the Dragons fought the Angels and the Giants, and won. The Demons took the Heavens, exiling the Angels. The Dragons devoured the Giants, leaving them like this. Now they're just gardeners - harmless, mostly."

Jayce didn't exactly feel reassured, but Baal's insight through Mai Lu was definitely helpful. "Aster," Jayce called out, drawing the eagle therian's attention. "Yes, Captain?" he questioned, quickly regaining his composure and forcing a beaked smile. "Anything we need to be aware of?" Jayce asked. There was a brief moment of hesitation. "No, uh, no, Captain Exarga. They're normal, totally normal." Jayce simply nodded, glancing towards Bjorn and expressing the

simplest of looks of doubt. "If he gets us through then it's worth the cost," Bjorn answered plainly. "Hmph," Jayce returned.

The bow of the Stacked Hand dipped, the entire ocean beginning to fall in front of them, draining into the colossal roots buried beneath the waters. Jayce looked up, warm rain beginning to fall down on him from the clouds surrounding the tree trunks of the Frontier. The bark was a soft reddish-brown, each individual tree the size of an island. They were countless, stretching as high and far as you could see, reaching around the world and above the clouds. Through the breaks in the clouds above Jayce could see countless large branches, topped with round leaves.

Falconer too stared up at the colossal trees, his curiosity piqued. He could see numerous Leylines embedded throughout the Frontier, fuelling and feeding it, but deeper within they twisted and merged, funnelling towards a singular spot deep within the forest, high in the canopy. "How curious," he said unconsciously, in awe of the sight. "Meaning?" Yuthura asked, as she stood leaning on her cane next to him. "They are hybrids, multiple trees forged into one, through some very powerful magic," he answered. She smiled, shaking her head. "Well of course, nature has its limits after all."

Jayce brought his gaze back down from the heavens, the waters of the ocean were beginning to rise against them, churning into white rapids. A large gap between the trees sat ahead of them: an entranceway, where several ships were already heading towards. "Zeta, Marisha – some magic would be appreciated. Red get back on board," Bjorn called out. Marisha headed to the foremast, Zeta stood on the main deck, and Jayce began to chant on the aft deck, channelling the winds into the Stacked Hands sails and boosting them forwards.

Even with the three of them, the process was slow, the very design of the Frontier trying to keep them out, but eventually the waters calmed and they passed through the entranceway. "How eerie," Astris stated, as Jayce dropped his magic. "What is?" he asked, their environment illuminated by beams of light through few and large gaps between the foliage high above them. "Look at the waters and listen," she said, her pointed ears twitching slightly as she looked around.

The channel they were sailing along was wide, the waters calm, smooth and clear – protected from the ocean's waves. Jayce stepped to the side and looked down, seeing an endless expanse of clear water beneath them – a mirrored channel far below containing fish, ocean crawlers, even whales. Smaller trees sat to the edges - mangroves bustling with life: turtles, alligators, other reptiles Jayce didn't

recognise. Some trees bore fruit; life surrounding the Stacked Hand in abundance.

The air smelt fresh, and damp – cleaner than any Jayce had ever experienced. The heat of the Frontier archipelago had tempered into a cool, refreshing, humidity that wet Jayce's skin and lips. Wren let out a loud cry that echoed slightly in the vastness of the space, before she took off into the skies of her own accord, unusually leaving Falconer behind. From the forest around them emerged flocks of brightly coloured birds, of all manner of species, flying after the giant roc that now neared RK-227 in size. She circled and danced in the air, weaving around the trees and disappearing out of sight.

Jayce listened to his surroundings, to the burbling of water and air emerging from deep below, to the rustling of leaves high above them, to the guttural cry of something far, far away. "What was that?" Jayce questioned, the unusual sound repeated by numerous more creatures. Astris looked at him and nodded in simple acknowledgment, before checking her ammo and pistols. "Aster, anything we should know?" Bjorn called out.

The winged therian flew over to them. "No, no, all good, we just need to keep following the convoy and all will be fine," he stated, with a hardly hidden look of uncertainty. "Are there are other paths through?" Bjorn asked, noticing a slight split in the path up ahead. "Yes, most certainly, but following the others would be safest." Jayce and Bjorn glanced to each other. "It should be perfectly safe to follow the main route," Aster reinforced.

"Right," Jayce stated, stepping away from the aft deck and heading down towards Falconer, his gaze locked upwards and outwards. "Something up?" Jayce questioned. Falconer concentrated, chanting quietly before he placed his wooden hand on Jayce's shoulders. Jayce gasped as he once again saw the world as Falconer did. "Beautiful," he said unconsciously, before pointing off towards the knot of Leylines far off in the distance, vaguely in the direction of the off-shooting path. "What am I seeing?" Jayce asked.

"I do not know, Jayce, I really do not know. If Wicke were here, I think she would have known for certain – however, I am guessing that is the source of the Frontier," Falconer stated. Jayce nodded simply, his mind wandering to Abbot Song – the monk he had met in the underworld, the monk supposedly somewhere in the Frontier itself. Jayce wanted to find him, but had always acknowledged the likelihood was next-to-zero of actually encountering him.

"Guesses can sometimes be right," Jayce stated. "No risk..." Jayce stated. Falconer smiled. "No reward," he concluded.

"Bjorn, take us down that passage!" Jayce called out, much to dismay of several members of his crew. Bjorn only grinned, spinning the wheel and angling them. "No-no-no, why? They're all going that way, why are we going this way?" Aster questioned in quickly growing panic. "Quiet down. You said you've done this route numerous times before, it went well then – it'll go well this time, right?" Bjorn questioned. Aster let out a quiet whimper.

The channel narrowed, still as large as the Stacked Hand was long, but far smaller than before. The path was also far more windy, weaving through the forest for miles upon miles. "Should we be worried about Wren?" Bjorn questioned, returning from his break to take over from Jayce. Jayce looked towards Falconer, stood next to him. "She is hunting, she will be fine," he stated. Bjorn and Jayce looked to each other. "Hunting what?" Jayce asked. Wren's daily food intake had sky-rocketed in recent months, and her size increase from when she had initially joined to what she was now was distinctly noticeable. Jayce guided the Stacked Hand around a bend, the channel opening up and the background chattering and cries getting louder and louder.

The path ahead stretched across a giant opening, a colossal lake before them and the air open but still contained between the foliage far above. "Open space, finally," Aster stated, letting out a sigh of relief and taking to the air to stretch his wings. Jayce's hairs stood on end, his body alerting him to danger. His eyes widened as they entered the open area and he looked upwards, a dark haze sitting high above them. A haze that quickly began to grow and move towards them.

Aster turned, and looked down at the Stacked Hand, his eyes narrowing as he saw looks of horror and terror from the crew beneath him. "What-?"

"Dragons!" Mai Lu yelled, the deck of the Stacked Hand getting painted with the insides of Aster as a swarm of giant flying reptiles descended down towards the Stacked Hand. They were endless, a technicolour of scales, claws and teeth, ranging from the size of a hand to some that looked as large as the Stacked Hand's sails. The Rising Aces leapt into action, those with melee weapons lunging to guard the Mages as they began to chant. Mai Lu wasted no time, taking the blood of Aster as her own and using a pair of sharp rings gifted to her to cut open her forearms before flinging giant shards of red-black crystal at the Dragons.

Falconer drew his bow, firing arrow after arrow at the beasts as they attacked from all angles. He glanced between the swarm, looking for any signs of leadership or pack mentality, instead spotting a giant red Dragon with a thick round body, four legs, a long neck and two wings, sparking its mouth as it prepared to unleash fire onto the Stacked Hand. Tempest's shield surrounded the Stacked Hand, blocking a volley from smaller Dragons as the red Dragon built up speed. Zeta used her music to heighten her allies, Jeanne created a sphere of golden light around her, the Beastly Boys ran to the cannons. "Incoming!" yelled Falconer, the only one to see the threat.

A cry split the air, all of the Dragons breaking off their attack in immediate panic as a predator emerged from the forest. In a blur of feathers the giant red Dragon lurched, its decapitated body spiralling towards the water before breaking the smooth surface with a crash. "Wren!" Jayce cried out, the roc covered in blood that was not her own. The centre of the lake then swelled, the entire crew turning in quick panic as a colossal creature emerged from beneath, swallowing the corpse of the red Dragon and several others too close to the surface. The Dragon was blue, with a colossal bulbous body and a giant, familiar maw. "That's Charybdis!" Astris yelled out, the Dragon dropping back beneath the surface, cutting off their escape.

"Bjorn!" Jayce yelled out, the polar bear therian wrenching the ship's wheel away from Charybdis' trap. Countless cries above drew Jayce's attention to his surroundings as even more Dragons descended from above to join the frenzy. "There!" Falconer called out, pointing to a hollow trunk of one of the trees, a bay of sorts inside. The flat lake dropped, a whirlpool opening in its centre as Charybdis began to filter water. The Stacked Hand lurched as it was caught on its edge.

"Gust, now!" Jayce ordered, beginning to chant, Marisha and Zeta doing the same as the others moved to protect them. "I have an idea!" yelled Fenn, beckoning his brothers and pointing towards the Stacked Hand's forward gun, facing in the wrong direction. Wam grabbed a cannonball from the extradimensional container hidden next to the cannon, loading a black orb into the cannon as Ohno got ready to fire. "Caelie!" Fenn called out, drawing her attention. Her eyes widened in immediate realisation, and she created a portal directly in front of the cannon's barrel. "Do it!" Bjorn commanded through his communicator, with a sense of both pride and worry. Ohno pulled the lever, firing the cannon and unleashing its shot straight into Caelie's portal.

The portal directly over Charybdis unleashed its bombardment straight down into the colossal Dragon's mouth, its black line of death carving through the monstrosity before detonating outwards under the water from its impact. The mouth closed, unleashing a red wave from beneath the surface that shoved and carried the Stacked Hand into the opening within the tree. The ship tilted, thrown by the wave into an internal branch that pierced straight through the hull, bringing the ship to a sudden halt.

Jayce groaned as he recovered from the impact, finding himself on a large natural pier within the tree. He grabbed his head, feeling blood as his vision cleared, the Stacked Hand impaled in front of him. "Just... great," he muttered, laying his head back on the wood. "Jayce?" Astris questioned, kneeling over him and assessing his injuries before healing his wounds with her blood magic. "I'm okay," he groaned, reaching up to his communicator as he forced himself upright. "Everyone okay?" he asked.

A cry drew his attention, Wren crashing into the natural pier next to him a moment later. She rolled to her feet and yelped, her wing injured and her leg broken as she promptly collapsed in a panic. Falconer raced to her side and calmed her with ease. Jayce looked towards the entrance that Wren had just flown through, no Dragons had pursued her – at least for the moment, they were safe.

There were plenty of injuries amongst the crew, but as they all gathered together their attention immediately landed on the branch that had impaled and grounded their ship, their home. "Can it be fixed?" Jayce asked, looking towards Tempest as the djinn analysed the wound in the hull. "Most certainly with time, but not until the ship has been removed from the tree, but that is its own problem. Its container will not be able to do that as the branch, or root, is attached to the greater tree. For now, we are stuck."

"Great," Jayce muttered, turning and looking to his crew as they tended to their wounds. "We lost our guide as well," Jayce stated to Bjorn. Bjorn let out a sigh and shook his head. "It was his fault for lying about his knowledge. At least we've saved some Pearl," he stated coldly, transforming into his human form to fix his wounds before transforming back. Jayce shook his head, looking around the cavern before spotting what looked like stairs leading to a hole going outside. "This place isn't a natural formation, it was made, so it's got to go somewhere," Jayce stated, pointed upwards to the stairs.

"Falconer, that... knot of Leylines, are we close to it?" Jayce asked. Falconer turned away from Wren, leaving her in Astris' care as she tended to the roc's wounds. He pointed straight up. "We are directly underneath it, Captain," he answered. "Then up is where we need to go. There might be a solution there for the Stacked Hand, or someone who can help us," Jayce stated, his crew looking to him. "Someone should stay and guard the ship," Bjorn advised. Jayce nodded in agreement. "The majority will stay, those Dragons may come back." He looked across the group, thinking as to who to take before making his decision. "Morgana, Ordo, Jeanne, Arthuria, Falconer. You're coming with me."

There were a few looks of disappointment, most notably Caelie. "Sorry, I need you here in case of the Dragons, you're the best bet for giving our close range fighters a way of hitting them," Jayce explained. She let out a huff but accepted his point. "Mai Lu, what does Baal know about the Frontier and these trees?" Jayce questioned, as his team clambered onto the Stacked Hand to get their things. Mai Lu shrugged. "I don't know, this is all new. The Dragons weren't like that before is what he's saying, they've become stupid. The notes Wicke gave me are minimal, other than that this is all recent history, the last millennium. Baal only knows ancient history, as he lived it. Sorry, I'll get reading and will message if there's anything of note," she answered. Jayce let out a sigh of disappointment. "Okay, thank you."

His team emerged from the Stacked Hand with their travel packs, Arthuria in her full armour, Jeanne in simple clothes and chainmail. "We're still missing our oaths," Arthuria reminded, glancing with bemusement to the pot containing the Sapling of Oaths in Jeanne's arms. "I know, but the training we've done will make up for it. Jeanne, leave the pot here," Jayce stated. Jeanne glared at him, hugging the pot tightly before reluctantly relinquishing it to Arthuria who carried it back on board and set it down on the main deck. Sola and Luna chattered on Jayce's arms as he took the backpack Ordo had grabbed for him. The pair of mimics felt excited and Jayce couldn't help but feel the same. "Right, let's go."

They stopped as they neared the hole leading outside, turning and looking down at the broken Stacked Hand. "We'll be back soon," Jayce muttered, turning and stepping outside into the open air. The path continued outside, with large wooden planks creating stairs to walk along as it circled the trunk of the tree. At first they were close together, but slowly, spiral after spiral, the gaps grew larger and larger until they were forced to come to a halt.

“Well that’s a problem,” Arthuria stated, sticking tightly to the bark and not wanting to look down at the colossal fall beneath them. The gap between them and the next step was huge, one that a single physical leap could not cross. Morgana sat on her broom, lazily floating next to the group. “I can fly us, but its going to be a slow and tedious process to get all the way up there,” she stated, gesturing to the canopy still quite some distance above them. “It’s a test,” Falconer stated. “One to ensure that only a person able to use magic or trained in Focus can cross.”

Jayce tensed, the group tucking close to the bark as a flurry of wings dove past from above. “Let’s not waste any time then,” he stated, conscious of their exposed position. “Time to practice our Stride.” Jayce leapt, concentrating his Focus into his legs before visualising a platform beneath his feet – willing one to form as he found a barrier to push off, leaping once again to land on the next step. Jeanne, Arthuria and Falconer did the same before Morgana flew over. Ordo, however, just turned and looked at the tree before he placed his foot onto the bark – willing his body to bind to its surface before beginning to walk vertically along it. “Show off,” Arthuria stated, as he walked past the group preparing for their next jump. “Master your Stride and you can do the same,” he stated.

Jayce couldn’t help but look down at the monstrous fall beneath him, the corpse of Charybdis floating on the water. With his jumps he could at least control where he was going and landing, with Ordo’s method a single lapse in concentration could spell his end. Ordo stopped in between their next leap, turning and looking back at Jayce. “It’s the same principle we applied with the water. Concentrate and will it to happen. You’ve done it already. Trust you won’t fall.”

Falconer placed his foot to the bark, shutting his eyes and then lifting up his other foot before beginning to walk. “Well done,” Ordo told him simply, Falconer opening his eyes and then looking straight down with a big grin as he spread his arms and laughed. Jeanne and Arthuria looked at each other, both shaking their heads and continuing to leap onwards with Morgana flying beside them. Jayce took a deep breath, concentrating on the feeling in his feet, on the feeling of gravity on his body.

Cautiously, he placed a foot on the bark, concentrating everything into that foot until he felt able to lift up his other. He stood there horizontally, looking up at Falconer and Ordo and the canopy behind them. They nodded to him and he forced a smile before he felt his feet begin to slip. He snapped back his attention to the feeling in his feet, brief panic crossing his face before he too began to walk

upwards. He shook his head, thinking back to the demonstration Vexx once gave so long ago. "So you were at this level then," Jayce muttered to himself, shaking his head and wondering just how strong Vexx would be now.

They continued to climb, eventually stopping for a short rest and some snacks before onwards for their final climb. "There," Falconer stated, pointing to a hole in the foliage, a platform beneath it. They hurried their approach, only more and more aware of their growing fatigue, before finally they collapsed onto the platform, panting heavily from the long ascent. Other than Morgana who stepped off her broom to stretch her legs. "Come on, tick tock," she stated smugly, drawing all manner of expressions from her party.

Jayce let out a groan, forcing himself to his feet before reaching for the ladder leading upwards. He dragged himself upwards, pushing his head through the brightly lit hole and stepping out into the open. His eyes widened, and mouth fell open slightly. "Woah," he stated quietly, not exactly certain as to what he was seeing.

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Forged in Blood and Steel**

"I hope you find it to your liking," stated Artificer Gujin, as he wandered with Alara through the bowels of her new ship - Alara's cat from the Lone Wanderer, Tilly, following closely behind them. "The Courier has been fitted with all standard Navy technologies, as well as extradimensional additions to support your storage and training needs. I did also add those amenities you requested - just for you, Alara," he stated with a big grin, as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

"All of them?" she asked. He nodded. "You're the best, Gujin," she stated, hugging him tightly. He chuckled, patting her on the back. "It's the least I could do. Myself and the others owe you plenty for all your support this last month." Alara dismissed the thought, shaking her head. "Oh please, it's nothing." He shook his head, but knew better than to push it further. "Your ship should go undetected, only an onboard inspection would let anyone know you're from the Empire - uh, um, Republic, I mean."

He guided her into one of her crew's quarters, several uniforms already stored inside on racks awaiting their occupants. "We took inspiration from your previous uniforms: the plated armour structure and insulation remains - just with an additional enchantment or two around the vital areas. Helmets have replaced the berets of your base Marines, your onboard Navy have access to their

own combat gear as well for battle. No helmet for you however - despite my advice - apparently Lieutenants and above should be Focus capable and recognisable – something about fear factors – blah, blah, blah.”

Alara stepped closer and touched the uniform’s jacket, the style the same as before, but now sporting a black colour compared to its previous grey. “The enemy had dibs on grey, unfortunately. There are combat cloaks as well which should help cover the uniform if deemed necessary.” They departed the area, heading back up to the main deck. “I’ve also tweaked your glaive using the schematics Tempest provided. You’ll need a few magic crystals on you, but an emitter has been installed within the staff – you can create a forcefield around you. Should help if you come under heavy fire.”

Alara glanced across the heavy guns scattered along the deck of her new ship. “The sonic disruptors will protect your hull, but keep them as a last resort. No need to make enemies if you don’t have to.” Alara nodded in agreement before looking out to the nineteen other ships making up her fleet. They all looked similar, but all different enough to not draw immediate recognition. “Good luck Captain, you’ll need it.” She turned and looked down at him before nodding. “Thank you, Gujin.”

It didn’t take long to settle in, Alara didn’t have many things she felt the need to take – the only item she did take was the small tree covered in the tags of her old squad. It hurt to look at, but the memories and feelings it brought up in her only helped to steel her resolve. She had a mission, a duty to fulfil – and this was a not a battle she was going to back down from. She would find her parents, establish a base of operations in the Old World, and take down the Sea Sovereign.

“Are we ready?” Alara asked, stepping out onto the aft deck where Commander Witchford stood waiting. “Aye Captain, all crew accounted for and settled in. Stores are filled, vault is occupied, and morale high. Is it time for a speech?” he asked. Alara shook her head, glancing towards Lieutenant Commanders Wulf and Riley, each talking to their specialist squads of therians and snipers. “Speeches can wait, we’ve got a job to do. Let’s hunt!”

### **Chapter 158: Mother's Embrace**

It took a moment for Jayce's eyes to adjust as he slowly clambered out of the hole in the canopy of the Frontier. It was bright, strangely so for an area still encased in thick, colossal foliage, lit up by floating palm-sized spores that drifted in the air. "Woah," he said subconsciously, breathing in a breath of fantastically clean air. The others climbed out behind him, all taking in the scene around them and making similar gasps.

They were stood on a wooden walkway that circled the Frontier tree. Outwards, around them, were numerous wooden huts of sorts, all simple buildings with a mostly open structure. They sat on expanding rings, nestled amongst the branches and connected by thick wooden and rope bridges. Jayce immediately spotted a bridge that continued onwards through the leaves, as if connecting to another tree.

Numerous people were walking around: therians of all kinds - wearing gold and brown ceremonial armour, humans - mostly with shaved heads and monastic brown and orange clothes, and dryads - lots of dryads. One turned and looked at Jayce and his crew with a distinct look of surprise and curiosity. "Visitors?" she questioned. "And not from the Long Walks? How curious. Greetings, welcome to Mother's Embrace."

Jayce tilted his head slightly as he looked up at the tall humanoid. She wore a simple dress made of green leaves that left most of her body exposed. She had long, green-tinged blonde hair, a pair of antlers, and pointed ears sticking outwards from within the flower infested mess. She had pale, cream-coloured skin that on closer inspection had a more wood-like appearance than human skin. Her eyes were a bright glowing green, and she stood slightly taller than Jayce, even with bare feet.

"Mother's Embrace?" Jayce questioned, only to immediately have several figures appear around him and his crew: monks and therians, all of whom looked apprehensive. "Who are you? What are you doing here?" questioned a short, tanned monk with a shaved head and narrow eyes - he was holding a wooden staff in his hands, and the others looked to him as a figure of authority. "Jayce Exarga. I'm looking for Abbot Song," he answered. The monk's eyes widened, his face going pale. "How do you know that name?" he demanded, as the other monks glanced at each other. "I spoke to him in the Heavens after traversing the Abyss. He referred to himself as a 'Dragon Monk' and said he lived within the Frontier. I've come to see him in person. I'm guessing I'm in the right place?"

Jayce answered confidently, looking at the monk before looking beyond to the dryad who had greeted him – now observing from afar amongst other dryads.

“So it’s you...” muttered the monk in charge, lowering his weapon. He bowed low, the other monks doing the same whilst the therians continued to eye the Rising Aces. “I apologise for the hostilities – it’s rare for someone to arrive from below and our last unexpected guest resulted in an unpleasant experience. My name is Master Soho, of the Order of the Ascendant Dragons. Welcome, honoured guests, of which Order do you hail from?” asked Master Soho, raising his head and looking over them. “The Rising Aces,” Jayce answered promptly, “from the New World.” Master Soho nodded, gesturing to follow before beginning to walk. Jayce glanced to his crew. Ordo shrugged back and then gestured for Jayce to lead on. “Please follow, I will take you to the Abbot.”

The walk was short, and full of countless eyes observing the Rising Aces, concluding in a slightly larger hut than the others around, with blue markings decorating the pale wooden beams. On closer look, it was more like a shrine than an abode – with only a single enclosed room, the entrance consisting of a pair of paper sliding doors. The floor was a giant straw mat, and Jayce was immediately invited to take off his shoes before entering. “Please prepare yourself,” warned Master Soho, “this is a... complicated matter, and one that you will likely have many questions for.”

Jayce braced himself, his mind thinking back to the Abbot he had met in the afterlife. Abbot Song had been a very muscular man, with a face grizzled with age. His skin had been firm and tanned, his head smooth with a thick pair of dark eyebrows and a large beard. He had worn giant beads over his hairy, bare chest and he had extended nothing other than gentle kindness to Jayce when they had met. In the two years that had passed, Jayce had attempted numerous times to find and meet him once again – to ask for more guidance, more answers – only to be met with bitter failure. His heart raced, just thinking about meeting the man again.

But his heart lurched as he stared at the corpse of a man sat cross-legged inside the shrine. The man was shrivelled up, like he had been left in the desert for a very long time – his eyes sunken into his skull, his skin dark and wrinkled, tight against the wasted muscle underneath. His beard and eyebrows had grown long, grey and untamed, and the beads he had previously worn sat around waist – fallen from his previously broad shoulders. “And I thought I was getting on in years?” Ordo murmured. Arthuria immediately elbowed him.

"What am I looking at?" Jayce questioned cautiously, approaching slowly after Master Soho. "Is this not who you saw before?" asked the monk. Jayce shook his head. "No, he was much bigger – alive, not... dead," Jayce said, in quiet confusion. Soho nodded, gesturing slowly towards a painting on one of the walls. Jayce's eyes widened, it looked almost exactly like how he had seen the Abbot. "That's him," Jayce stated.

"As is this," Soho returned, kneeling in front of the Abbot and bowing. "Abbot, Jayce Exarga is here," he said softly. A loud and slow wheeze came from the corpse, startling the entire group of the Rising Aces. "Zombie!" Morgana cried, hiding behind Arthuria. Soho flashed the group a warning glare before beckoning Jayce to take his spot in front of the Abbot. Jayce approached and sat down, mirroring the stance of the ancient monk. "Abbot Song?" Jayce questioned.

One atom at a time the monk raised his eyebrows, exposing dark voids of eyes that glinted slightly in the light. "Jayce..." gasped the Abbot. Soho dropped to the floor, bowing his head low. "You've come," Abbot Song whispered, his voice harsh and forgotten. "You've got a lot to explain, old man, I was expecting someone a bit more alive," Jayce returned. A minute smile appeared on his wrinkled face. "Indeed," he wheezed. "Alas, time is not always equal. I have waited so long... so long for one such as you to take up my mantle." "What do you mean?" Jayce questioned.

"You hold the potential for nirvana within you, the only person I have met to have done so. Perhaps it was fate, or an old gambler's good luck, for us to have met. Do you still remember my teachings?" he asked. Jayce nodded and the smile spread further. "Then, Spirit Monk, as my master taught onto me, and I taught onto you the ways of the underworld, I ask that you bring balance to the world and return the order of things to their original state," he asked. Jayce frowned, not understanding what was being asked. "I don't understand. Balance? Spirit Monk? What do you mean?" Abbot Song took one final raspy gasp of air. "Undo the past, bring a new future."

"I don't understand. Wh-what do you-" The Abbot let out a slow exhale, his body crumbling away in front of Jayce into a pile of dust. Jayce leapt backwards to his feet in horror, staring at the dust before him before looking to Master Soho. Soho knelt before him, the other monks who had escorted them doing the same. "I never thought I would be one of the few to hear the Abbot speak," Soho cried, tears falling from his face as he looked up at Jayce. "I pay my greetings to the

Abbot of the Spirit Monks," he stated immediately, clasping his fist to his palm and bowing his head to Jayce. The other monks copied him, only leaving Jayce more and more confused.

"Explain to me, slowly, what is going on?" Jayce requested, once he had had a few moments to think. Soho sat in the spot that Abbot Song had been, the ancient monk's remains having been moved to a ceremonial urn – to be stored with the other Abbots of the past. "The Abbot entered a state of meditation more than two centuries ago, and it has been over a hundred years since he last spoke, according to some of the dryads and Elder Sulong. According to the stories, the Abbot entered this state in an attempt to reach enlightenment, to hopefully commune with the dead and find traces of the Spirit Monks – an Order that guided the souls of the dead on their journey to their next life. So deep was his meditation that he ceased needing to do most processes. But one day - a little under three years ago – he chuckled. We believed he had met someone, and had also communed with the Spirit Monks of old. But given the time it had taken it was unfeasible to hope that the techniques he had learnt could be passed on."

"That's where I came in," Jayce realised. Soho nodded in agreement, looking past Jayce and nodding to someone. An old man hobbled in, kneeling next to Soho and laying down a thick blue and black book, before placing upon it two rolls of blue linen covered in silver etchings. "It is an honour to meet you, Abbot Exarga," stated Elder Sulong. Jayce looked at the items placed in front of him. "Abbot Song was one the wisest amongst our Order's long history, I believe his choice in you was purposeful. So, I wish to return a piece of your Order's history to you and this sealed artifact." The old man extended a hand out, inviting for Jayce to extend his own hand. Cautiously, Jayce did so, the Elder wrapping his hand up in the linen before doing the same to his other. "The Bindings of Zen, may your foes fall to your wisdom." Jayce didn't feel any different, but the gesture was appreciated – even if it didn't feel earned.

"In exchange, I ask that you bequeath an aspect of your teachings so it may be recorded amongst our Order, and not lost - should you fall in battle." Jayce looked at the scroll and the ink available. "He didn't really teach me anything special, only how to enter the Abyss. Is that what you're after?" Jayce questioned. The two monks nodded. "It appears you do not recognise just how important that gift is. The ability to communicate with and learn from your vanquished foes, to hear forgotten teachings, to speak and bring peace to your pains and the pains of others. It is all powerful, and special. Please, teach us – Master."

Jayce turned and looked at his bored companions. "The ship," Arthuria silently reminded. "Right," Jayce stated. "First some questions. You said you're Dragon Monks, what does that mean?" he asked. The two monks looked at each other before they both pushed up their sleeves. In a flash of fire and ice, red and white scales spread across their skin. "We commune with the winged beasts, using their power to guard their homes and ours in a mutual arrangement," Soho answered. Jayce's eyes widened as he looked at the scales. "Like a Warlock's pact?" Morgana questioned from the side, drawing curious looks of confusion from the monk's before she dismissed her own question. "The Dragons obey you?" Jayce asked.

"Not quite, we are bound to each other in mutual agreement: strength for security. Power for food. A pact that ties us together as one in harmony." "How would we go about doing that?" Jayce asked, the thought of potentially adding Dragons to his crew of great appeal and a powerful tool to protect his ship from above. Both monks hesitated and Jayce could tell what was required. "I will teach you, if you teach us," he stated. The two monks nodded in agreement. "Agreed."

It didn't take Jayce long, but he felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders once Master Soho could copy his technique. It wasn't much, but the tears of joy felt far from bad. "It is a miracle," cried Soho, holding his palms together in prayer before he stood and looked up at Jayce. "Thank you, thank you." Jayce nodded in a simple, awkward acknowledgement, glancing back towards his crew. "Your turn."

"What is it you want us to do?" Ordo questioned quietly to Jayce, as they were led away by Master Soho. "We came very close to losing all of our lives, without Wren we'd have been goners. We need air superiority and it's unrealistic to believe that the whole crew will be able to master Focus to that level. We need some Dragons of our own," Jayce clarified. Ordo nodded in agreement, looking around at the various monks. "Understood. We'll do what we can, but if it's anything like with the Demons then it should just be us. You shouldn't take the risk." Jayce shook his head but Ordo placed a firm hand on his shoulder. "Captain, you can't risk yourself. It's on us, we'll do it."

Jayce faltered but Ordo simply nodded before pressing onwards, the group eventually stopping beneath another ladder leading up through a hole in the foliage. "The trial is perilous, there is no guarantee of safety, or success. Please understand that only those who have proven themselves through years of

practice and training are normally allowed to undergo this trial. Your lives are your own. Choose wisely as to whether it is worth the risk," warned Soho, bowing to Jayce before departing with his followers.

"So we go up there, wrangle some Dragons and forge a pact with them? Sounds easy enough," stated Arthuria. Morgana nibbled on her thumb nervously as she eyed the hole. "So who's going?" she asked, hoping not to be volunteered, only to flinch as Arthuria placed her arm over her shoulder. "We'll go," Arthuria volunteered in her stead, the pair looking towards Jayce. Jayce glanced towards Falconer who had already begun to wander off in a different direction. He then looked towards Jeanne.

She was muttering to herself, her hand the hilt of her sword and eyes fixated on the hole above. Jayce frowned, her green eyes seemed glazed over slightly, but she blinked and lowered her gaze – settling her cold vision on him. She smiled, the coldness fading and a warmth reemerging. "I don't think this is a good idea, we don't need them. And we can't trust these..." She glanced around at the dryads, therians and monks, the grip tightening on the hilt of her blade. "Okay," Jayce stated, reaching down and placing a hand on her shoulder. She flinched, but her wandering gaze settled back onto him – a look of confusion appearing and vanishing on her face - before she shook her head and pulled her shoulder away. "I'm fine," she mumbled, answering a question he hadn't asked.

"Okay," Jayce reiterated. "Ordo, Morgana and Arthuria will undergo the trial. Keep your communicators ready – we'll come to your aid if you call for it." Arthuria and Ordo both nodded with confidence, Morgana less-so but sensing little choice in the matter. Arthuria and Ordo began to climb, leaving Morgana behind. She looked at Jayce and he at her. "You don't have to, but I know you can do it," he told her. She scowled, and grabbed onto the ladder before beginning to climb. "I hate you, Jayce Exarga," she stated, climbing quickly with her face burning. He smiled before turning away and nodding to Jeanne as she found a plant box to lean against. "I won't be far," he told her, following after Falconer. Jeanne watched him go, struggling not to place her hands over her ears as whispers continued to fill her mind.

The light was blinding in Falconer's eyes, streams of green and gold flowing like water all around him. He felt invigorated, strengthened – yet his arm burnt like fire, piercing deeper inside him with each moment, invading and consuming him from within. He let out a groan, a drop of sweat rolling down his forehead before dripping from his nose. His knees hit the floor, the pain unbearable yet built upon

utter and complete bliss. He couldn't speak, he couldn't think, he could only feel the life of the world around him – and it felt... broken.

A hand placed itself on his cheek and his open eyes began to see again. His pain subsided, relieved by the stranger in front of him. The dryad tilted her head as he did, mirroring him with a childish curiosity. She looked different from the others - to anyone else she would be indistinguishable, but to him he could see her youth. He could see the faint purity of the Leyline within her, a rawer and more wild expression of the world's lifeblood that sparked and flashed within her body.

"Falconer!" Jayce stated, rushing over and crouching down next to him before placing a hand across his back. "Are you okay?" Jayce questioned, looking from him to the dryad next to him. She pulled her hand back and immediately ran away, her shoulder length green hair trailing in the wind behind her – her short antlers barely visible. "I am fine... I believe," Falconer gasped, shaking himself off and forcing himself to his unsteady feet. "Are you sure? What did she do to you?" Jayce asked.

Falconer looked towards Jayce, the golden crosses on his green eyes narrowing slightly. "I don't know, I think she saved me from myself." Jayce frowned, opening his mouth. "This way, Captain, the source is over here," Falconer stated, shutting down Jayce's further questions and beginning to press forwards towards the main trunk of the tree. Jayce shook his head, following after his friend towards a hollow within the tree.

The guards stood outside didn't stop them, allowing Jayce and Falconer to walk into a grassy grove within the hollow inside the tree. It was brightly lit with spores kept in baskets all around the room, and the grass was soft to the touch. But it was the centre of the area that drew both of their attention: a large stone bed lay in the middle, a middle-aged woman upon it, dressed in green robes with a large, matching tome in her grasp. Several dryads were tending to the grove, but one towered above them, at least a foot taller in height.

"Jayce," Falconer said softly. "That's the knot of Leylines," he stated, pointing to the woman on the stone bed. They slowly approached the bed, the giant dryad similarly approaching them. "Greetings," she said, her hair touching the floor and the colour of grass, her skin a soft-brown colour. "Hi," Jayce stated in turn, nudging Falconer. "Hello," he said quickly, forcing his attention away from the Leylines.

"I welcome you, but I must ask for your respect and peace. The Lady is not to be awoken or disturbed," stated the dryad. "I am Emme, soul of this tree and guardian of all who inhabit it." Jayce looked up at the giant woman, she rivalled even Bjorn in height and he certainly had no plans to draw her anger. "I apologise for our intrusion, we're simply passing through. Our ship crashed into one of your hollows down below and has impaled itself. Would it be possible for the ship to be released, so we can begin repairs?" Jayce asked. She simply nodded. "It is done."

"Jayce, the tree just moved, was that your doing?" came the somewhat panicked voice of Astris. "Yeah, all good," he returned. "Thank you." She smiled, looking down at Falconer with curiosity. "You have questions, do you not?" she asked. "I do. This... Wizard, who is she?" he asked. The dryad shook her head. "I do not know. None of us do. She is our mother. The one who plucked us from our home and nurtured our bodies, the one who still does. She is the creator of what you call the Frontier."

Jayce and Falconer looked at each other, their thoughts confirmed and curiosity only growing. "What Wicke would have given to be here," Falconer said softly, looking at the ancient mage. Jayce nodded in agreement, trying not to set his Gaze onto the dryad from earlier, doing her best to remain camouflaged against the wall of the tree hollow. Emme turned, spotting his distracted attention and glaring at the young dryad. "Gaea, what are you doing?" she questioned forcefully.

Gaea's body shimmered, returning to her normal colours of cream and green. She was shorter than the other dryads, with smaller wooden antlers and shorter green hair as well. "Nothing, mother," she lied, her skin flushing green. Emme slowly raised a hand to her forehead. "Forgive my daughter, she is still young and excitable," Emme said softly, beckoning her daughter forwards. Gaea was slightly shorter than Falconer, but still tall. "Mother, I'm nearly thirty," Gaea complained. "Still but a sapling, my child."

A thought seemed to come into Emme's mind and she looked towards Jayce and Falconer. "If I may be so bold, would it be possible for me to show my child your vessel? Your kind have such interesting uses for life, and it would do her good to see more than this tree," Emme asked. Jayce nodded, but as he opened his mouth to point out the distance, a glowing golden hole opened up underneath them all and they appeared far below, overlooking the Stacked Hand as repairs were being made to it on a dry-dock created from twisted roots. "My daughter will

return you when you are ready,” Emme stated, opening a hole behind her and stepping through, leaving the three of them behind. “Well,” Jayce stated, not exactly certain how circumstances had led to this. “Shall we.”

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Scars of the Past**

“Where are your companions?” asked Elder Sulong, as he approached Jeanne. Jeanne simply gestured upwards with a single finger before gesturing around in a nonverbal answer. “I see. And you wished not to undergo the trial yourself?” he asked. Jeanne didn’t answer, she didn’t even look at him. “Hmm, probably for the best,” he stated, wandering in front of her and leaning onto the railing of the wooden platform they were upon. “What’s that supposed to mean?” Jeanne asked coldly.

“Nothing to you personally, I assure you. Simply that Dragons are ferocious creatures and one bound to a soldier like you could easily spell disaster. Outsiders bring dangerous experiences from an alien world here, and I can read your experiences like words on a page. Soldier.” Jeanne frowned, unclipping her sword from her belt and resting it next to her before approaching the old man and leaning next to him. “Go on.”

“You’ve been betrayed, just like our last visitor was, and now you’re lost – struggling for purpose and meaning. But you’re not one to consume others in your search for meaning, you’re more... internalised. A different kind of dangerous, should you let that darkness fester,” stated the Elder, keeping his eyes outwards. Jeanne grit her teeth. “And there’s the anger... so common amongst those like you. So I ask you, will you try to burn this place away too because I’ve upset you?”

Jeanne unclenched her jaw, shaking her head. “You speak too much old man, and in ways that don’t make sense. Speak clearly or don’t speak at all.” He chuckled. “The Dragons truly would hate you. They need indulging from time to time and you would not give it to them. Your friends will be fine, don’t worry. The Sovereign killed most of the strong ones when she visited and took the strongest with her.” Jeanne flinched, her hairs standing on end, but as she turned to look up at the old man he was gone.

Jeanne shook her head, retreating back to her sword and picking it up, only to find a paper talisman placed upon it: a ward against evil. She scowled, taking it off and discarding it to the wind before sitting back in her seat, her mind thinking back to the battles she had fought in the past. To the soldiers she had led into

battle. To the blade in her hands that had fed on so much blood. "The past is the past," she said.

"The future is ours," said her sword.

### **Chapter 159: In the Wings of Another**

"Hmm," Gaea uttered softly, as she walked across the deck of the Stacked Hand, stopping in front of a plant pot sat amongst a grass bed. The ship was quite something: oozing with history and memories from all across an ancient world, yet there was more to it. Gaea had always found the concept of using trees for buildings, paths, or vessels quite an alien thing. It was hard to really think about, but she supposed that was more down to her nature as a dryad – the soul of the woods. She smirked as she crouched down, drawing out a tiny seed from inside her palm and nestling it next to the sapling – green roots immediately spreading out and binding to the plant in a new symbiosis.

"Everything okay?" Jayce questioned, walking away from Tempest and Bjorn – the news about repairs far from pleasant. Gaea stood up, smiling brightly at the strange human man. "Oh yes, I like it very much. I'm sure my mother does too. Anyway, we should head back to your friends up above, I'm sure they're nearly done with their trial," Gaea stated. Jayce nodded in agreement, looking towards Falconer who quickly walked over. "Ready?" Gaea asked, the pair nodding to her. She extended her hand outwards, a golden portal opening in the wood beneath them. Jayce and Falconer immediately dropped through, but Gaea lingered, looking back to the plant in the pot and the greater ship around her. "This will do," she said with a faint smile, leaping into the portal.

Ordo, Arthuria and Morgana all screamed as they fell from the branches of the giant tree, the flat waters far beneath them and countless Dragons swarming in the air. Ordo glanced around, looking for Morgana and Arthuria - both easily audible across the expanse but far too far away for him to get to. It made no sense, they had been in a large grassy room for only a moment before the floor had fallen out from beneath them. Why? Was it a trap? Were Jayce and the others now in danger? It didn't matter. What mattered was the impact rushing to meet him.

Arthuria's mind raced with nearly identical thoughts, as opposed to Morgana's which held nothing other than anger towards Jayce and her sister, and utmost terror as her broom was nowhere to be found. "I'm going to die!" Morgana screamed, a swarm of Dragons circling beneath her. Her eyes widened, a glimmer amongst the swarm drawing her attention. A small Dragon, no larger than a dog, was gliding through the swarm, its body shimmering in a pearlescent manner. "You'll do!" Morgana screamed, the Dragon's ice colour eyes widening

as she collided with it from above, desperately grabbing onto anything she could before the pair of them spiralled away into the unknown.

Ordo came to the same idea, but with a slightly more calm decisiveness, his eyes scanning the swarm for one large enough to take the impact from above and carry him to safety. He figured he could probably survive the impact if he missed, or at the least use Focus to mitigate it, but if this wasn't a trap then there was a purpose to his freefall. He tasted metal in the air, a sparking of lightning drawing his attention to a large four-winged, black Dragon with blue accents. "You're mine!" he yelled, dropping his head and diving towards the Dragon before colliding into it as hard as he could.

Arthuria spotted Ordo and Morgana far across the expanse, her arms and legs as wide as possible to slow her fall. She spotted Ordo diving down, aiming for a Dragon before colliding into it. "Okay! So-be-it!" she screamed, spotting two Dragons fighting beneath her: one that was white, another that was red. She turned her attention away, spotting a golden Dragon of an appropriate size. The red Dragon grappled the white, tearing out its throat before pushing off its corpse directly into Arthuria.

She yelped as the giant creature collided with her, grabbing onto its spines desperately in order to find a grip. The beast roared, feeling her on its body but in a position where it couldn't reach with its head. "Calm down!" Arthuria screamed as it thrashed in the air, the pair of them falling downwards towards the water beneath. "Up! Up!" Arthuria cried, the Dragon spreading its wings at the last moment and gliding away from the water straight into a mangrove.

Arthuria flew off the Dragon's back as they crashed through the small tree, the pair of them tumbling across a grassy grove before coming to a rest next to a large, pointed monolith. "Ugh!" Arthuria groaned, only to hear a soft whine building up along with a deep inhale. Panic snapped her out of her pain. She yelled out, tucking her legs in and flicking out her tower shield from her wrist as the Dragon unleashed a plume of bright orange flames in her direction. The flames wreathed her shield, the metal turning warm and then hot before they died out.

Arthuria took in a deep breath of air, trying to settle her panicked heart before she peeked her head out from behind the shield. The Dragon stared at her, it's bright red eyes boring into her, it's two black horns giving it a devilish visage. The creature was huge, at least five-metres in height, with two colossal wings extending from its back and four large legs. Its main body was a deep crimson,

with a slightly lighter red on its underbelly and black spines extending along its back. It sat proudly like a cat, looking down at Arthuria with clear frustration and fury. Its heavy tail flicked behind it, the end tipped with a large spiked club.

“What are you waiting for?” Arthuria yelled, holding her hot shield cautiously and her sword in her other hand as she awaited another fire breath, or a swipe from its huge claws or spiked tail. Instead the Dragon simply huffed, extending its wings before trying to fly. It took off from the ground, the force from its wings sending Arthuria tumbling, pressing upwards before colliding into a shimmering purple barrier that extended outwards from the giant monolith between them. The Dragon crashed to the ground and thrashed around before getting back to its feet.

Arthuria wasted no time, backing away and trying to make a break for it, only to run face first into the invisible barrier as well, a purple shimmer emerging on impact before fading away. “Just great,” Arthuria groaned as she sat up, rubbing her nose. Another deep inhale came from the Dragon but this time she was ready for it, running and using the monolith for cover along with her shield. She stopped next to it, resting against the dark stone as the fire subsided. The Dragon growled at her, the ground shaking as it repositioned before taking in another deep breath.

“Enough!” Arthuria screamed, unclipping her shield and throwing it like a discus at the Dragon, the metal bouncing off the creature’s nose. It recoiled back, reaching up with its front claws to its nose, a genuine look of shock on its face. “No more!” she commanded, unleashing a basic level of Panic at the Dragon. It snarled, raising onto its hind legs before crashing back down. Arthuria staggered, feeling what she could only describe as the Dragon’s own Focus.

They glared at each other, sizing each other up until a shimmer behind the Dragon drew both of their attention. The Dragon turned to the barrier, swiping out with its claw only to harmlessly bounce off. It then unleashed a plume of fire, again having no effect, but identifying immediately to Arthuria that the barrier was moving inwards towards the monolith. “We’re going to be crushed,” Arthuria realised, the Dragon turning its head to her and looking at the stone before trying to shatter it with its tail, again to no effect. “Can you understand me?” Arthuria questioned. The Dragon looked down at her but made no gestures or sounds. “I’ll take that as somewhat. Look, we’re stuck together, but there’s got to be a way out of this. Don’t do anything,” she commanded.

The Dragon growled and sat upright, watching Arthuria carefully as she analysed the monolith. It was covered in Arcanum runes, transcribing some sort of ritual or spell. She frowned, her necklace translating most runes for her. "That dammed djinn," she muttered, trying to understand the now literal translation. "Right, it wants our blood!" she realised, cutting her wrist and touching her blood to the stone. Several of the runes lit up, the barrier becoming apparent to both of them. "Your turn," she stated, turning to the Dragon. The giant lizard looked down at her and then back at the monolith before back at her. It raised its claw, Arthuria's eyes widening as she grasped what it was thinking. She dove behind the monolith as it tried to swipe her, hoping to paint more of the monolith with her blood.

"It needs your blood as well! Your blood!" she yelled, as it thrashed around and tried to kill her. "Fine! Fuck this! Fuck you, you overgrown lizard!" Arthuria screamed, darting out from cover and rushing at the Dragon with her sword. She slid underneath its swipe, carving her blade through its palm. The Dragon recoiled and Arthuria raced back to the monolith, flicking the blood across the stone.

The rest of the runes activated, the barrier rushing forwards and dragging them both towards the stone. "No no no!" Arthuria screamed, before the stone turned bright white and they both found themselves in an endless expanse of empty space. The Dragon thrashed around in the void, trying to flap its wings as it floated but to no effect. It turned, facing Arthuria and opening its mouth to exhale fire, but nothing came out. "Just calm down!" Arthuria commanded. "Dragon!" she yelled.

"Ape!" came a loud and commanding voice in her mind that rattled her very being. "Was that you?" Arthuria questioned. The Dragon tilted its head. "Prey?" it questioned, the voice deep and somewhat masculine. Arthuria shook her head before looking around. "I'm not food. I think... I think we're meant to team up." The Dragon stared blankly at her. "Allies. Partners. Same pack." Arthuria attempted.

"No."

"Okay, well at least that's something. Why not? I don't know much about you, but you appear strong, mostly, and I can ensure that you never go hungry."

"Weak."

"How's your nose and foot?" Arthuria retaliated. The Dragon snarled, but made no further comments. "Look, you need me and I need you. Surely there's a way we can come to some agreement?" The Dragon let out a huff and looked around, before slowly lifting its claw and pointing ahead. Arthuria looked, spotting another monolith off in the distance. "Oh," she said softly, trying to will herself forwards. She didn't move. She looked towards the Dragon and tried to move closer to him. She drifted forwards, holding herself back at a sensible distance from him.

He looked confused, and cautiously he too moved towards her, the monolith getting closer to both of them. Arthuria clenched her fist, only to yelp in pain as she looked down and saw a wound in her palm. The Dragon drew even closer, a look of bloodlust in his eyes as he realised an answer to his problems. Arthuria's eyes widened. "Wait! Wait!" she yelled, the Dragon rearing back to bite down on her. "We're linked!" she yelled, holding out her palm and causing the Dragon to falter.

He leaned in, looking at the wound on her palm before he looked at the wound on his claw. "We're linked," Arthuria repeated, the monolith directly next to the pair of them. Two differently sized holes were made in the stone. One large enough for a human hand, another for a Dragon's. "Trust me," Arthuria asked, reaching into the receptacle. He growled and did the same, the monolith growing brightly.

Arthuria bolted upright, taking a deep breath as she found herself lying on a bed of grass in a large circular room with a hole in the roof. Two more gasps drew her attention to Morgana and Ordo, both in similar positions across the room. "Was that real?" Morgana immediately questioned, reaching up to face and finding a large scratch on her chin. Arthuria took off her gauntlet, a cut in her palm. "Ugh," groaned Ordo, his body covered in cuts and wounds. "Are we all okay?" he asked. They both nodded, Morgana crossing the room to hand Ordo a healing potion. "What do you think happened to the Dragons?" Morgana asked.

A swirling white portal opened above the room, three large reptiles tumbling out of it with a crash. Arthuria yelped in pain, clutching her neck as her Dragon landed on his head. "What is that?" Morgana gasped, pointing up to the portal, a colossal, reptilian eye staring down at them. The portal snapped shut, a hot pain spreading across Arthuria's back, the same occurring to Morgana and Ordo. The three Dragons began to stir, slowly looking up at each other and then over at the three Rising Aces.

“Zhurong,” Arthuria said subconsciously.

“Taranis,” Ordo stated.

“Soteria,” Morgana uttered.

“You took longer than I expected,” stated Emme, Gaea’s mother, looking from Falconer and Jayce to Gaea. Gaea looked up at her mother, reading her silent expression before a small smile broke through on Emme’s face. “I hope the visit was bountiful. I must tend to some duties, but I believe your friends have just completed their trials. Gaea guide them, please.” Gaea nodded to her mother, gesturing for Jayce and Falconer to follow.

Jeanne perked up as they approached. “You’re back,” she stated quietly. Jayce nodded, looking up to the hole Ordo, Arthuria and Morgana had gone through. “No sign of them?” Jayce asked. Jeanne shook her head, looking cautiously to the dryad with them. “They should have finished,” Gaea stated with a look of confusion. “Wait here,” she instructed, disappearing through a portal before promptly returning. “Ah, I think they’ve left on their own. It’s probably best we return to your ship,” Gaea stated. Jayce nodded and they all dropped through her portal, this time emerging straight back out onto the deck of the Stacked Hand.

“Is it any source of wood you can travel through?” Jayce immediately questioned. Gaea shook her head. “Only that which I’m connected to, through kinship or personal affinity,” she answered. Jayce nodded before immediately frowning. “You’re back? That was fast,” Bjorn stated, distracting Jayce from his follow-up question. “Where are the others?” he asked. A loud roar thundered from the entrance of the hollow, a trio of Dragons flying inside. “There they are,” Jayce stated, watching with a big grin as Arthuria and Ordo flew around the Stacked Hand on the backs of their Dragons, whilst Morgana flew next to hers on her broom. They landed moments later.

“I take it you were successful?” Jayce asked, looking across the three creatures. “You could say so. Meet Zhurong,” Arthuria answered, looking towards her Dragon – the crimson creature eyeing the crew cautiously. Jayce looked towards Ordo’s black and blue Dragon. It had four wings that overlapped into pairs, each tipped with a singular claw that it used to walk on, similar to a bat, along with a pair of large hind legs. The Dragon’s head had horns on its nose and jaw, resulting in an axe-like shape, but, as the Dragon opened its mouth, Jayce spotted an internal beak of sorts just underneath its lips along with two rows of sharp

teeth. It growled, or revved – it was hard to tell – the sharp teeth inside vibrating like mechanised saw. Jayce made an immediate note to keep his arms as far away from the creature's mouth. The Dragon also had a large flat tail that made Jayce wonder whether the Dragon could swim. "This is Taranis," Ordo added, his Dragon sparking with lightning.

"And this is Soteria," Morgana introduced, presenting a far smaller Dragon than the other two. The pearlescent Dragon looked quite similar to Arthuria's, but with large frills on its legs and a sail leading down its spine. Jayce looked over the three Dragons, struggling desperately to hide his excitement over having such mythical creatures on his ship. His excitement immediately faded as Wren bounced her way up the stairs from below deck.

All three Dragons spread their wings and roared in panic as Wren screeched at them. "Woah woah woah!" said various Rising Aces, stepping between the giant animals. Wren continued to screech in anger at the Dragons until Falconer placed his hand on her beak, reassuring her gently as Morgana, Arthuria and Ordo tried to calm their Dragons. But even as Wren settled, the three Dragons continued to observe their predator with unrest. "This may cause some issues," Jayce muttered, oblivious to Little Witch wandering across the main deck.

The small cat stopped in front of the three Dragons, all of them eyeing up the potential snack with great intrigue. Soteria was the first to dare, a shimmering bubble appearing around Little Witch, trapping her, before she tried to snap at the cat with a quick bite. Jayce flinched as Wren stomped on the Dragon, pinning her to the deck of the Stacked Hand beneath her talons and freeing Little Witch. Wren then glared at the other two Dragons, both slightly larger than her, but neither willing to move. Little Witch snarled at the pearlescent Dragon in dominance, batting her nose before hissing at the two other Dragons, both bowing their heads low in subservience. Little Witch then looked towards Wren, walking past her bodyguard with her tail bushy and flicking behind her. Wren screeched at the pinned Dragon before releasing her, waddling after the cat before disappearing below deck.

"What in the abyss just happened?" Jayce questioned, only to immediately spot Morgana crouched on the floor holding her neck in pain. Soteria shook herself off, retreating to the safety of the other two Dragons as Jayce crouched next to Morgana. "Are you okay?" he asked. She nodded, panting heavily with panicked eyes. "We're linked, us and the Dragons. We feel their pain, we might share their wounds as well, but it's just speculation at the moment," Arthuria stated.

"What if they die?" Jayce asked. None of the three wanted to answer, but they all shared the same thought. "Okay," Jayce stated. "We take this carefully and figure it out." Jayce left the Dragons to their handlers, turning to Bjorn.

"How long until we're good to sail again," he asked, stepping next to Bjorn as he stood by the main mast. "Tempest said it could be a few days, at least," Bjorn answered. Jayce swore quietly, shaking his head. "Okay, keep me in the know." Bjorn nodded in acknowledgment, before looking curiously towards Gaea hovering nearby with a clear question in her mind. "Something you want to ask, miss?" Bjorn asked, drawing back Jayce's attention.

"Would it be possible for me to come along with you?" Gaea asked out of the blue, her skin far lighter than before and her green hair now a light cyan colour. Jayce glanced from her to the Sapling of Oaths, a small vine wrapped around its stem. "I don't think I'll get another chance like this to see the world beyond my mother and aunts. I'm not sure what you guys really do, but it seems exciting." "What will your mother say? What can you do for us? What we do is very dangerous, can you fight?" Jayce questioned.

Gaea looked towards the sapling she had bound herself to. She extended her hand out towards it, the plant twitching and twisting before it exploded outwards, shattering its pot and digging into the grass bed beneath it whilst growing upwards and outwards. The Tree of Oaths curled over into a hook, the small tree bursting with life and countless cyan leaves. Gaea then extended her hand downwards, the planks at the edge of the grass patch twisting and merging together before she guided her hand vaguely in the direction of the holes in the Stacked Hand's hull. "Captain," Tempest stated immediately, floating up onto the main deck. "I don't know about fighting, or the other things you do, but I'll protect my home, and you guys. I promise," she stated nervously. Jayce looked towards Tempest. "The holes are sealed," confirmed the djinn.

Jayce and Bjorn looked at each other: at this point the decision had already been made for them, removing the dryad from the ship would likely be an impossible task, not that they wanted to. "Okay," they both stated, just before a golden portal opened between them and Gaea. Emme looked down at her daughter before looking across the Stacked Hand. But where Jayce had been expecting a scolding, he only saw relief in her expression. "Oh thank goodness, they accepted you."

"Accepted me? You want me to go?" Gaea questioned. Her mother nodded. "But of course, this is a wonderful opportunity for you. I couldn't want anything more than for my daughter to see the world. I came to wish you luck and give

you these,” Emme stated, handing over a handful of various seeds. She reached down, placing her forehead to Gaea’s before stepping back. “Treat my daughter well, I’ll be sure to visit from time to time,” Emme stated with partial warning, before she disappeared through a portal. “Looks like I’m staying!” Gaea stated with an excited grin.

Jayce and Bjorn glanced towards each other, both cracking small smiles before shaking their heads. “We’re going to run out of room soon,” Bjorn stated. Jayce chuckled, nodding in agreement before looking towards Gaea. “Speak to Tempest about accommodation, he’ll get your room sorted,” Jayce stated. Gaea frowned and then shook her head. “Oh, no, I don’t need a room. I already have one,” she stated, gesturing to the Tree of Oaths - both Arthuria and Jeanne kneeling in front of it. “I see...” Jayce stated. “Do you need food?” Gaea shook her head. “Water?” She nodded. “Fresh water?” Again she nodded. “Okay, we can sort that. Bjorn, can you get her signed up whilst I go speak to Tempest about the Dragons and their pens?” Jayce asked. The Quartermaster nodded and Jayce left them behind.

The night came and passed quickly, the first day of their new adventure filling all of the Rising Aces with anticipation for the next and curiosity as to what awaited them in the future. But Jayce struggled to find rest. He sat in his quarters in his chair, his light on, and the surface of his desk and his bed covered in documents and notes. He let out a long sigh as he held one paper in particular in his hand: an image of the Sea Sovereign – Atalana Scáthach – and information Jayce had been able to find on her.

He reached across his desk, picking up the information Jeanne had given him. Scáthach had visited the treetops and their villages. She had caused havoc and destruction, targeting the strongest of the Dragons before taking one with her. He set her photo down, reaching out to a small notebook. He flicked through the pages containing his personal notes on the Betrayers – stopping on Sétanta before turning over to Kaina. He looked at their photos, their minimal notes, before he scribbled under both of them: ‘Dragonlord?’.

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Ancient Friends, Newer Allies.**

Both Mai Lu and Caelie found it difficult to take their eyes off the Dragons, initially for very different reasons: they scared the life out of Mai Lu and Caelie had never seen something as exciting before. But as the morning came, they returned to view the Dragons once again, but this time for a different reason.

"It's... almost saddening to see, don't you think?" Baal asked Belial, the pair of them stood below deck by the Dragons upgraded pens.

Belial tilted his head, observing the three beasts with distinct curiosity – the three Dragons staring back with equal confusion and intrigue at the unusual humanoids that reeked of power and familiarity. "I do not know, my king. They brought it upon themselves after all. You did warn them of the dangers of toying with mortals," Belial returned, Zhurong letting out a long yawn before going back to sleep. Taranis continued to stare, eventually turning away and pushing open the hatch built into the Stacked Hand's hull before sliding out into the waters below with a splash – the hatch closing behind him.

Baal approached Soteria cautiously, looked down at the dog-sized Dragon. "Do you understand me, Dragon?" he asked in a tongue long unheard. Soteria looked up at him – but there was no recognition. Baal let out a sigh, shaking his head and turning away, only to immediately collide with an invisible barrier. Baal growled, the small Dragon bellowing in a manner that almost sounded like laughter. Baal cut Mai Lu's palm, forming a crystal shard but the Dragon ignored him. "I have killed more for less. Know your place – fallen friend."

Soteria watched the Demons leave, eventually looking over to Zhurong who too had kept an eye on the creatures. They locked eyes for a moment, Zhurong letting out a long growl. Soteria growled back in agreement. The Demons were worth watching.

### **Chapter 160: Welcome and Listen Carefully**

Both Gaea and the three Dragons: Soteria, Taranis and Zhurong settled into the crew of the Rising Aces with little issue. However, the Dragons brought inevitable problems with them: they required a lot of food for one, something that was not an immediate issue - thanks to the abundance of fish beneath the surface of the Frontier waters, but would likely cause problems later on. There was also the space issue, their pens were large enough for them, but Jayce and Tempest couldn't help but wonder just how large the Dragons could and would grow - the same thought extending to Wren. Gaea, on the other hand, only continued to bring pleasant surprise after pleasant surprise to the crew of the Stacked Hand.

"Hazelnuts and... nectarines?" Arthuria questioned with distinct confusion, as she looked up at the Tree of Oaths. Gaea nodded proudly as Jeanne scowled, gesturing towards the cyan leaves - her body and hair matching the tree's cyan and white colours. "A gift from my mother. There are other fruits and nuts I can create, but I am a bit limited as I adjust to this new body," she said proudly. "What is it you're doing?" she then immediately questioned, looking between Arthuria as she stood in thought and Jeanne as she knelt on the floor sharpening her black and gold sword. "Preparing to forge our oaths," Arthuria answered earnestly. Gaea tilted her head. "I see."

The dryad faded away in a cloud of green spores: disappearing either inside the Tree of Oaths or the greater ship, Arthuria did not know. She shook her head and turned to Jeanne. "Do you wish to go first?" Arthuria asked. Jeanne glanced around at the numerous crew members stood across the deck, observing the Frontier around them, before she looked back at Arthuria and shook her head, gesturing for her to go first. "Very well... Captain!" Arthuria called out, drawing Jayce's attention away from Bjorn and Astris.

Jayce glanced towards Arthuria and Jeanne as they prepared for their ritual, he nodded to Arthuria and then looked back towards his left and right hands: Astris and Bjorn. "I can't imagine it'll take us much longer to cross. The general chatter said two-to-four days, so the day after tomorrow most likely. Myra's base should be on the other side, we can sort our food and mapping issues then. Bjorn, I'm going to leave that in your care - let Falconer take the helm and sort it with Marisha," Jayce ordered. The pair nodded to him and he stepped away, descending from the aft deck to the main deck by sliding down the banister.

"Now?" Jayce questioned, looking between Arthuria, the Tree of Oaths and Jeanne. Arthuria looked around and gestured to their surroundings. "Why not? The sooner the better," Arthuria returned. Jayce simply nodded, turning and sitting down on the deck next to Jeanne. "You don't need me to do anything, right?" he asked. Arthuria shook her head, not exactly certain herself what either of them were expecting. "We verified last night that it's possible to forge oaths, but I want this to matter. To me and to you," Arthuria declared. Jayce simply nodded and she unclipped Caliburn from her belt, the blade still locked in its sheath.

"Right," she said somewhat nervously to herself, before turning to face the Tree of Oaths. She could feel the power of the blade in her hands, it thrummed and vibrated with energy, so much so that her hands shook. She forced them to be still, taking a deep breath in and looking across the black and gold sheath, she rubbed the red gemstone on the pommel with her thumb. "I call on you, Caliburn, to forge a bond of blood and steel, of oaths and magic. I ask for your strength, your power, your might – so that I may face the greatest foes imaginable with my heart open and nerves steeled. I vow to not waste your strength. I vow to use your power only on the greatest of foes. I vow to channel your might for the briefest of moments but once between dawns. Grant me this oath, Caliburn."

Arthuria pulled on the pommel, the blade sliding cleanly away from its sheath. She felt power course through her, just as it had before, back at the Holy Palace. Her body felt light, angelic wings lifting her off the ground. "Nice," Jayce stated, as she turned to face him, the magic fading moments later and the sheath reforming on the blade. "How long was that?" Arthuria questioned, looking to Jeanne. "Thirty seconds, but at the highest tier of magic." Arthuria let out a long exhale, clipping the blade to her waist before drawing her other sword. "It's better than nothing."

Arthuria then turned to Jayce. "Your turn. I vow to you, Captain, that as long as our goals align, your battles are my battles, your enemies are my enemies, and that this blade is the Blade of Exarga. I vow to fight with my life on the line, I vow to shy away from no enemy, I vow to kill in the name of the Rising Aces, to protect our home, and my crew." Arthuria felt the sword thrum with similar energy, her body and blade glowing with holy energy. She then stowed the sword and nodded towards Jeanne.

Jeanne remained kneeling, both her hands on her blade, shutting her eyes. She thought her vow, feeling no need to share it with anyone other than herself and

her sword. It took longer than Arthuria's had, and as both Jayce and Arthuria watched her they noticed her black hair slowly turn grey from the roots to the tips. "Awaken Martyr's Grace," Jeanne eventually said aloud, opening her eyes. Both Arthuria and Jayce stared at her. "What?" Jeanne questioned quietly, her green eyes a deep yellow colour. The colour faded back to green and her hair darkened to black. "Nothing," they both answered.

The end of the Frontier came a day and a half later, marked by a drastic increase in traffic. "Left. Left. Left!" yelled Bjorn, as he supervised Fenn on the Stacked Hand's helm, reaching over the fox therian to turn the wheel himself and narrowly avoiding collision with another ship. "You didn't say how much by," Fenn complained as Bjorn glared at him. "I shouldn't have to. At this rate I might as well paint a giant red 'L' on our sails to warn other ships that you're a learner. We'll continue your learning out on the seas - away from others," he said with a sigh, taking over as an opening leading through the trees came into sight.

"Brace for exit," warned Bjorn, his voice loud and clear in the crew's heads. Arthuria and Jeanne came to a pause from their sparring, looking towards Jayce and Ordo as they sat at the edge of the room observing. "That'll do," Ordo stated, standing up with a groan before offering a hand to Jayce. Jayce took it and turned to the board displaying the Rising Aces' proficiencies with Focus. He reached forwards and marked two additional marks on both of their names. "I'm impressed," Ordo stated, stepping towards the two Paladins. "You've caught up, but I must admit - I was expecting more from the Paladin Elder."

Jayce and Arthuria glanced towards Jeanne, her face flashing red and distinct frustration visible. "It's not my fault," Jeanne protested angrily. "I'm not used to..." She seemed to catch herself before she shook it off and looked at Ordo more defiantly. "I'm missing my armour and my other weapon," she stated. Ordo folded his arms. "Hoho, so you admit it at last. Perhaps you should have taken Tempest up on his offer." Jeanne broke eye contact and shook her head. "I want nothing from that thing."

Jeanne flinched as she felt anger radiating from Ordo and Jayce, but a gentle hand found her shoulder and she turned to see Arthuria smiling at her. "You're missing your battle standard. I'm sure we can create one with the markings of the Stacked Hand's flag, but you do need armour - and I promise you the stuff that Tempest makes is good. Really good. We'll go together and sort it now, okay?" Arthuria tempered. Jeanne looked up at Arthuria, reading the reassuring expression on her face and the tiniest pressing nod before letting out a sigh.

Jeanne nodded in begrudging acceptance. "Fine." Arthuria looked over Jeanne towards Ordo and Jayce, tilting her head slightly and raising an eyebrow in a silent communication of smug pride. "Sounds good," Jayce told her.

Jayce left Jeanne's armour in Arthuria's hands. There was no one on the ship better at getting Jeanne to agree to things she didn't want to do than her, and their unusual relationship was more than well-known and rumoured amongst the crew. It had been a frequent topic of late, especially with Jeanne seeming to only grow more and more distant, as opposed to Arthuria, Morgana and Mai Lu who had integrated fully amongst the crew. Jayce shook his mind clear of his thoughts as he climbed the stairs to the main deck – Jeanne and Arthuria's feelings for each other were obvious, whether or not they were actualised was not his business to press or question. Theirs, after all, was far from the only unusual relationship within the crew.

"All who wish to depart should get ready now," Jayce ordered across the communicators, looking out towards the bow at the large fortress in front of them. It looked like a giant conch shell, surrounded by large networks of piers and countless armaments pointed towards the Frontier. "We're staying until the morning, but that may change. Pick your partners, keep your wits close," Jayce stated, turning and approaching the helm. "The plan?" Bjorn questioned. Jayce looked out at the numerous warships, most bearing the markings of the World Guild but a few bearing distinct grey colours that made Jayce think of the Sea Sovereign's Null Legion. "We pay a visit to an old friend."

They docked the Stacked Hand before pulling it into its bottle. Almost the entirety of the crew disembarked, other than Tempest and RK who stayed on board, the three Dragons each taking to the skies in search of a feast and Red taking some time to himself under the waters. The crew split into their chosen groups leaving Astris, Bjorn, Jayce and Caelie behind. "Keep out of trouble," Bjorn told the Beastly Boys, as they took their pocket money from Marisha and raced off into the city. Jayce couldn't help but chuckle witnessing the parental sighs coming from both Marisha and Bjorn. "Stay safe," Marisha told the command squad before heading off with Zeta, Morgana, Mai Lu and Thalia.

The city of Final Bastion was far older than Jayce and his group had been expecting. None of them had any real knowledge on urban sociology, but they could all tell from the way the city had been structured that it had formed over centuries, with the streets getting older and older the closer they got to the centre.

It was quite claustrophobic, with the general spiral structure of the roads leading to some streets being completely buried within the houses and buildings above.

There were endless citizens walking around, heading to the countless shops around. There were also various Null Legion soldiers, each dressed in entirely dark grey uniforms. They wore trench coats, adorned with numerous pockets and a thick metallic chestplate over the top. They had puffy trousers, with armoured knees and wrappings that tucked into simple leather shoes. Their hands wore dark leather, and their heads were covered with a metal soldier's helmet, a skull-like, grey gasmask clipping into it. The eyes of the helmet were pure black, giving an almost undead look to the ensemble, and a long hose led around the body connecting to their large backpacks. They all carried either glaives or bayoneted rifles. Jayce could feel the gaze of the soldiers on him, and when he probed his Focus back to them it was met with an immediate response of warning – their capabilities not far beneath his.

"Thoughts?" Jayce questioned to Astris as they walked deeper into Final Bastion, following the signs leading towards the Guild headquarters. "We could take them," Astris confirmed, her mind also on the various Null Legion but also wandering towards the Guild guards dressed in gold and jade. "We don't know how many of them there are, so let's not pick any fights," Jayce returned. "Just saying."

"Oh, Jayce, you're here?" Myra questioned nervously, as she glanced from him to his crew. She was sat behind a similarly large desk to that of Holli's, and her office held a near-identical design, only more archaic – with lots of grey stone and wood. Jayce couldn't help but look upwards to the giant sword hanging from a wooden beam over Myra's desk. It was similarly shaped to her mother's katana but twice as long, hanging from a thin golden thread, just out of reach. Myra smiled slightly, her round ears slightly flushed and peeking through her long dark hair. "I wasn't quite sure when you'd arrive - had I known, I'd have prepared something more special for you and your friends," she stated, remaining in her seat as they approached her desk.

Jayce folded his arms, his expression immediately conveying his attitude to her. "Oh," she said pointedly, "I'm guessing you're not too happy about... this?" "You used me!" Jayce stated plainly, faking an expression of rage. Myra stared blankly at him, before her brown eyes flitted to Bjorn, Astris and then Caelie. She shied away into her giant chair, cowering before him as tears filled her eyes. "I-I'm sorry, it was the only way. Please don't be angry at me," she cried, both Bjorn

and Astris immediately looking at each other before back at Jayce. "Jayce..." Bjorn said softly. "Can we speak alone?" Myra asked softly. Bjorn and Astris both nodded without thought, sensing no danger from the short, terrified woman before dragging Caelie with them out of the room.

"Myra..." Jayce said softly, questioning whether he had chosen poorly and been too harsh. The doors to her throne room slammed shut as his companions departed, the crocodile tears disappearing in an instant before being replaced by a blast of fiery fury. "How dare you come here with that sort of outrageous attitude!" she yelled, getting to her feet and leaning across her desk towards him. Jayce flinched. "Do you even know how much we've done for you? How much Holli has done for you? How much I've done for you?" she scolded.

"Hang on-" Jayce attempted, only to receive a cold and immediate glare of warning. "We warned you, plainly and clearly. It was your fault, not mine, that you failed to grasp the reality of the world stage. So don't even think of placing blame on me for your incompetence, especially when you have direct access to the Guild through your crewmate!" she lambasted. Jayce opened his mouth to speak but she glared at him and held up a finger. "What do you say?" she questioned. "Thank you?"

"You're welcome. Now we can talk for real," she stated, walking over to a cabinet and retrieving a large scroll before unravelling it across her desk. "Welcome to the Old World." She clicked her fingers and her doors opened, Bjorn, Caelie and Astris returning back to the room with a look of confusion. "Take a look," Myra commanded, her voice getting higher and softer as she gestured to the map. "Is that-?" Bjorn asked.

"Some call it the 'World of Cards'," Myra stated, gesturing to the four regions each shaped like the suits of a deck of cards. "The coincidence is quite amusing in all honesty, for a crew called 'the Rising Aces' this will only help spread your name, but given the World predates you guys I guess it's nothing special." Jayce looked at the map; the four main regions were easy to see and to read. To the East sat the Spades region of Arcastalum, the West held the region of Diamonds known as Crea, the Clubs-like North was known as Brunxchume, and the southern region of Hearts was called Diasta. In total the map seemed to be the same size as the New World, and the far bottom even had its own Frontier. "What is that?" Bjorn questioned.

"That, dear customer, is the Scourge. It's where the seas end and life ceases to exist. I wouldn't worry about that too much, it sits beyond the Sea Sovereign's

palace and she tends to not like people passing her fortress," Myra explained. Jayce and Bjorn looked at each other, their curiosity piqued. "Anything you can tell us about the four regions and the Old World in general?" Jayce asked. Myra lent forwards, pointing to Brunxchume.

"We're here, sitting at the edge of the northern regions. Historically it's a region that used to have a very domineering Navy. It's made of a mainland and three surrounding archipelagos, hence the 'Clubs' shape. You'll like it, good food, good fights." She pointed east. "Arcastalum was the continent of magic, it was full of Mages – some so powerful they could raise islands from the ocean into the skies. The magic there is a bit more chaotic at the moment, so... Anyway, Crea, to the West, is the... therian, and co, lands. Lots of non-humans, lots of money. They used to be a lot more united. But it's probably still the safest of the three routes south. It's also where the Nomads have settled." Bjorn immediately glanced towards Jayce, who simply nodded back in return.

"I'm hearing a lot of 'used to be's'," Astris pointed out, drawing a smile from Myra. "And you'll hear many more," she returned. "Our world wasn't the only to be overhauled in recent times. About three years ago the Sea Sovereign conquered the Old World – I don't quite know the full how's or why's but no one here doesn't know of Atalana Scáthach." Jayce nodded simply, he hadn't been expecting anything else. "What about Diasta?"

"That's Scáthach's homeland and where she has her castle. It's mostly ruins and ancient cities. You're going to have to go there for your meeting, but be careful – she has eyes and ears everywhere. The map isn't accurate, and you will struggle to find any that are – the islands have a habit of moving around." Bjorn frowned. "Moving around?" he questioned. Myra looked towards him, but as she opened her mouth to answer, a tremor vibrated through the floor – fading almost immediately.

"An earthquake?" Astris questioned, but the expression on Myra's face said otherwise. "Bossman, we've got trouble," came Fenn's voice through Bjorn's communicator. The doors to Myra's office opened and a gold and green guard stepped inside. "Master Guildsman, there's been an explosion within the city." "Fenn, what's going on?" Bjorn questioned, looking towards Jayce as Myra stepped up onto her desk and plucked the huge sword from the beam. "We're being hunted Bjorn."

"Go," Jayce ordered, Bjorn nodding and leaping into a portal Caelie created before she followed after him. "So it begins," Myra murmured, her body relaxing

before she returned to her seat. "What begins?" Jayce questioned, turning to her. She rolled up the map and tossed it to him. "Did you really think that others wouldn't want your seat as Pirate Lord?" she questioned. Jayce's eyes widened. "Already?"

"Jayce, we've got a problem," Arthuria stated into her communicator, wiping her sword clean as blood and viscera dripped from the walls of the streets around her. A figure leapt out from an alleyway, a huge gun tucked into his hip. Jeanne tackled her and the weapon roared, tearing up the street where she had been standing. "Where's Exarga?" the assailant demanded, striding forwards and continuing to fire his weapon.

Fenn darted beneath tables as he fled with his brothers in the burning remains of what had been a rather lovely shopping district. His fur stood on end and he dove to the left, rolling out of the way of a large beam of red energy. "What are those things?" Wam called out, leaping behind a fountain with Ohno and taking cover before Fenn scrambled over to them. The three boys peeked their heads up and over, looking at the group attacking them. There were six assailants, all human other than one gigantic dog-like monstrosity – easily the size of one of the Dragons. "The hell if I know," Fenn responded, his eyes widening as the red orb-like eye in the centre of the metal masks they all wore began to glow.

"We need to go!" Jayce stated, as a barrage of calls for help came from his scattered crew, all under assault from numerous different enemies. "Astris, head to Zeta and the others, I'll find the Paladins," he commanded, only to falter as she stepped in front of him and spread her arms to stop him. "Jayce, wait, we can't." He stared at her in disbelief. "You're the one they're after. The others will be fine, we need to protect you."

Jayce shook his head. "Jayce, you're the one who was a Pirate Lord, not me, not Bjorn, not anyone else. You heard Scáthach, anyone who kills you and brings your head can have your seat. They're after you, it's a trap. You can't rush into this and I'm not leaving you alone. Without you, this crew dies," Astris stated, staring up at him with desperation in her eyes. "Astris, that's not true. Bjorn and you--"

"It is! Neither of us could control Jeanne or Thalia. Without you we fall apart. Please, trust me on this. This a battle of kingslayer, you're their prize." "She's right," Myra inserted, drawing a look of frustration from Jayce. "Not helpful!" he stated. Astris grabbed Jayce's arm, drawing one of her pistols

and pulling him towards the door. "We have to trust in our crew. We need to get somewhere safe and get out of the city. Then we can slaughter these assholes."

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Strange Bedfellows**

Corina couldn't help but feel a little underwhelmed as the clouds fell beneath her and the skies opened up. She had longed to feel the wind underneath her countless times before, ever since she had been a young girl staring at the sparrows through her window. Yet now, as she steered the Dragonfly flyer she had bought, it felt almost boring. The controls were tough and required concentrated wrestling, the winds needed mapping, and the ludicrous costs associated with the vehicle sucked all of the fun out of the experience.

"We're almost there," Ottar stated from the seat behind her, a look of wonderment on his face as he stared out at the world around them. He was her one remaining ally, now that her power had been stripped from her body, and the more she came to accept that, the more she came to appreciate him. "Anything I need to do?" he asked, turning back to her – the childlike wonderment fading back into his usual gruff seriousness. "Just be yourself," she responded, looking away from the rear-view mirror and turning to give him a faint smile.

Corina's smile slipped from her face as she looked at the office around her: it was far more organised than she had been expecting – and organisation implied efficiency. The displays full of magical items were all warded and protected, all labelled and priced for any visitors wishing to purchase from Gryphon's personal collection. The door opened and a man strode in flanked by guards. He hardly looked at Corina; his guards all looked at Ottar. "So, Miss... Liu, was it?" Gryphon questioned, sitting down behind his desk and immediately flicking through a stack of documents. "Yes, it is," Corina answered nervously, standing up and extending a hand to shake. He ignored it and she pulled her hand back, sitting down, her eyes scanning all of the information he was accidentally showing her: mostly reports on the successes and failures of integrating communication methods between the Old and New World.

He set them down, placing both hands on his black and blue marble desk. "Why do you wish to work for the World Guild?" he questioned, staring at her intently. Corina smiled softly back at him, her anxieties disappearing as she read him. "I feel it's the right move for me, and there is nothing I have more experience in than the handling of information," she answered. "And your seat looks particularly comfortable," she said in her head.

### **Chapter 161: On the Backfoot**

Fenn took in a deep breath as he stepped out into the sunlight, emerging from the labyrinthine backstreets of Final Bastion. "Finally!" he yelled, raising both hands to the skies in celebration and startling an old woman. She scowled and hobbled away as Wam placed a heavy hand on Fenn's head, apologising to her on his behalf. "Get off!" Fenn exclaimed, fighting off his brother's large arm and escaping a follow-up grab. "Chill out, we're representing the Captain and Boss Bjorn. We need to be... what's the word?"

"Intelligent?" questioned Ohno. Both Fenn and Wam looked at him in disbelief, before grinning. "Yeah, intelligent, let's go with that," Wam stated, before rolling his eyes. "We need to be intelligent and responsible, and respectable. We're Rising Aces. The top dogs. The big... cheese, or something. Okay?" Wam questioned. "Since when were you in charge? I'm the ideas guy. But... respectable it is. We can do respectable."

"So you're Pirates?" questioned a rather pretty young woman leaning against the bar of a crowded tavern, her friends giggling away as Ohno carried two different women on his shoulders whilst Wam drank glass after glass in a competition against another three. Fenn transformed out of his fox form, putting on as charming of a smile as he could. "Fenn, of the Rising Aces," he said with a wink, extending a hand whilst clenching a fist behind his back to steady his nerves.

The Beastly Boys were still far from used to being in human form. Their forms had never been secret to each other – more than a decade of shared bedrooms, cardboard boxes, campfires and back alleys had more than acquainted them to each other, but, as Fenn saw himself reflected in the mirror behind the bar, he couldn't help but still feel uncertain about the stranger he was to himself. Fortunately, he didn't need to impress himself.

She smiled, looking at the fair-skinned, skinny, red-headed boy with messy curtains and a bit of stubble. His jaw and nose were pointy, his eyes a sharp hazel colour, and reminiscent of his fox form. "Lena," she stated, returning the smile and looking towards the barkeep. "I think you were about to buy me a drink," she stated, melting Fenn in an instant. "I think so too," he stated, ready to throw away all the money he had.

"So here we were, racing through the burning Capital, our mission clear: get our ship to safety, protect our crew and our home, when who else could appear but the Sea Sovereign herself!" Fenn portrayed, in a dramatic and greatly

exaggerated story of the Therian War. The girls around them gasped, other than the pair leaning into Wam, both of whom had long accepted it was almost all lies. Instead they listened quietly to his own stories, ones far more real and genuine as they leant into his large body, his charm and physique both obvious from a first glance.

"He doesn't look much like you, are you sure he's your brother," said Cindy, looking between the skinny redhead to the very dark-skinned, curly-haired Wam. The sides of his head were shaved, a short goatee on his chin. His eyes were dark brown and portrayed his genuine feelings as he answered. "He's my brother, without a doubt." He then looked over to Ohno, snoozing away in the corner. Ohno was heftier than both his brothers, and ironically smaller than Wam – despite being larger in therian form. He had narrow, mono-lidded brown eyes, light-brown skin, and had shaved his head to have very short and simple black hair. A prominent freckle sat in the middle of both his cheeks that would disappear whenever he smiled due to his dimples. "They both are."

"And that was when Pirate Lord Jayce Exarga appeared in a whirl of blades on fire. He called to us, ordering us to get the ship ready as he held off our enemies." Wam frowned, looking past his foolish brother to a beetle scurrying along the wall behind him. It was like no bug he'd ever seen before. It looked no different from a black scarab, but its head glowed, its face covered by a large, and central, red eye surrounded by – what looked like – metal. Wam stood up, Ohno stirring from his slumber as he moved, approaching the insect before staring into it. It looked straight at him before the orb on its head began to shine brightly. Wam leant forwards before his eyes widened and he jerked his head to the side, a tiny beam of red energy cutting his cheek. He slammed his fist into the bug and the door to the tavern burst open, a group of cloaked figures stepping inside and immediately heading in his direction. "Guys!" he called out.

"Where is Jayce Exarga?" came a robotic, metallic growl as the heat began to fade from the melted fountain the Beastly Boys were cowering behind. "You just had to keep talking, didn't you?" Wam called out, as a beam of red energy tore a hole through the remains of the stone, carving a line between Wam and Ohno. "How's this my fault? How is any of this my fault?" Fenn returned, looking around the wreckage around them. "Shh," Ohno stated, the barrage of laser beams halting and a cold silence falling across the area.

The six assailants all stopped and turned towards Bjorn as he dropped from a rooftop down into the market square. He briefly glanced away from them as

Caelie opened a portal in front of his three boys, the trio darting through without hesitation, before he settled his gaze back on the group. They were strange: alien or human - or something between – the giant hound an amalgamation of machine and meat. Yet they followed him, as he walked across the area, in unison – their stances identical. “You know me, I don’t know you. Who are you?” Bjorn questioned, gripping his two axes tightly.

“We are Engine,” they said in unity, a clear leader stepping forward and the other four spreading out to partially surround Bjorn. The giant hound remained sat behind their leader. “And why have you attacked my crewmates?” Bjorn growled. “Bring us your leader, and join us in unity,” offered the lead Engine, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a large metal orb. Bjorn looked at it and immediately grimaced as it opened up, revealing a large spike and several wriggling metal tentacles. “I’m going to have to pass,” Bjorn stated, standing up as straight as he could and putting on as stern of an expression as he could. His heart raced in his chest, his odds far from favourable – even with Caelie nearby.

“Now, I’m going to make this clear. I’m not Jayce, I will never be Jayce, but if I were – then you’d be dead already. You stand maybe a chance against me, but you stand no chance against him. So, I’m going to give you to the count of three to leave, to crawl back to wherever you came from with your lives intact. Otherwise, I will be forced to dismantle you, and any others you have nearby. This is your warning. One.”

The Engines drew weapons, pistols, swords and daggers, to accompany their masks. “Two.” Their masks began to glow. “Three.” Bjorn threw one of his axes – the blade of the heavy weapon imbedding itself in the hound’s mask. A loud fizzing and zapping began before the creature grabbed its head in howling agony, its mask detonating a moment later, Bjorn’s axe flying back in his direction and embedding itself in the stone floor between him and the group. The headless corpse crashed to the floor, the other five Engines all turning and staring in horror.

One turned back, only to see a glowing blue portal before Bjorn’s arm reached through it. Bjorn yanked the Engine partially through the portal before Caelie closed it. Discarding the corpse, he charged forwards as the four survivors turned to rally against him. But he was already upon them, an angry seven-and-a-half foot tall behemoth. He swung with both axes, ending two before he let the weapons go and grabbed the two remaining Engines by their jaws. They both unleashed their energy beams in desperation but he turned their heads, facing

them against each other – their bodies melting away before they turned off their masks. “Caelie, bring a body or two back with us for dissection. Let’s find the others.”

“Call for help,” ordered the lead attacker in front of Ordo, the foremost of a trio of identical women wielding twin, curved swords and dressed in tight-fitting black clothes. “You targeted our healer first - you know who we are, don’t you?” Ordo questioned, wiping Yuthura’s blood from his face – his mind ignoring her gasps and groans of pain and trusting Falconer to look after her. “Bring us Jayce Exarga and we’ll let you leave with your lives,” said one of the three women, their mouths obscured by scarves, leaving only their dark eyes visible. “No.”

They wasted no time for further remarks or retorts, rushing forwards in a Focus-enhanced blur. They took three different angles of attack, two running along the walls on either side of the narrow street they were in, as the leader ran headfirst at Ordo. He growled, scraping his greatclub along the street and sending shards of stone and dirt flinging in their direction. The one directly in front faltered, but the other two dove at him swinging their blades in mirrored poise.

A roar filled his mind, his blood boiling and back burning as he heard Taranis. Ordo tensed his entire body, a flash of blue lightning erupting from his body as black-blue scales spread across his skin. He felt something charge up from within, the glint of their blades blinding as they moved in slow motion. It bubbled from within, spreading from his stomach to his chest to his neck before it erupted outwards in an uncontrollable roar.

Falconer and Yuthura stared in disbelief as a shockwave erupted from Ordo, throwing the assassins back down the alleyway before the stone above the street cracked and crumbled, crashing down on the trio. Ordo backed away, turning to Yuthura – his eyes glowed an electric blue and patches of black-blue scales had spread across parts of his face and body. She looked up, staring at the two curved axe-head horns emerging from head. “Fascinating,” she said subconsciously, the pain in her stomach subsiding. “Save the fascination for later,” Ordo stated, a pair of blue and black wings spreading outwards from his back as he reached down to pick her up. “There may be more and they may have survived. Falconer, stay close and call in Wren. Let’s get to the skies.”

“Just what is that weapon?” Arthuria questioned in disbelief, as the wall in front of the corner she and Jeanne were crouched behind was torn apart from a spray of continuous bullets. “It doesn’t matter, come on,” Jeanne said, steeling herself and grabbing Arthuria’s arm before the pair of them took off along the side alley.

“Jayce, we’re on the move,” Arthuria called into her communicator – no response came. Arthuria looked back, the shadow of the large man dominating the alley before Jeanne pulled her down into another street.

After weaving from alley to alley, the streets eventually began to open up – widening into bustling rows of stalls full of countless shoppers. “We should be safe here,” Jeanne stated, letting go of Arthuria’s hand and catching her breath. Arthuria didn’t like the thought of using civilians as cover, she also didn’t like the looks she was getting from the various Null Legion around the area – their skull-like masks all angled towards her. “I think you’re right, there’s no way-”

Bullets tore apart the ground around them, Jeanne and Arthuria both shoving off of each other to avoid the barrage. Arthuria swore loudly: they were lucky – the shoppers weren’t. She blocked out the screams and panic, rolling for cover whilst looking around for their attacker. A shadow covered her and she looked up, spotting her attacker stood on a bridge above the street before she dove behind a stall.

Jeanne had similarly mirrored her, taking shelter directly under the bridge, behind a stall, to avoid the assailant. She met Arthuria’s eyes and reached for her communicator. “I’ll draw the fire, find a way up and behind – use Caliburn if you need to.” Arthuria shook her head in distinct disagreement, but Jeanne didn’t wait for permission, racing out of her stall towards the corpses littering the street.

A scarred and distorted voice drew both of their attentions – the voice automatically translating for them thanks to their communicators. “Protect the civilians!” ordered one of the Null Legion – the various soldiers around stepping forwards with their glaives and rifles to defend the people fleeing the scene. A loud bang thundered throughout the street, Jeanne coming to a sudden stop as their assailant fell from the bridge and crashed to the ground in front of her. She stared in horror at the Null Legion trooper stood on his corpse, having ridden his body down from above – their bayonet piercing his chest and a bullet hole torn straight through his body. The Null Legionnaire looked directly at Jeanne, tearing the weapon free from the corpse before reaching down and confiscating the heavy gun. “Get out of the city,” came a somewhat feminine voice through the mask. The soldier looked away, pointing to two other Null Legionnaires. “Look for other followers of the Machinist, rout them from the city, drive this battle to the seas.”

Arthuria and Jeanne didn't need to be told twice. "The Machinist?" Arthuria questioned as they ran. Jeanne ignored her, her hand on the pommel of her sword as they ran in the direction of the harbour. "We should find the others, they might need our help," Arthuria suggested, eyeing each person they passed warily. They rounded a corner and Jeanne drew and swung her sword. A familiar yelp rang out before Jeanne's sword came to a halt – blocked by another blade. "What the hell?" Astris yelled, clutching a thin cut on her left cheek.

"Astris! Jayce!" Arthuria exclaimed, looking at the familiar pair with a sigh of relief. Jeanne withdrew her sword, putting it away and backing off without a word as Astris glared at her. "Are you okay?" Jayce asked Astris. She nodded, pulling her hand away before realising the wound wasn't closing. "Of course it's silvered," Astris groaned, pressing her hand to her face and looking between the two Paladins. "And you two?" Jayce questioned. Arthuria nodded, looking around nervously. "We were saved by the Null Legion, but they're not happy. We need to get out of here," she stated. Jayce nodded in agreement, trying to take the lead – only for Astris to step in front of him. "They're after Jayce, he stays in the middle," she commanded.

They ran for the harbour, the nearest harbour – any would do, as long as they could get away from their pursuers, but each corner, each bend, seemed to bring a new foe. Jayce grunted as Arthuria once again pulled him by his collar – dragging him backwards away from danger as Jeanne and Astris charged forwards. He stumbled, flailing to regain his footing, only to feel something hard pass between his legs and his body to tumble.

His eyes went wide as he fell, his body yelling out in pain as rolled down a small set of stone stairs. A man stared at him as he rolled, his skin fair, hair long and down to his waist, tied in a thin ponytail. He held a large and thin spear, leaning onto it. "Jayce!" cried Arthuria, turning and noticing he had fallen. He hit the bottom of the stairs, carrying his tumbling momentum to roll to his feet before immediately looking around for the figure he had seen.

There was no one.

He frowned: the fall had been seconds – he was sure he had seen someone, their white grin plastered into his mind. He had felt his feet snag on something. Someone had tripped him... they must have. "Are you okay?" Arthuria questioned from the top of the stairs, wiping blood from her sword before immediately turning and racing back to join Astris and Jeanne. "Yeah..." Jayce said in a belated answer. "Yeah, I think."

As they continued their charge, the figure filled Jayce's mind – he was certain he had seen someone, or maybe something – he couldn't have just tripped on his own, he was better than that. He felt Arthuria reach for his collar once again as a large man dropped from a nearby rooftop wielding a scimitar, but this time Jayce darted forwards – past Astris and away from the Paladins – his mind furious at his own incompetence. No one could have tripped him, there was no one there and no one was stealthy enough to disappear into the corner of another person's eye – least of all Jayce Exarga's, Pirate Lord. He must have imagined it to cover up for his own accident.

Jayce pulled back a fist, not waiting for the assailant to land to the ground before he threw it in a nasty upcut to the would-be assassin's sternum. Jayce felt the bone shatter, the ribs collapsing inwards as he held the man in the air by his fist. Yet, as the body hung on his fist, an image – a projection – of the attacker emerged from behind – a spiritual visage of the Pirate, his face full of panic and stunned shock as his soul was shunted out of his body. It lay severed for only a moment, the body completely stunned from Jayce's strike, before the soul was sucked back into it and his attacker regained a terrified expression of life before crashing to the ground on his shattered chest. He didn't get up.

Jayce stared at the wrappings on his hands, the gift he had been given from the Monks – the legacy of the Order of the Spirit Monks. But Astris grabbed his hand, pulling him forwards. "I don't know what that is, but now is not the time to experiment!" she yelled, firing off a pair of shots from her pistol before charging into Jayce to shove him behind a corner as bullets peppered the ground where they had been. Jayce shook off his curiosity, taking in a sharp inhale before nodding. "Agreed."

"This way is blocked, I count six marksmen on the roofs," Arthuria warned, a little later. "I can use my shield but..." Astris shook her head, taking command and looking towards Jeanne. "You're fabled for your light magic, I need a distraction – enough for me to draw some fire. You three will climb and follow the rooftops down," Astris ordered. Jeanne hesitated, not liking the tone of control Astris was using, but begrudgingly she nodded, stowing her sword and beginning to chant. "Go!" Astris ordered, racing out from cover as a miniature sun hid her.

Jayce leapt and climbed, pulling himself up onto the ancient rooftops before reaching down along with Arthuria to help the bruised, fatigued and shorter Jeanne. "This way!" Jayce stated, taking back command and charging forwards

down to the next rooftop on the final run towards the harbour. They ran unhindered, Astris' distraction successful for the moment. A shadow covered them from above and Jayce looked up, his eyes narrowing before widening as he stared up at what looked like Ordo, flying in the air alongside Wren through the use of two wings. "Ordo, Falconer, that you? Straight down," Jayce questioned. "I see you, Cap. Bjorn and his group are east of you, Zeta and the others aren't far behind you," came Ordo's response before he dove down, gliding just in front of Jayce. "This is new," Jayce stated in bemusement. Ordo chuckled, dropping down into a run – his form fading away. "It's only temporary it seems, we'll figure it out on the ship." Jayce nodded, glancing back towards Arthuria. She shook her head before shrugging. "Nope, sorry."

"Falconer, release the ship and pick up Caelie. Get us out of here," Jayce commanded, pulling out the Stacked Hand in its bottle before throwing it up into the air. Wren dove down, Falconer snatching it out of the air before flying onwards to the harbour and depositing the ship, and Yuthura, before looping back to retrieve Caelie. Only a moment later, a blue portal appeared before them, the deck of the Stacked Hand visible beyond it. Arthuria and Jeanne leapt through, Jayce and Ordo both faltering as they looked around for any of their allies. "Come on," Ordo stated, jumping through. As Jayce turned, his hair stood on end – a feeling of eyes on his body. He looked back, scanning the city before he spotted a head of short red hair on a balcony far away. He blinked and the figure disappeared. "Come on," Ordo repeated, Jayce turning and leaping through.

"Get us moving," Bjorn ordered, as he and his group stepped through their own portals, Zeta and the others arriving a moment later before rushing to defensive positions. The Stacked Hand lurched as the Mages used their magic, the ship tearing out of the harbour before sailing cleanly away to safety. "Jayce, where to?" Bjorn asked, already near-certain of the answer as he looked towards his Captain. "Southwest - let's find some Nomads!" Jayce ordered.

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Nighttime Occurrences**

The crew of the Rising Aces remained on high alert for the rest of the day and late into the evening – there was no telling if they were being followed, or if their assailants had a means of tracking them. But eventually the adrenaline faded, replaced by a steady and firm exhaustion from the exciting day. There had been no casualties, and only minor injuries – and Astris' new scar, thanks to Jeanne's sword.

Astris found herself as one of the only Rising Aces awake as the clock neared midnight. She stood naked in her room, debating a bath in her tub or a quick shower before bed, as she checked over her body for injuries or marks. She scowled as she looked in her mirror, the healed mark on her cheek noticeable and not exactly a blemish she found aesthetic or pleasing. She hugged her waist, deeply conscious of the two large scars she had earned from the deceased Fleet Admiral – they were tender and slightly rough, and had ruined most of the fun she got from her various swimsuits. But, despite Yuthura's offer to remove them, she hadn't brought herself to tend to them – she had earned them, and they were a consistent reminder that she wasn't invulnerable.

A knock startled her and she hastily thrust on a robe to cover up before answering. Her eyes widened slightly as she opened the door, her heart speeding up and the tips of her pointed ears growing warm. "Hey," Jayce said softly, leaning into her doorway and towering over her. She looked up at him, conscious of his eyes as they flashed with a slightly nervous panic, as they glimpsed exactly what she wanted him to see, yet hid the rest just enough to tease him. "Hey," she said quietly, not sure what he was after at this hour and slightly worried that he was actually here to fulfil her nighttime fantasies.

He glanced away and she covered herself up more, a momentary flash of guilt flooding her mind as she thought to Alara, her friend and his girlfriend – if not more. "I just wanted to come and say that you were right," Jayce stated. Astris stood stunned. "Come again?" she questioned in genuine disbelief. "You were right about my priorities. I was the target and I put you guys in unnecessary danger by not recognising that."

Astris grinned smugly, folding her arms and looking up at him. "I'm not sure I heard that correctly. You might need to repeat it." He rolled his eyes and began to walk away. "I'm kidding," she stated. He stopped and looked back at her. "I'll catch you in the morning. There's a lot to go over, so get some sleep." "And what are you going to do?" she questioned, glancing over his distinct lack of nightwear and the wrappings still on his hands. "A light bit of training, then I'll sleep too." She raised an eyebrow. "Goodnight, Astris." He turned and walked away into the darkness.

Astris watched him go before she slowly shut her door, only to falter as she heard the faintest of footsteps walk past her door. She opened it, her eyes glowing red as she looked down the corridor trying to sense body heat. There was no one. She let out a sigh and turned around, grabbing the towel she had thrown onto her

bed before stepping back out and following after Jayce. He had acknowledged she had been right, and Jeanne d'Arc had followed her orders, both a rarity and deserving of something a little more special than her regular bathroom.

With a long sigh she sank into the giant hot tub in the women's spa, the bubbles melting her muscles and easing her soreness. It was the perfect temperature, and she had altered the air to be cold with a soft breeze – as if she were outdoors. Most of the others had specific fragrances they liked to use when in the bathhouse, typically vanilla or something strong. But with the place empty, Astris finally got to use her own – the smell of petrichor, the smell of rain, and, when accompanied by the sound of running water on decorative rocks, she found herself pulled back to her old home. It was a divine, if bittersweet, memory.

She opened her eyes, awakening from her slumber to find her skin boiled and wrinkled and her body feeling like jelly. She yawned, forcing herself out of the warmth and into the cold air before she pranced across the room to her towel – the room spinning and her vision fuzzy. With a groan she slipped on her slippers and staggered her way out of the baths, only to falter as she heard a splash through the curtained entranceway to the men's baths.

Cautiously she peered inside - half-expecting, half-hoping, it was Jayce - but, as her vision cleared, she saw no one. "Hello?" Astris called out quietly. Unsurprisingly, no one answered. She shook her head and retreated. It must have been her imagination.

**Chapter 162: Masters of Warfare**

"Good morning," Jeanne said casually to Astris, Marisha and Zeta, as she walked into the living quarters and helped herself to the array of foods out for breakfast. Zeta spat out her drink, Astris nearly swallowed her spoon and Marisha missed her face with her food. All three of them exchanged an immediate and confused look. Jeanne d'Arc did not say 'good morning', least of all to Astris Kai – that was impossible. "Morning Jeanne, are you feeling okay?" Marisha asked cautiously.

Jeanne turned and nodded, placing a broad smile on her face that seemed anything if natural. She then stepped forwards and pulled out a chair next to Astris, sitting down on it and beginning to eat with them. "Did you all sleep well?" she asked. The trio couldn't help but feel on guard: had Jeanne been replaced by an impostor? "Yeah..." Zeta returned hesitantly. "Jeanne, what's our copycat protocol?"

Jeanne raised an eyebrow, her green eyes widening slightly as she saw the confusion across the three of them. "Oh, sorry, am I acting strange? Well, I'm meant to say something deliberately off, yet knowable that it's a deliberate mistake. Um, I guess I would have originally said this ship is the Stacked Card, but that could be a genuine mistake someone could make since we have both the Stacked Hand and the Last Card... Hmm," Jeanne said calmly and chattily. She turned to Astris. "You're the Captain's right hand," she said, with a wink. "Who are you?" Astris questioned.

Jeanne laughed, causing Astris to flinch, before her eyes narrowed and she noticed the scar on Astris' cheek. "Oh, I'm sorry for that," she said, pointing to Astris' cheek. "It was an accident, but I could have really hurt you. I will be more careful from now on." Astris stared at her blankly and Jeanne's face fell, a genuine look of concern and worry spreading across it. "It's... okay. Don't worry about it." Jeanne's face lit up once again and she nodded, quickly finishing her food before going to wash up her plate.

"What is going on?" Astris asked quietly, leaning forwards to whisper to Zeta and Marisha. "Do you think she and Arthuria...?" Zeta questioned, making a gesture with her hands. Both Marisha and Astris looked back at Jeanne as she hummed to herself. "Maybe," Marisha said. A loud shatter startled the three of them. "Damn," Jeanne said gently, looking down at the plate she had accidentally snapped in two. She turned and showed off the two halves. "Sorry. I'll take it to Yuthura to be repaired," she said, Astris spotting the faintest patch of grey in her hair before it faded immediately back to black. "Accidents happen," Marisha said

quickly, standing up and approaching before taking the two halves from Jeanne. "Right," Jeanne returned somewhat absently, before walking to the door and leaving without a further word. A few moments of silence passed before Zeta spoke up. "What the-"

The sun was hot, the air dry and the ocean around them vast, empty and beautifully blue. An otherwise perfect day for relaxation, had the events of the previous day not occurred. Instead, late in the morning, the Rising Aces found themselves spread across the living quarters – all looking towards Jayce as he handed out a small stack of clipped papers to each individual before taking a position in front of them all.

Astris and Bjorn both looked at each other, neither of them knew what was going on or what Jayce had planned for them – this was all him. Bjorn shrugged to her before glancing down and reading the cover of the papers he had been given: 'To Seize the Seas', it read. Bjorn flicked through it: the twenty-or-so pages were filled with numerous drawings of the Stacked Hand and potential enemies. There were combat teams and manoeuvres hand-designed by Jayce, clearly over a long span of time.

"Yesterday showed us that our time here is not going to be easy. I hate it, but we're vulnerable until the - what people are now calling - Revelry occurs. Until we secure my seat as Pirate Lord and our position at that status, we will be hunted, potentially by some enemies who may outnumber us, or may even be stronger than us. Already we've met foes unlike any we've seen before: the Engines, the Followers of the Machinist, who knows what else is to come. As such I've formulated our battle plans. Created a... system for handling our enemies and, above all, protecting the Stacked Hand," Jayce declared.

"I need you all to familiarise yourselves with this handbook, and soon, because it's being implemented from this point forwards. The contents themselves aren't that important, but understanding it is. I've created three main battle itineraries in preparation for different types of warfare: for the seas, the skies, and the waters beneath. Regardless of which situation is occurring, the same strategies will be implemented."

Jayce looked towards Falconer and pointed at him. "In every battle, every situation, you are in the air with Wren and Zhurong. The skies are yours to command and control - you are our eyes." Jayce looked to Arthuria. "You know your Dragon better than I, but from what I've seen so far and what the drills

yesterday showed us, Zhurong is best in the air. He will have no orders other than to destroy our foes and to protect Wren."

"In the same vein, Red – you're always underwater with Taranis. You two will protect our hull, but Taranis will be a ship breaker. He will alternate between offence and defence, depending on the threat, and in some cases you will do the same. Otherwise, your role is to defend and scout." Red nodded in acknowledgment. "With the skies and waters guarded, we can move on to our main strategy."

"We will simultaneously attack and defend," Jayce stated. "Please go to page three." Jayce began to draw on the board behind him, outlining a circle he marked as an enemy, another he called 'home' and a cluster of dots he called 'Gambit'. "Our most important stance in any conflict is the preservation of the ship. If we sink, that's it. Game over. So we will always have a home team led by Bjorn."

The various crew looked towards Bjorn, who simply sat back in his chair and nodded. "Bjorn will be in command at the Helm. The guns will be manned by Wam, Fenn and Ohno – it will be on Bjorn's decision if the forward cannon is to be used, but given our limited shots it should be a last resort, or guaranteed victory, in any conflict. Gaea will prioritise keeping the ship together and dealing with ships that get too close. Tempest and Soteria will physically defend the ship with their shields. RK will stay on the ship for defence, but should a ship get too close, or an opportunity arise, then he can be used to harass the enemies. Zeta and Jeanne will act as morale boosters with their magic. Jeanne's secondary role is to deal with intruders, along with Marisha. Mai Lu – you're air defence, take down anything that flies too close. Morgana and Yuthura are the medics, with Morgana having a supplementary role of supply runner to the away team. You are all in charge of giving the away team something to come home to. If Bjorn is incapacitated then Marisha is in command, with Yuthura as backup."

"In contrast, we will have Astris as our Gambit lead and main medic." There was little surprise. "Ordo is secondary, Arthuria is tertiary." There was some surprise there. "Along for the ride is Thalia and Caelie. Caelie will fill the mirrored role of Morgana, acting as supply runner and escape artist. Caelie is not to enter combat, using her teleportation and Magic to control the battlefield." Caelie shook her head in protest. "The away Team is reliant on you to get out if things get too tight. You need to stay safe." She grumbled but halted her protests.

"Your role is simple. Kill and destroy, in whatever way you can. Sink our enemies. If the opportunity to end the battle shows itself then Zhurong and Taranis, and potentially Red, will join the away team temporarily. We will attack and defend simultaneously, giving our enemies no room to breathe. These two teams are the basis of all other strategies and are the core foundations of our playbook," Jayce concluded. Some chatter emerged: points of acknowledgement and intrigue about the two teams, before a singular voice cut through it all. "What about you?" Arthuria questioned, finding next to nothing in the playbook about him. Jayce grinned. "My job is to hunt and decapitate their leadership, to force them to play by our rules, because I know there is not a crew in a world that can compete with you guys."

There were numerous questions but, after a short half-hour, the meeting concluded, the strategies clear and their plans in place. "Why am I on the home team?" Jeanne asked bluntly, drawing Jayce's attention away from Bjorn and Astris. "Because that's where you fit best. You've always led, always been a figure that people look towards – a light in the darkness. And I want you to be that for us. I've taken most of our strongest fighters and sent them away from the ship – you're here to make up that difference. But I need you in armour. Go get some." Jeanne opened her mouth, trying to think how best to respond. But instead she simply nodded. "Okay."

Jeanne tapped her foot impatiently as she waited in Tempest's forge, the djinn slowly laying out the pieces for her. Arthuria had forced her to let the djinn measure her and it was clear that he had been working on the armour long before then. "See how it fits," he commanded, his voice dull and irritating. With a sigh, Jeanne obliged, setting her sword aside and dressing in the armour. To her horror, it was perfect. The best she had ever worn in terms of flexibility and comfort, and the djinn had even matched the colours of gold and black to her sword.

A gold headband had been provided to keep her hair out of her eyes, as well as a black helmet. The helmet itself was a singular piece with no moving parts other than to tighten it to her head. It had two narrow and sharp eyeholes that gave her plenty of vision, and several flat, vertical cuts in the mouth for air, otherwise it was a simple rounded helmet covered in golden etchings. The rest of her armour matched the aesthetic, with large plated pauldrons over her shoulders, protruding pointed metal to protect her elbows, as well two large faulds that extended out to protect her waist. A few layers of black fabric filled out the armour, adding some decoration.

Tempest then floated forwards, attaching a cloak around her shoulders, a fur hood sitting around her neck. He floated back and nodded. "Why the cloak?" she asked. "It was Arthuria's request, she said something about aesthetic appeal. Otherwise, it will help to conceal your armour when away from the ship. I'm nearing completion on my experiments with storage and summoning magic. I will make upgrades once those are ready." Jeanne nodded and picked up her sword before heading to the door. She stopped in the doorway before turning and looking at Tempest. "Thank you. I can feel the care you've put into this. I'm sorry for being so rude to you." The djinn sparked slightly before nodding in acknowledgement. "It was of no concern to me, but I appreciate the sentiment." "Understood... I need a battle standard, make one for me," she ordered, before turning and walking away.

Jayce let out a long sigh of relief as yet another sunset came into view. It had been nearly a week since their visit to Final Bastion, and the rapid departure caused by it. The seas had been clear and, for the most part, safe - other than a rogue storm, a kraken that Red and Taranis dealt with, and some hopefully profitable sunken wreckage. They had yet to come across any islands worth stopping off at, the ocean mostly empty and deep, except the odd regions of shallower waters.

"Another peaceful day," Jayce said sedately, gripping the railing next to the wheel tightly before pulling to stretch out his back. "You sound disappointed," Bjorn commented, with a soft chuckle. He angled the Stacked Hand's wheel so the ship was facing the setting sun as he looked for a patch of shallower water to weigh anchor. "No, of course not. It just... it feels like things are finally settling, you know?" Jayce stated, looking out towards his crew as they emerged from below, with various cocktails in hands, to enjoy the sunset. He couldn't help but smile as he spotted Jeanne amongst the group.

"Are you starting to regret leaving Wicke and Damian behind?" Bjorn returned, spotting an area to stop. Jayce faltered, his mind uncertain and his expression showing just that. "I..." He looked away from his crew and leant backwards into the railing, his focus entirely on Bjorn. "I don't know. Damian most definitely not - he'd have gotten himself killed almost immediately, probably from Zhurong. But Wicke..."

"I get it," Bjorn stated, locking the steering and raising the sails with the glyphs on the ship's wheel. "But we know she's doing well from her letters, and if Tempest gets that teleportation circle up and running then maybe... we could get her back," he suggested. Jayce thought for a moment, stroking the short beard on

his face, before shaking his head. “No, we can’t let our guard down – not this early. And she has a job to do, just as we do...”

Jayce let out a large yawn as he tucked himself into his bed, the seas pitch black around the Stacked Hand – other than the faint silvery illumination of the moon above. The day had been long and, although little had happened, he felt mentally exhausted. His crew had been happy, and more than social with each other – the only exception being Astris and the Paladins. They were still tense with one another, but things had eased. It was improving, finally. He smiled as he shut his eyes.

His eyes opened hours later and the traces of any smile that had been on his face disappeared. He felt cold, his hairs on end as he sat up in his bed – his heart pounding away in his chest and his breathing shallow and panicked. He felt afraid. Something had triggered his senses. Jayce leapt out of bed. “Sola, Luna – to me!” he commanded, his crimson mimics shooting out an ooze-like vine before wrapping themselves around his forearms – settling into red tattoos. Jayce threw on a pair of shorts and stepped out into cool night air.

An orchestra of heavy cannons thundered in a ring around the Stacked Hand – the orange flames of their artillery lighting up the darkness as Jayce yelled out across his communicator. The mainmast shattered, the large beam toppling with a crash down to the main deck, and with it the Stacked Hand’s flag snapped from its pole and dropping to the floor. Jayce’s room was torn asunder behind him as he leapt upwards, glancing around the darkness to see his enemies. There were four ships, each positioned to perfectly circle and surround the Stacked Hand.

A loud hiss alerted Jayce back to the main deck through the thunder – Soteria slithering up the stairs to the main deck before spreading her wings wide and leaping into the air. A bubble surrounded the ship, creating a momentary disruption to the symphony of death, allowing the vanguard of the Rising Aces: Astris, Thalia and Ordo to surge out to face the enemy. A very angry Gaea emerged next, as the trio each picked a target and stormed off the Stacked Hand towards their prey in their various pyjamas. “My home!” she cried, dropping to her knees and burying her hands into the main deck.

The Stacked Hand roared, the ship pulsating as it formed large, twisted tendrils of wood that writhed in the darkness before lashing out at the hidden enemy. A loud crunch and a shockwave through the deck indicated one had found a mark. Jayce scanned the area, trying to peer through the darkness to sense who was

leading this assault. He found nothing, his attention switching as a pair of loud roars indicated the awakening of Zhurong and Taranis.

Jeanne staggered out of her room in her new armour as the Stacked Hand shook and trembled. It was an assault. A surprise attack. It had to be! The door next to hers slammed open, Arthuria surging out in her own armour – her eyes clearly panicked, even in the darkness. “What’s going on?” Zeta called out, the three Beastly Boys emerging from their own shared room a second later. “We’re under attack!” Jeanne stated. “Boys, take the cannons and defend this ship as you’ve been trained to. Zeta, stay close – there may be intruders aboard. We all have our orders, the Captain has planned for this. Move!” Jeanne ordered, leading the charge through the darkness.

They emerged out onto the main deck, the world around them invisible other than a shimmering barrier and domino of circling cannon fire. “I can’t see anything!” yelled Zeta, staggering out into the night but holding close to Jeanne. “Arthuria, go!” Jeanne ordered, sensing Arthuria still stood by her side – unwilling to leave her. “But-” Arthuria attempted. Jeanne shoved her, stepping forwards as she spotted the now-familiar shadows of Bjorn, Marisha and Yuthura fighting on the main deck.

A plume of orange dragonfire illuminated the deck, revealing a small group of foes that had boarded, all searching for the source of the shield protecting the ship. They looked human, dressed in simple dark clothes and wielding curved sabres. A potential continuation of the trio that Ordo had encountered, Jeanne surmised. She peered through the shadow, an unnatural veil further hindering the crew, yet also their attackers.

Her foot touched something and she looked down: a pole lay on the floor by her feet, attached to a flag – their flag, her flag, the flag of the Rising Aces. Jeanne snatched it from the floor. “Follow me!” she yelled, raising the flag high with one arm and beginning to chant as she moved closer towards Bjorn and Marisha by the forward cannon. “Rally together! Fight! Survive!” she screamed, lifting the standard high and sweeping the flag through the darkness.

Jayne squinted as he was blinded by the light of a midday sun emerging in the centre of his ship. Jeanne shone through the darkness, blinding their attackers as a familiar song of Zeta’s dominated the cacophony alongside Jeanne’s glowing flag. She bore the new flag of the Rising Aces, a simplistic skull and crossed swords on a gold ace of spades across a black background – Wicke’s final design in a long process of iterations. She swung the golden flag high in the air with

pride and purpose, rallying the surprised defenders of the Stacked Hand and taking the darkness away from their enemies. Soteria growled as she sat by Jayce's side, the Dragon exhausted from maintaining such a large shield. "Well done," Jayce stated, patting the Dragon's head as the final round of defenders emerged from below. "My turn," Jayce stated, as Tempest floated upwards to form his own shield.

With the entire horizon illuminated by Jeanne d'Arc, Jayce set his Gaze on the remaining ships. The fleet was actually five vessels: a fifth remaining in safety a sizeable distance away. "Boys, your target is to the north-east. Wipe it out!" Jayce ordered, diving forwards before darting across the surrounding ocean water with both swords drawn towards the command ship, painting as big of a target on himself as possible as he channelled his Focus through everything. He couldn't help but laugh as his target showed themselves, similarly, darting from their ship to meet him.

She clashed with him in a thunderous impact that send waves rolling around them, her scimitars spinning in stunningly fast and precise strikes that aimed to slice through his defence. Instead of trying to match her speed, Jayce pressed into her attacks – her body composed of inhuman darkness and purple cloth: a Shadow unafraid to face him in her true form. He forced his body into her reach, giving her little room to perform her feints and slashes. Her curved blades cut his skin, but it forced her to peddle backwards, putting her on the defensive as opposed to him.

Jayce dropped Sola, the mimic melting onto him - throwing a heavy fist that broke through her defence, narrowly avoiding her head and extending behind her. Luna mirrored her scimitar – the crescent blade hooking around her waist before Sola did the same and hooked opposingly to her neck. The Shadow Captain's flat orange eyes widened in surprise – her only option to transform into something smaller or face trisection.

The illuminated darkness around them was cut through with a black knife, a colossal boom tearing through sea and sky as her ship was hit by the Stacked Hand's forward cannon, disappearing into fragments and red mist. "No," she whispered – her crew gone in an instant and her will to fight fading with it. She froze in his death grip – unwilling to continue and accepting her end. Jayce read her face, uncertain what to do as he held her life in his hands. Would she have hesitated if the roles were reversed?

Jayce retracted Sola and Luna, pulling away from her as she dropped to her knees on the surface of the ocean. "I'm sorry. You gave me no choice," he told her earnestly, turning and beginning the walk back to the Stacked Hand. She screamed as she ran at him in blind rage, diving at him with her scimitars in a desperate lunge. In a singular pivot, Jayce pressed his palms together, swinging with Sola and Luna as they combined into a golden greatsword. Her body hit the water, her head landing with a splash a moment later.

### **Seize the Seas Tales: The Desperation of Emotion**

Jeanne sat alone in her room – her new battle standard propped against her door to prevent anyone from entering. It displayed the flag of her crew, and was mounted simply to an ornate gold and black pike that matched her armour and sword. It was long enough to be clearly visible, light enough to wield in one hand, and pointy enough to act as a secondary weapon. It was - as expected of Tempest - perfect.

So just why did her mind hate it so much. She concealed a scream as she gripped the hair on either side of her head, a storm of whispers swirling in her brain. "They don't care about you. You're a prisoner - contained so they don't have to dirty their hands and kill you," echoed the voices in her mind, her sword resting across her lap. "Shut up! Shut up!" Jeanne whispered, her body in physical agony yet unable to move as she sat trapped on her own bed. "You're pathetic! Dirty and unclean."

"No! No!" she whimpered, shaking her head before forcing her blade off her lap and onto her bed. Almost immediately she felt cold, as if everything joyous had been stripped from her body, her senses numbed and dull. She lunged for the sword, hugging the sheath until feeling returned. "What do I do?" she asked. "You know what you need to do. Purge the filth. Remove the rot." Jeanne stood up, holding her blade at her side and staggering to the door. But as she moved her standard, she faltered.

She set the flag aside, before placing her sword next to it and rushing out of her room. Immediately her body screamed to take the blade back, but she didn't need to go far. Jeanne knocked on the door next to hers, a brilliantly golden and warm figure opening the door to her. "Jeanne?" Arthuria asked softly, only to yelp as Jeanne thrust herself upon her – placing her lips to hers before kicking the door closed behind them, warmth and emotion returning to her body.

### **Chapter 163: Friendly Faces in a Sea of Enemies**

Jayce let out long sigh as he looked up into the dark, stormy skies – the rain falling hard and washing the blood off his face. He shut his eyes and shook his head before looking down at his latest victim, their corpse slowly sinking beneath the waves and leaving a dark red cloud behind. “It’s over,” he stated into his communicator, before turning and beginning his long walk back to the Stacked Hand. “Clean up.”

With cold frustration and deep fatigue, he climbed back on board – his crew looking towards him with respect, fear, and concern. “How’s the ship?” Jayce asked Tempest, as the djinn lowered himself to the deck, deactivating his shield. There was not an immediate answer – the countless holes across the deck, the planks of nailed wood holding the masts upright, and the fact that Jayce’s quarters was mostly exposed to the elements gave more than enough of an answer. “I require time to make proper repairs,” Tempest repeated, as he had done so every single day before. Jayce simply nodded, the freezing rain falling hard on his shoulders and running off his face. “We’ll try again tomorrow.” Tempest nodded in plain acknowledgment before floating off to assess the latest wounds in the Stacked Hand’s body.

“Are you hurt?” Bjorn asked, as Jayce approached the ship’s wheel. Jayce looked down, his body frozen and exhausted – he could no longer tell without looking. He reached to his left arm, a large gaping hole in his bicep. “Yeah, I’ll get it looked at in a minute,” he answered coldly. Bjorn looked at him with an expression of worry, but Jayce shrugged it off and entered the remains of his room. He commanded Sola to form into a copy of Vexx’s curved knife before slashing a mark across the back of his door for the ship they had just sunk. Jayce shook his head as he tried not to scream, and when he opened his eyes and took a calmer breath of fresh air he couldn’t even tell which mark he had just made amongst the dozens across his door.

It had been a little over three weeks since the attacks had begun. Each day had had at least one, with the most being ten ships in a single day. It was unending, fight after fight, battle after battle, massacre after massacre – and Jayce was pissed off. He slammed his door shut, stepping back out into the rain through the hole in his quarters and looking towards Bjorn. “We’ll try another island, find the nearest one you can,” Jayce ordered. Bjorn nodded in acknowledgment. “Okay, there’s one not far from here that should have what we need.”

The thundering of cannons gave an immediate answer to the question they had all been wondering on approach. "Shit, hold on!" Bjorn yelled across the communicators, the Stacked Hand lurching as it moved to avoid the volley. "We didn't even make the harbour this time!" Bjorn stated. Jayce slammed his fist into the nearest wall below deck, swearing viciously. "Them?" Jayce asked back through his communicator, squeezing his mostly healed bicep and climbing up to the main deck. "Yeah," came Bjorn's solemn response, as the island they were hoping for refuge in shot at them. "Just like the others."

It was a problem, a big one, but an understandable one. The Stacked Hand was recognisable, even without their flag and colours, and the hunt for Jayce's head had brought more than a miserable sum of collateral damage in Final Bastion – no one wanted it to be repeated, so the answer was to turn them away. Marisha came running to him. "Our beacon signal has been sold, my source in the Guild has verified it. We're being tracked, we need to ditch it and get another one," she stated. Jayce nodded and she ran off. It explained why so many ships had found them, even when they were laying low on their journey to the Diamond Continent of Crea, but Jayce suspected there was more to it. It was not an easy thing to buy the Guild signal of another person, and some of the fools who had come at them had been nobodies: suicidal morons looking for glory who had only found a quick route to the bottom of the ocean. Marisha rushed out of the living quarters and threw their signal emitter into the sea. The rest of the day was peaceful.

"We're going to need to stop soon," Bjorn warned, a day later. "Not just for repairs, but for food and other supplies." Jayce nodded: it had been inevitable and the peace so far indicated they may have eased their problem for the moment. "How close are we to Crea?" Jayce questioned, folding his arms and thinking. "We're in it, we're close to a piece of the main continent," Bjorn answered. "Okay, we'll try a village on the continent, and if that doesn't work then we'll disembark and walk to one inland." A loud dull roar rumbled in the skies above, Jayce immediately letting out a long sigh. "So much for a peaceful day," he muttered, spotting a small squadron of flying machines diving towards them, along with a large ship flying in the air through the use of a giant balloon.

As Zhurong grabbed onto the final flyer, tearing apart its engine and sending it spiralling down to its demise, Jayce scanned the deck for injuries – ignoring his own. There were numerous, of varying degrees of seriousness. He grit his teeth as Zeta screamed on the deck, Yuthura surgically removing bullets from her body before taking the wounds for herself. Before Yuthura collapsed, she gave Jayce

one steely expression, a look of clear fatigue. "We're on our last legs," he realised - this next stop had to work.

The following day brought a wind of warmth and patches of bright sun amongst a sea of clouds. If it hadn't been for the horrendous past weeks, Jayce would have happily taken the day to just lounge and read on the main deck – instead he paced back and forth in near prayer as they approached the village of Sonorous Reaches. The map showed the village was small, it was not the most northern amongst Crea, and its position was perfectly out of the way that Falconer believed any pursuers would doubt it was their destination. And as it came into view, its docks empty other than a few fishing boats, Jayce couldn't help but feel relieved.

"What's the plan?" Astris asked, as Jayce joined her and Bjorn by the cracked wheel. "Pray they let us stay and then keep a low profile," Jayce answered simply, glancing up to Jeanne as she stood in the rickety crow's nest scanning the horizon for other ships. She looked down and shook her head, bringing an immediately sigh of relief to him. "I think we're okay," she yelled down, bringing relief and ease – even to Astris.

The village of Sonorous Reaches was simplistic and plain. There were two dozen standard wooden houses with thatched roofs, all built neatly and orderly as they led from the docks towards a huge oak tree, with a circular building underneath – a village hall of sorts. A forest sat in the distance, leading further inland to a portion of the shattered continent of Crea. A windmill sat to the edge, sitting over a river leading down towards the ocean. It seemed peaceful and quiet - exactly what Jayce had been hoping for. "Bring us in."

As Bjorn brought the ship to a stop, Jayce walked over to the edge of the ship before climbing down onto the pier below. Their arrival had not gone unnoticed, Jayce had spotted locals heading to greet them, but as he dropped down and turned to greet the villagers he couldn't help but falter. "Welcome," stated an elderly ogre, towering over Jayce and leaning on a huge club-like cane constructed from a large tree branch. "Uh, hi," Jayce said somewhat nervously, noticing numerous goblins, shadows, and other ogres – but no humans. "What brings you to Sonorous Reaches?" questioned the ogre, in a deep and booming voice. He had orange and cream-coloured fur, his horns short and stubby. His eyes were a bright, flame-like orange and he wore an outfit that looked almost mayoral in design, with soft colours and embedded jewellery. "We're the Rising Aces, have you heard of us?" Jayce probed.

The ogre shook his head. "No, should I have?" he questioned. Jayce hesitated, his mind debating whether to lie or be honest. He let out a sigh. "I guess not. We were hoping to stay here for a little while to repair our ship and trade supplies. We're... currently being hunted at the moment and, well, things have become quite dire," Jayce answered honestly. The ogre nodded, a few whispers emerging from his community, but he steadied them with a simple gesture with his palm. "We welcome all. You are safe here. The name is Talos, and I am something of a leader amongst this small community," Talos stated, bringing an immediate sigh of relief out of Jayce and his observing crew. "In exchange for our hospitality, I simply request that you bring peace with you and leave your fighting for the seas. Our local storekeeper, Rolo, should have supplies for sale and will be more than willing to trade and barter for any commodities you may have," Talos stated, extending a hand out to Jayce. Jayce shook it. "You have my thanks, this is... better than anything we've had in some time." Talos nodded and turned, gesturing for Jayce to walk with him. "You're safe now, sailor. Welcome to Crea."

After a lengthy discussion about the history of the Rising Aces and the causes for their journey into the Old World, Jayce found himself stood in front of the Mayoral Hall. A pair of carved wooden statues guarded the entrance – two bears with an unusual design. They both has six horns, extending outwards in a star-like manner. Talos observed Jayce closely as he watched and looked at the bears. Both bears had marks on their chests, a golden pattern that shimmered in Jayce's vision – his communicator trying to translate the symbol. "Our guardian deity," Talos clarified, as Jayce opened his mouth to ask. "She has no name, but has prowled the woods to the south of here since before I was born. A living 'Disaster' to those who approach her, but a protector in times of strife." Jayce simply nodded, stepping inside the Mayoral Hall.

Before long, he found himself sitting and sipping tea with Talos and some of the local residents. The inside of the large circular building was covered in traditional painted murals, each depicting notable years and celebratory or cautionary events. Jayce found himself staring at one in particular: a diamond-like shape that had fractured into eight pieces – it looked new. "I couldn't help but admire the artistry you have decorating this place," Jayce stated, changing the conversation away from himself. "I must admit, I'm curious to learn about your history – that painting in particular – what does it represent?"

Immediately Jayce was met with a serious of darkened expressions that made him question whether he had asked a question he shouldn't have. "It represents the shattering of Crea," answered Mysta, an elderly shadow that acted as a local

doctor to the village. Jayce narrowed his gaze. "You have spoken of the Sea Sovereign in great detail, but we know her by another name: 'Apocalypse'." "Apocalypse?" Jayce questioned.

"It was not long ago that our world was wreathed in war, with each great nation vying for dominion over what you call the Old World. I myself have known peace for only a few years - all of us have - the wars extended far before we were all born," stated Talos, Jayce nodding in acknowledgment as he glanced across each wizened face. "She brought an end to the conflict, a final and definitive answer to the question of how peace could ever occur. The answer was through indomitable bloodshed."

Jayce glanced back to the painting. "Crea is a nation of allying unity, a celebration of diversity that other nations shun - that humans, such as yourself, shun." Jayce nodded, appreciative of the alien feeling of being in the minority and the respect that he had been given despite it. "We are a nation of multiple peoples, and it was Apocalypses' will to eradicate our leaders. Them and all others in control of this world. She seized command through slaughter, murder in abundance and without respect to those who were guilty or innocent. It ended war, and unified the Old World - for better or for worse. I doubt, however, that I will live to see the effects of her impact, or maybe even yours," Talos stated. Jayce shook his head before finishing his drink. "I doubt that very much - I'm sure you many more years in you. But, thank you for sharing."

After the conversations had dried up and come to a natural close, Jayce made his way back to the Stacked Hand where a large portion of his crew had remained - mostly out of nervousness as they awaited an attack. "Two days before we're fully repaired, another hour before we're fully restocked," Bjorn immediately summarised, as Jayce approached. "Okay, that's good to hear. Talos and the others are willing to let us stay as long as we need to, but should another ship be spotted I said we'll hide the Stacked Hand in its container. How is everyone?" Jayce asked.

"Nervous, but otherwise okay," Bjorn responded. He glanced towards the Beastly Boys as they paused hauling cargo, giving the trio of therians a silent prompt to get back to work. "And Jeanne?" Jayce questioned, well aware of her feelings on non-humans. "Surprisingly settled. Arthuria may have actually fixed her," Bjorn said with a chuckle, glancing up to the two Paladins as they sat in the crow's nest together. "Good, encourage the others to disembark. We're safe here."

As his crew separated away from the Stacked Hand, now eager to explore and relax, Jayce caught Mai Lu as she prepared to wander off with Morgana and Zeta. "Can I borrow you for a moment?" Jayce questioned. Her pink and red eyes widened slightly, an immediate look of nervous surprise passing through her face. "You're in trouble," chided Zeta and Morgana, much to Mai Lu's immediate anger. "Uh, yeah, of course," she stated, glaring warningly at the other two before facing Jayce. "What's can I do for you?"

"Well?" Jayce questioned, the pair of them stood in front of the two statues outside of the Mayoral Hall. "I don't know, but I do see your point," Mai Lu stated, her arms folded as she looked the statues up and down. "A bear that has lived at least seventy years, horns, a rune embedded in its chest..." Jayce proposed. Mai Lu tilted her head, a red and toothy mouth emerging on her neck. "It would be unlikely for a Demon to bind with an animal," Baal clarified bluntly. "The first issue would be the contract, a beast would struggle to forge one." "Then what if a Demon didn't form a contract, what happens then?" Jayce asked.

"We form contracts to resist the pull back to the Abyss. Without them, it could lead to madness or worse," Baal answered. Jayce and Mai Lu looked at each other in singular thought. "So it's possible?" Jayce questioned. Baal remained silent before eventually answering. "A Demon without a host could be possible, but the physical and magical drain would be extraordinary. It would break them," the Demon answered. "And which Demon would this most likely be then?" Jayce asked further, his mind sparking with eagerness. "A horned beast like that, it could only be Paimon."

As dark clouds began to fill the skies, the air electric and a storm brewing, Jayce and his crew found themselves gathered with the locals for a colossal feast of a variety of meats and vegetables, roasted over a large fire. Jayce and Mai Lu had decided to keep their theory quiet for the moment – hunting the guardian deity of the village they were recovering in was far from the expectations of a good guest – but, as the food filled their stomachs, both of their minds wandered until they were disturbed by a toast. "To new friends, and good foods and booze from home and afar!" toasted Talos, the Rising Aces and the villagers raising their cups to the skies.

It was only as the clouds opened that the Rising Aces stumbled back to their ship, the food, fire and booze a welcome, positive experience amongst a multitude of negative ones. "I've got the nightshift," Astris stated, rubbing her eyes as she stood in front of Jayce holding an umbrella. "Are you sure?" he questioned, well

aware of how much she had drunk and the heavy torrent around them rendering the entire village almost invisible. "Yeah, get some sleep," she reassured, smiling at him before turning and walking off. Jayce watched her go before shutting his door. He turned and smiled, grateful to have his room back and even more grateful to have had such luck with Sonorous Reaches. He stripped off and got into his bed, pulling his duvet close and enjoying the warmth as the rain drowned out the world around him.

The darkness of the night smothered the ship, the lightning illuminating the shadows every-so-often, before roaring through the hammering of the rain. Arthuria's room lay in silence, other than her soft snoring, protected against the noise of the outside world. Jeanne looked down at her, Arthuria's body sprawled across her bed and her chin covered in a soft veil of drool. She sighed softly, leaning down and kissing Arthuria's forehead, before she stood up and walked across the carpet to the door. She closed it quietly behind her, her mind silent.

Jeanne reached for her sword, pulling it clear of its sheath.

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Following a Legacy**

Alara took in a deep breath of fresh air, the sea breeze cool despite the heat of the Frontier Archipelago, before beaming with joy as she lowered her gaze onto her home. It had been too long, far too long, since she'd been home and - although she knew there wasn't going to be anyone waiting for her - she couldn't help but look forward to it. That, and the Frontier, that for so long had been out of her reach with her parents behind it. "Captain Vanathur, you have four hours then we move on," came Commodore Kai's voice across her communicator.

"Thank you, Cyr," Alara returned on their private channel, watching the rest of the fleet carry on, other than Commodore Kai's flagship and the three other crews she had within her portion of the Vanguard Fleet. Alara changed her mechanical communicator to address her crew. "Attention Wolves, we will be docking at Last Drop for a departure of fourteen-hundred hours. Get what you need, this is our last stop before we cross."

Alara had long known that Jayce had left Wicke and Damian behind, but it only actually sunk into her when she found the pair of them making their way towards her through the crowd of locals who come to greet her. "Vanathur!" Wicke stated, her face still burnt but slowly on the mend. "Alara!" Damian practically mirrored. Alara held up her hands trying to calm the noise, to little avail. A loud bang from a pistol silenced the mob.

Alara immediately turned and glared at Riley, who just shrugged before stowing her backup weapon. "Hello all, it's good to be home. I'm not staying long, so I'm sorry I don't have much time for chat. Please help my crew resupply, and otherwise clear the area so we can work. Thank you," Alara stated rationally, her people disappointed but understanding. Eventually only Wicke and Damian remained. "You came," Damian said with some surprise. Alara frowned and then shook her head. "Are you stupid, of course--"

"Yes he is," Wicke interrupted. "Vanathur, have you heard from... you know who." She looked nervous, glancing around to see if anyone was listening. "Jayce?" Alara questioned. Wicke nodded. "Not since about a week or two ago. The Guild's still figuring things out so it might take some time before I get a response, but... why? Has something happened?" Alara pressed, looking at her squad before dismissing them with a simple gesture – only Riley remaining. "Come with us, we should talk at ours," Wicke stated, beginning to walk with Damian in tow. "Ours?" Alara questioned.

She was not surprised to find that Wicke had laid claim to the Exarga home; she was surprised to find her staying in the Jayce's bedroom. "Does Jayce know about this?" questioned Alara, trying not to think about the numerous memories that Jayce's room held for her and the innate discomfort she had to Wicke laying claim to the bed. "I offered my room," Damian mumbled, prompting Wicke to roll her eyes. Alara held up her palms and shook her head. "Anyway, what's this about Jayce?" Alara questioned, as Wicke retrieved several letters from within a small box under the bed. "I've stopped getting responses," Wicke stated, holding the letters up before passing them to Alara.

She scanned through them - the letters containing casual messages from Jayce, Bjorn, Marisha and some of the other Rising Aces to Wicke – almost all of them expressing the same thing: they were being hunted, and they missed her. "Is this all of them?" Alara questioned. Wicke nodded, glancing from Alara to Damian, as he sat cross-legged on Jayce's bed, before looking towards Riley as she leant out of the window. "It was inevitable, they're a high profile crew," Riley stated, turning and sitting on the lip of the window, kicking her metal legs back and forth.

Alara nodded in agreement, forcing a calm expression to ease Wicke's worry. "Jayce will be fine, your crew are more than capable of looking after themselves," she stated. Wicke opened her mouth to disagree, but she found no rationale points to counter. "They don't have me," she said quietly, as her only point to

make. "For a reason, Wicke. You need to heal, and do what your sisters asked," Alara stated. Wicke frowned. "How do you think I knew you were here? They will be fine, trust me – I'll try and find them. Otherwise, just be patient, that's all you can do. Okay?" Alara questioned. Wicke paused before eventually nodding. "Good." Alara looked towards Riley. "Onto our next stop then."

"Captain Vanathur, it's good to see you," Holli stated from her throne-like desk, sitting up slightly but not standing. "Holli," Alara greeted somewhat coldly, drawing an immediate sigh of disappointment from her old friend. "You too?" "What were you thinking, allying with a person like that?" Alara questioned. "It was the only way, Alara. It was going to happen anyway. Jayce has already come and said exactly the same thing you will, so how about we skip to what you're really after: your parents."

Alara flinched, drawing a soft smile from Holli and a quick glance of concern from Riley. "From what I know, they're still alive. Leading a... resistance of sorts against the Sea Sovereign. However, information is loose at best. Search out the Reapers, it's the name they've taken for themselves. Just be careful - they may be your parents but a lot of time has passed," Holli warned. Alara pondered for a moment before simply nodding. "Thank you," she stated, turning and marching towards the door. Riley gave a simple nod before following after her Captain. The second the doors closed, Holli slouched back into her throne before letting out a long sigh. "I'm sorry, Alara."

After a brief stop to the graveyard to pay her respects to Sara, it wasn't long later that Alara's ship, the Courier, was back on the seas, leading the way towards the Frontier. She stared up at the colossal trees, her mind full of awe and wonderment, her heart steeled and nerves tempered. She would find her parents, she just needed a trail to follow. With a roar, her ship engaged its new engines, pushing forwards up the tilted ocean towards the entrance of the Frontier. "Onwards, into the unknown!" Alara declared, to the cheers of her crew.

### **Chapter 164: A Repeated Mistake**

The darkness of a storm in the night smothered the Stacked Hand as it lay docked at the edge of Sonorous Reaches. Rain pounded upon the deck, creating a loud and constant thrum that echoed throughout the ship, deafening its slumbering crew. Across the island and the surrounding seas, the darkness was total – broken up only by the bright blue lightning above and the periodic flash of gold from the nearby village.

A loud banging startled Jayce from his sleep, a flash of lightning and a crash of thunder illuminating and waking him in an instant. With a groan, he forced himself out of his warm bed onto the cold wooden floor, pausing as he stepped onto his soft rug and questioning whether he had imagined the knock. A more heavy slam echoed from his door, three loud knocks followed by a boom of thunder. “Coming,” Jayce stated, throwing on a pair of trousers and answering the door.

Arthuria stood before him in her black night gown, her hair tied up and dripping with water, a pair of boots loose on her feet and her swords tied to a belt that sat on her hips. Her wide eyes looked panicked in the darkness of the night. “Arthuria? What time is it? Why are you here?” he asked, hanging in his doorway before stepping aside to let her out of the rain. She remained stood in the torrential downpour. “I can’t find Jeanne anywhere,” Arthuria said with a tremble.

The fatigue in Jayce shattered instantly and he grabbed his fist wrappings from his bedside table before commanding Sola and Luna to bind to him. “How long has she been missing?” Jayce asked, shoving a pair of boots on his feet and grabbing a coat. “Uh, I don’t know. An hour, maybe,” Arthuria said, her voice wobbly. “Was there anything bothering her? Did she say anything?” Jayce pressed, stepping past Arthuria and walking down to the main deck: the lights were on inside the living quarters. “I don’t think so. She had a headache earlier, the same one as the last couple of days, but Yuthura said it was nothing to worry about – that she was fine.”

Jayce pushed open the door, finding Astris sat at the table with a large spoon and a small tub of coffee ice cream, labelled as ‘Caelie’s’. She froze, staring at the pair with her mouth full before slowly lowering her spoon down to the table. “Have you seen Jeanne?” Jayce asked. Astris silently shook her head, slowly taking the lid of the tub and covering the half-eaten container. “Where were you?” Arthuria asked. “I checked here and you weren’t here a moment ago.”

Astris swallowed, her hair wet and tied up in a towel. "I went for a swim," Astris said with soft defensiveness, standing up and taking the ice cream to the freezer. "What have you done with Jeanne?" Arthuria questioned, her voice panicked and shaky as she drew her sword. "Woah," Jayce stated, placing his hand on her pommel as Astris drew her pistol. "I haven't seen Jeanne. Obviously, I haven't done anything with your girlfriend. Have you checked the toilets, or the baths?"

Arthuria nodded, taking a sharp breath and stowing her blade – Astris lowered her pistol. "Yes, I have – I'm sorry. I-I don't know what's come over me. I feel like I've been so quick to anger recently," Arthuria said weakly, holding her palm to her forehead. Jayce and Astris glanced towards each other, both of their eyes widening. Astris gave the tiniest shake of her head in disbelief, before both of them rushed to the door and stepped outside, looking onwards towards the village – an orange inferno burning through the rain. "What's wrong?" Arthuria questioned, following both of them outside before she too saw the fire. "No..."

They sprinted off the ship, racing across the pier towards Sonorous Reaches, fear filling their minds as they imagined the worst. Astris lead the way, sliding to a stop next to the small lighthouse at the edge of the dock. The door was banging in the wind, the inside completely dark. A flash of lightning illuminated the horrors within, Astris turning on her heels and looking at Jayce with immediate panic. "She's gone rogue," Astris yelled through the rain. "What do we do?" "Check for survivors, split up!" Jayce ordered, the three of them rushing off in different directions.

Doors had been kicked down, locks had been cut open, corpses filled the houses – the stench of blood heavy in every home. Jayce ran from house to house in disbelief, in horror, in disgust that he had let this happen. That he had not seen this coming, that he'd been tricked by Jeanne d'Arc, or that something else entirely had happened without him noticing. He slid to a stop on the main road, looking down at a pair of severed legs, a large streak of blood through the mud leading to the top half of an ogre that had tried to crawl away before she had been stabbed from behind.

A queasy Arthuria emerged from an alley as Astris ran over to them. Both of them shook their heads, looking around at the devastation. "Should we wake the others?" Astris questioned, her eyes mournful and looking to Jayce with an expression of self-loathing. He shook his head. "They're dead, we should let the others sleep – there's nothing they can do to undo this. We have to find Jeanne," Jayce stated, a golden light emerging from the Mayoral Hall. Astris sprinted

forwards: the first to react. Jayce followed but Arthuria's foot slipped in the mud, her ankle rolling and sharp agony coursing through her leg. "Go!" she yelled as Jayce turned. He nodded, rushing onwards as she pushed herself to her feet and half-ran, half-limped after him.

Astris got there first, apparating ahead and pushing open the heavy wooden doors before stepping inside. A yell of anguish drew her attention to Talos as he was locked in battle, and surrounded by corpses. "Why?" he roared, swinging his cane down towards Jeanne – dressed head-to-toe in her dark armour, her standard in one hand, her sword in the other. "Jeanne, stop!" Astris yelled ineffectually, as Jeanne stepped into the heavy swing and thrust her spear upwards. The point pierced Talos' chin, emerging from the top of his head. His legs crumpled, his body falling aside as she pulled the blood-covered flagpole free of his corpse.

A low light filled the large chamber, occasionally heightened by a flash of lightning. "Jeanne! Put the weapons down, now!" Astris commanded, unleashing a blast of Panic into her words and firing a shot. Jeanne staggered before the bullet hit her helmet, knocking it off her head. "That was your only warning!" Astris warned, as Jayce and Arthuria rushed in behind. Both of them faltered, staring in shock at the scene in front of them.

Jeanne's hair was completely silver, the opposite of her usual jet black. Her face was cold and stone-like, emotionless as she glared at the three of them. Her jade green eyes had also changed, turning a luminescent gold that mirrored Arthuria's. Her gold and black armour was covered in blood and rain, the merciless design chilling to look at as it stood opposed to them. But to all of their horror, Jeanne smiled.

"You landed one hit, you will not another – fiend!" Jeanne d'Arc declared, levying her sword towards Astris. "The zealot's gone mad!" Astris stated, drawing her second pistol and pointing them both at Jeanne. "Jayce?" Arthuria questioned. "Take her down, don't kill her!" Jayce commanded, rushing forwards as Astris fired her pistols – aiming for Jeanne's legs and arms. Arthuria grimaced through the pain, charging with Jayce and drawing Caliburn.

Jeanne turned her sword sideways, using the flat edge to block Astris' shots as she slammed her battle standard down into the body of Talos, the flag standing upright. Immediately, Jayce felt his body become sluggishly slow, a dark fog on the air that hindered his body, mind and spirit. Jeanne swung at him, and he blocked with both blades – the strike heavy, despite her small stature. She

stepped into him, angling his body to create a physical barrier between him and Astris, before kicking his chest and swinging at Arthuria with an unfamiliar mercilessness.

Jayce pressed forwards, striking with both blades as fast as he could, along with Arthuria who hesitated far more than him. Between blow after blow, Jeanne met his and her strikes, whilst simultaneously chanting and dodging and blocking Astris' crippling shots. Jayce stepped back, turning his attention to her battle standard and swinging at it. A blue rune lit up, protecting the weapon and giving Jeanne a chance to strike him as she channelled her magic into her sword in a lethal strike.

Arthuria flew into Jeanne using her wings, the pair slamming into each other – her strike narrowly missing Jayce. “Dammit Tempest!” Jayce yelled, the djinn’s magic protecting the aura of hatred Jeanne had created. Jeanne rolled backwards, chanting before extending her palm forwards and unleashing a blast of golden light at Arthuria. Arthuria mirrored her, her eyes widening as she recognised a dark mirror to her own abilities in Jeanne – a pair of black wings across her back and a golden halo over her head. “We’ve got a problem!” Arthuria yelled, the two extremely powerful spells cancelling each other out.

Astris apparated as close to Jeanne as she could, placing her pistols flat to Jeanne’s back. She fired, the bullets rattling against her enchanted plate armour. Jeanne immediately twisted, releasing one hand from her sword and attempting to grab Astris’ throat. A gleeful smile sat on her face as she grabbed Astris, who immediately apparated away in a cloud of red mist. Jeanne turned in the air, throwing her sword and guiding it with her hand as she weaved between Arthuria – who had been forced to switch to her other blade as time ran out – and Jayce who lunged at her.

The blade swung at Astris as she reappeared, but Arthuria dove forwards and narrowly deflected it with the tip of her sword. “Thanks,” Astris said, reloading. Arthuria didn’t respond, her attention focused on staying alive and not killing Jeanne. “Astris, she’s after you!” Jayce yelled from across the hall. Astris immediately nodded. “Oi, zealot bitch! Thanks for finally giving me a reason to get rid of you once and for all,” Astris yelled, unleashing a volley of bullets from her pistols. Jeanne didn’t respond, finishing her chant and illuminating the room in a flash of light as bright as a midday sun.

Astris screamed as her skin burned and she went blind, but a grunt returned her vision and removed the source of pain. Jayce stared at Jeanne’s face from point-

blank, his fist embedded in the armour covering her stomach. Her mouth was open, her eyes wide from the Focus-enhanced gut-punch as the air was knocked out of her, but Jayce wasn't looking at that. He stared at the astral projection forced out of her – Jeanne's face in complete fear and terror, her hands across her mouth and her eyes peering through the gaps in her fingers. She wasn't in control.

"She possessed!" Jayce yelled, Jeanne's soul pulling back into her body faster than anyone else he'd seen. A bullet nicked Jeanne's cheek and she surged past Jayce before he could react. Arthuria raced to intercept her before she got to Astris, but to her distinct surprise – Jeanne pivoted in the air, Arthuria falling straight into her feint as she changed target from Astris to her. The blade lunged for Arthuria's exposed stomach, her nightgown torn and cut open from the multiple near misses. Arthuria tried to move, her rolled ankle giving out and causing her leg to twist and drop.

But in a splatter of red mist, Astris apparated in front of her shoving Arthuria back and twisting – not enough to dodge the strike, but enough to make it not-lethal to anyone but her. The silvered blade burned in Astris's waist and she grabbed onto Jeanne's armour, aiming to bite her. Instead, Jeanne cleaved her blade out of Astris whilst pulling backwards, twisting to try to stab her lethally. Jayce dropped his swords, diving forwards and grabbing Jeanne's sword by its handle.

She snarled and he wrenched it free, throwing it aside. Immediate panic filled Jeanne's face, her eyes going wide as her wings disappeared and she dropped to the floor with Astris. Astris screamed as Jeanne dug her fingers into the open wound, forcing her to apparate away. Jeanne then scrambled towards her sword in desperation, moving past her battle standard to get to it – a viable weapon in itself. "It's the sword!" Jayce realised.

Astris apparated next to Arthuria, healing her injured ankle, but as she pulled away Arthuria grabbed her. "Why did you do that?" Arthuria questioned in disbelief. "Shut up and fight, Ace!" Astris yelled, pulling back and hugging her side whilst fishing inside her bottomless bag for an antimagic item. She pulled a bronze orb free, activating it before throwing it. "Now!" Astris yelled. Arthuria dove forwards and struck a heavy blow down onto Jeanne – now unhindered by her battle standard – staggering her as their swords collided, before Arthuria dropped her sword to grab the handle of Jeanne's blade, yanking it away from her. The blade cut Arthuria's face as it flew, clattering to the floor. "No!" Jeanne

cried, as Jayce combined Sola and Luna into a copy of Ordo's greatclub – slamming the heavy weapon onto her sword and shattering it into a hundred different pieces. Jeanne reached out towards the broken weapon, tears flooding her face before she fell to her knees and screamed in anguish.

Astris slumped, tucking into a ball on the floor and hugging her open side. Arthuria stood frozen, uncertain what to do as Jeanne sobbed in front of her and Astris lay hurt. She turned and ran, rushing to Astris' side and rummaging in her bottomless bag, before pulling out a diamond from within and beginning to cast a spell to heal her as Jayce deactivated the antimagic orb. He stood alone in the room full of bodies, his body and mind numb as he looked down at Jeanne, at Talos, before finally he glanced towards Astris and met her pained expression. She shook her head before grimacing in pain and looking away. "Damn..." he said softly, his heart torn in two as he realised it had happened again: they'd brought destruction to another peaceful village.

Once Astris was healed, Arthuria stood up and walked over to Jeanne, kneeling next to her and attempting to hug her – only to receive a scream and a shove from her before Jeanne returned to her anguished cries. Arthuria just lay on the floor unable to sit up from the exhaustion of the fight and the blatant rejection she had just received. Jayce glanced across them both before he helped Astris up and they stepped to the side.

"You can't blame yourself for this Jayce, it's not your fault," Astris said immediately, recognising his expression. He shook his head but she grabbed his face, forcing him to look at her. "It's not your fault, you couldn't have known this would happen. It's... it's just like last time, and trust me – that wasn't your fault then, and it isn't this time." Jeanne's cries weakened into soft whimpers before she fell silent. The pair of them looked away from her, back to each other. "I'm so angry Astris..." Jayce said in barely a whisper. She nodded, feeling the same as she felt the weight of the slaughtered village upon her shoulders – of anyone, she should have seen this coming. "I know... I know... I will handle this, I will take responsibility for her." Jayce locked eyes with Astris, trying to read her feelings. "Are you sure?" he asked softly, seeing the mirrored pain in her expression. Astris nodded. "No one can understand what she's going through more than me. I'll handle it."

Astris turned and walked towards Jeanne with a powerful and forceful stride that made Arthuria stand up and move to intercept. "Arthuria!" Jayce stated forcefully, causing her to falter. She looked towards Jayce and he shook his head.

“Go back to the ship, wake Marisha and Yuthura up and tell them everything that’s happened. No one else, just them – tell them we’ve got this handled but to be prepared for Bjorn in the morning,” he ordered. “Then try and sleep.” Arthuria looked back towards Jeanne as Astris knelt in front of her, speaking quietly to her. Tears dripped from Jeanne’s chin and, with a tiny movement, Arthuria saw a faint nod. Arthuria forced herself away, stepping out into the storm and running back to the ship as her tears disappeared into the rain.

With a pained sigh, Jayce began to dig. The rain made it almost pointless, but it wasn’t about an efficient burial. He dug because he hurt, and he needed to feel it as the cold rain hammered his body and the rough wood in his hands fought against him with every heave. As he dug, every-so-often Astris and Jeanne would bring a body, laying it out nearby before going back for another. The storm had faded, but the rain continued, only stopping at the pink-orange glow of dawn as it emerged on the horizon.

“Bjorn! Bjorn!” yelled Marisha, as he stormed through the lower deck of the Stacked Hand with his axes in his hands. He ignored her, his face showing pure fury as he emerged onto the main deck before leaping down to the pier below. “Bjorn, stop!” Marisha called after him, before reaching up to her communicator to warn Jayce. But instead of Jayce, Bjorn found Astris stood before him at the top of the stairs leading to the island. “Move!” he growled.

Astris shook her head, her face weary and broken. He looked her up and down, her body and clothes covered in wet mud and multi-coloured blood. “It was the sword. It wasn’t her,” Astris stated calmly. Bjorn shook his head, stamping his foot. “She’s lying, it was an excuse – she’s wanted to kill us from the start!” he roared. “Bjorn...” Astris said quietly. He shook his head and tried to step past her, but she spread her arms. “Move!”

“No! Bjorn, what are you going to do? They’re dead - gone, murdered!” she cried. “Then she deserves to die with them!” he yelled, his face twisted in pain, his eyes level with Astris’ as she stood several steps above him. Her face fell. “Then kill me for what I’ve done...” she said quietly, with a pained and gentle smile as tears brimmed in her eyes. “It’s not... It’s not the same-” he whispered in pain. Astris bared her fangs. “Isn’t it! How? How is what I did anything different from her? She was possessed by a cursed sword, one she’s had since she was a child! It warped her life and we gave it back to her! Power to an addict! I was hungry! If anything, I’m more guilty than she is!” Astris cried. Bjorn shook his head, his axes loose in his hanging hands as he took a step back. “It’s not the same...” Astris

stared down at him with her crimson eyes. She shook her head and he turned away, returning back to the ship.

Jayce let out a sigh as Tempest used his magic to seal the mass-grave before placing a memorial stone upon it, bearing the names of the villagers and the village, that now was empty. "Captain, is this going to occur again? If so, I could prepare the next memorial stone in advance," Tempest said morbidly. Jayce grit his teeth. "No, it's not going to happen again," Jayce growled. "Search the village for anything of use, and then burn this place down and plant seeds so that nature can grow from the ashes," Jayce told the djinn. Tempest nodded and floated away back to the ship, leaving just Jayce, Astris and Jeanne behind.

Jeanne clung to Astris like a small child, unable to think for herself, unable to leave her side. "Go and get some rest. Stay in your room until a decision has been made about this whole mess," Jayce commanded. Jeanne looked towards Astris for reassurance - who simply nodded to her - before she began a slow and pained walk back to the ship. Astris let out a long sigh, the pair of them stood in silence. "I'll go with her," she eventually said, slowly walking after Jeanne. Alone with the grave, Jayce looked at the obsidian marker – the hilt of Jeanne's broken sword had been sealed inside it, just above the names. Jayce shook his head, kneeling in the mud.

"I'm sorry. I'm so so sorry," Jayce said to Talos, as he stood with the ogre in the Underworld. Talos looked at him blankly, uncertain as to what to say to Jayce – to the one who had brought his end. He remained in silence for an unknown number of minutes, maybe even an hour or two, before he eventually spoke. "I want to hate you, to hate your crew, for what has happened. But I can't. The world is not a fair place, and sometimes good actions lead to disaster. Maybe the next ship would have been pillagers and we'd have all died anyway, or a plague, or a disaster out of mortal control. Maybe..."

"But I cannot blame a child cursed by powers too strong for her. I can only imagine the pain she will live with for the rest of her life and that is enough. You do not have my forgiveness, but you do not have my hatred. It is just a shame that it ended this way, I liked your people, and you. A soldier will never forget those he could not save. So do not forget us, Jayce Exarga – learn from your losses as I have and live to save others. I will relay your words to the others who have gone on ahead. May we meet again... in a life much kinder," Talos finalised, turning and beginning the long walk up the steps of the black pyramid towards

his next life, or oblivion. Jayce opened his eyes, finding Caelie leaning into his body. She looked at him as he stirred and he gave her a weak smile.

"Come on. Let's go hunt a Demon."

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Into an Old World**

"You're telling me now - now that we've crossed and it's too late to go back - that we could have all emerged from that with our own Dragons. Dragons!" Riley stated in horrified disbelief, as Alara set her sights on Final Bastion. Alara simply nodded and Riley almost fainted. "You're killing me, Alara," she whimpered. "Oh, get a hold of yourself," Alara returned. "We don't have any room to store any and apparently you need permission from the locals. It wasn't possible, but maybe on the way back we can try." Riley's eyes lit up.

With a heavy boot, the door to Myra's office opened and Alara and Cyrenna strode in with their armed escort. Myra simply stood up in her seat, stepping onto her desk so she was an arm's width away from her giant curved sword. "Alara, what can I do you for?" Myra questioned, her own personal guard ready to engage the Marines. "Always a pleasure, Myra. We're after maps, good ones at that, and information on the Reapers," Alara stated, reaching into her bottomless bag to pull out a heavy bribe. She approached Myra and placed it on the desk, opening it for her to see. Myra grinned, stepping back and dropping back into her seat. "Well, who would I be to say no to you? Welcome, my Republic friends, let's get down to business."

### **Chapter 165: Hunters**

“See, it’s just as I said, Commodore – money is all that matters to the Guild, no matter who they are,” Alara stated, her bottomless bag now containing several new maps and her mind full of an abundance of information on the Old World – and her parents. Cyrenna chuckled, nodding in simple agreement. “Well done, Captain. But that’s coming out of your ship’s budget – not my fleet’s.” Alara let out a huff and Cyrenna tapped her fist into Alara’s shoulder with just enough force to hurt a little.

“Get us some distance from Final Bastion, then I want all Commanders and Captains on my ship in an hour’s time,” Cyrenna ordered across the fleet’s communicators. “Vanathur, get those maps copied as soon as possible. I want one for each Commodore – myself included – keep the originals,” came a second command straight to Alara. “Yes, Ma’am,” she responded immediately. She had given the order herself already, the second she’d stepped back on board and, like usual, Cyrenna was of the same mind. It had been a consistent sense of relief that Alara had been paired with her, Beowulf and Kask – and their fifth fleetmate, Captain Lilith Sellen, was no slouch either.

Alara nodded to herself, the central region of Brunxchume made the most sense for the fleet to head to. If secured, it could provide a valuable position to hold – with a central position on the global scale, an easy straight route to the New World, and a historically powerful naval region that likely would hold sympathisers. These were all the reasons Alara was ready to lay out to the rest of the Vanguard fleet, but what mattered the most to her was that the Reapers had a hideout somewhere there. Her parents were there, they had to be.

Alara stepped out into the bright sun, the fresh, salty wind pushing through her hair and dampening her face with a soft spray. “Captain,” greeted Commander Volker. Alara turned and looked towards the somewhat short man. He was shorter than the majority of her shipmates, but his stature was completely unrepresentative of his command or skill. She looked down at him as he stood at attention, his walrus moustache thick and grey. His hair was black and neat, with large streaks of grey muddled within underneath his black peaked cap. His skin was a light brown colour, his eyes only slightly darker. “At ease, as always,” Alara said casually. “You don’t need to worry about it with me.”

He tutted. “A tight ship leads to an effective crew, but very well, Captain.” She smiled, Volker was a no-nonsense man – the exact type she wanted running the Courier in her absence. By merging a Navy and a Marine crew, Fleet Admiral

Exarga had been hoping to create a unity between the two groups, whilst also providing a greater stability that meant the Marines could do away missions without leaving their ship undefended or unmanned. Alara liked it, but it had forced her to be more selective with which Marines had come along.

As such, under the advice of the Republic Advisor Xarga, she had finally given permission for Riley to have her own Special Operations team and for Wulf to create his Pack. "Keep us close to the others, but delegate – I want you at the briefing later with any analysis you can provide," Alara commanded. Volker nodded in simple acknowledgement and she stepped past him, heading down below deck.

It had taken some getting used to, to no longer having her original Wolfpack, now that most of her squad were dead or retired – it was just her, Wulf, Riley, Brett, Witchford, and Ashton Braze. Their tree was stored in her room, still holding the squads tags in its branches, kept safely tucked away but ready to be moved if Alara was deployed. Alara did her best not to think about the fallen; the war had been rough and there had been too many faces she had gotten familiar with that she'd never see again.

"Captain," greeting Wulf, as she stepped into his den – the other twelve therians checking over their personalised equipment. They were all wolves, something that Wulf himself had requested. There had been countless volunteers for his squad, many choices that Alara would have picked over the ones that Wulf took, but he had thought that the imagery, and the idea, of a pack of wolves on her ship, would help add morale and a fear factor to her identity. Alara had naturally shifted the best therians she could find into other squads throughout her ship, or to her closest allies – mainly in Cyrenna's fleet.

Boot and Channing both nodded to her, the other wolves still gawking at her with a level of awe that she wasn't fond of, or used to yet – a consequence of being known as one of the four 'Jailbreakers', as well as a leading figure in the war. Alara no longer cared for titles or medals, she had too many of both that felt unearned and undeserved, but she could appreciate the respect she now commanded. "Commander, you'll be joining me at the strategy briefing later." "Understood."

Alara departed, heading to her next destination nearby: the Sniper's Nest. She knocked first, a lesson well-learned after nearly being shot in the head and having to reprimand Riley for her lax command. She pressed the door open, scanning the group as they stood and sat in strategic positions as to not look out of place

or like they had been misbehaving. Instead, they all looked guilty of something - Riley in particular. "Cap'," she greeted, nodding to Alara from a top bunk. Alara looked at Riley with suspicion, eventually glancing from her to Artemis - Riley's second-in-command. Artemis wore a simple tank-top, her Marine jacket set aside. Both of her arms were heavily tattooed up and onto her shoulders. Her left arm was covered in thorns and roses, the right wreathed in fire. The tattoos were intricate and immensely detailed, but Alara couldn't help but pay attention to her stained hands and forearms.

"What have I intruded upon, Artemis?" Alara questioned, spotting Riley threaten her second-in-command with a finger across her throat from the corner of her eye. "Nothing worth punishing us for, Captain," Artemis said earnestly. "Hmm," Alara uttered, looking towards Riley. "You're off duty, but don't be stupid - I need you at briefing later." Riley raised an eyebrow before nodding. "Sure, why though? Do you really need all four Commanders?" she questioned. "Yes, I do," Alara answered plainly, turning around and leaving.

Witchford, as per usual, was in the secondary of his two most common locations: the training hall. He stood tall, a giant of a man, his tanned back bare and rippling with defined muscle. His short white hair had been freshly cropped, glistening with sweat as he boxed a heavy dummy. A large anchor had been tattooed across his back along with 'Wolf of the Republic'. Alara still wasn't sure what to think of it - he was far from the only member to have had the words inked, and she was all the more grateful that at least his didn't have her name as part of it, unlike some of the others. Most had iconography of wolves, a natural choice for the Wolfpack, but his meant something different to him.

"Witchford," Alara called out, stepping into the training hall and drawing the immediate attention of all inside. He threw a heavy right hook, punching a hole in the training dummy and knocking it aside in a spray of sand, before turning and standing up straight. Alara was not short by any means, but the recent months had made her feel tiny next to him. It didn't seem humanly possible for the already tall Witchford to have gotten taller, but the considerable bulk he had gained in the fallout of the Therian War made him look monstrous. "Captain," he greeted simply.

Of Alara's four Commanders, Witchford was her shadow - her right fist - the one who she could trust like no other to get a job done. She glanced across the training hall to each station. He dominated no area, but he was just below the top in everything: sitting just beneath Riley and Artemis in rifling, below Alara in

close combat, beneath Wulf in mobility. She couldn't help but smile when he was nearby, his presence alone bringing calm to her and their crew. "Finish up, and prepare for briefing," Alara ordered. He nodded back, walking to the side and retrieving a broom to sweep up the sand he had spilled.

Alara didn't know why she felt nervous as she stepped onto the Gloryhunter, Commodore Kai's ship – it was far from her first visit. In fact, as she walked across the main deck, glancing at each familiar face, it dawned on her just how many crew members she recognised and had come to know by name. Riley let out a loud yawn, drawing a look of frustration out of Alara. "Remind me to start giving you more things to do, since clearly it's not enough," Alara stated, approaching the war room. "Please and thank you," Riley returned with a sarcastic grin.

The others were inside, waiting for them, giving Alara and her group immediate looks of respect and acknowledgment, whilst also adding looks of wariness and frustration towards Riley and Wulf. Other than Commodore Kai, all three other Captains had only brought a pair of Commanders compared to Alara's quartet. Alara knew neither of the Kai's would ever claim there was any sense of favouritism towards Alara, but Kask and Sellen wore it on their faces.

"Vanathur, I was just about to claim that you were late," stated Commodore Kai, leaning over a giant circular table with maps placed upon it. "Then it sounds like I'm right on time, Commodore. Here are your maps," Alara stated, her Commanders handing them out to the other Captains and Cyrenna's own new Commanders – Alcador and Merci. "Thank you," Cyrenna said simply, meeting Alara's eyes and nodding to her.

"So," Cyrenna then said, turning the group's attention to the table. "We're splitting up from the others. They all have their own objectives, leaving us with ours: Brunxchume," she stated, pointing with a long stick to the 'clubs' continent in the centre of the Old World map. "For the sake of the mission, I will only inform you of the region of one other Commodore – we're still unfamiliar with the Sea Sovereign and her Betrayers so I don't want information leaking. This extends to me too, we pulled names from a hat, so don't try and get anything from me – I don't know. Osiris is following the trail of the Rising Aces west."

"So where does that leave us?" Kask asked, trying to read Alara's face. "Exactly where you'd think," Cyrenna stated. "We're to track down the Vanathurs." All other eyes turned towards Alara. She cleared her throat and they looked back towards Commodore Kai. "A hat... sure," Kask muttered unsubtly.

“Get over it, and suck it up. Be grateful we get the fun job. We know very little about their location. We know they have been operating as part of a group called the Reapers, and we know the Reapers had a base within Brunxchume. We’re to pick up the trail, wherever it leads. Understood?” Cyrenna questioned. “Aye Commodore,” said the rest, all looking between Alara as she stared at the table and the table itself. “Vanathur?” Alara looked towards Cyrenna. “We will bring them home.” Alara forced a nervous smile before nodding.

Jayce wiped the mud and grime from his face using a cold, wet cloth before he met his own gaze in his mirror. It had been a long morning, an even longer night, but now was not the time for rest – he wouldn’t have been able to even if he had wanted to. He dried his face, before taking in a sharp inhale and heading to the door of his bedroom. He grabbed his leather coat and Sola and Luna latched onto him as he pulled down the handle. It was time to hunt a Demon.

“We can’t know for certain that this bear is a Demon, but if it is then our main objective is to communicate with it,” Jayce stated, looking across his small group as they walked along the pier towards the burning village of Sonorous Reaches. The sun had come out from a cold and grey morning, and a cool breeze was helping to carry the smoke of the ruins away from the Stacked Hand. Only a few hours had passed since Jayce, Astris and Jeanne had buried the village and the guilt was still heavily felt by all.

Wren’s shadow briefly covered the group and Jayce pointed ahead in the direction of the woods to the southwest. Falconer flew on, leaving Jayce with the other four: Caelie, Mai Lu, Morgana and Thalia. “And if this... Paimon doesn’t want to talk?” Morgana questioned, floating alongside the group on her broom. “Then I will make her kneel,” stated Baal through Mai Lu. Jayce glanced towards her, spotting the familiar spiky mouth formed on her neck. Baal had stuck to the deal Jayce had struck with him, Mai Lu was in full control, but that didn’t mean the Demon’s emotions didn’t carry through her. Jayce glanced down: Mai Lu’s left fist was clenched, her nails digging into her skin. The Demon King was afraid.

In a gust of wind, Falconer dropped off of Wren and landed next to the group as she flew onwards and away. “This way,” he stated, gesturing deeper into the woods. The forest was large and expansive, with huge, spiky trees and moss-covered ground. The air itself was damp and wet, most likely a result of the night’s storm. “You saw Paimon?” questioned Belial through Caelie, his voice hesitant and ever-so-slightly nervous. “I saw the horned bear, but if you require

more proof..." Falconer stated, gesturing to the trees around them. They all bore deep gashes and claw marks.

Jayce took a nervous gulp, faltering as Falconer did. Paimon was nowhere in sight, but Jayce felt eyes upon him. They had come to an opening within the forest. The distance between the trees had spread apart, and the ground was covered in mounds of moss. But everything bore Paimon's claw marks – each placed in spread-out and chaotic positions: trees, rocks, the ground. "Jayce, I might have made a mistake," Falconer said softly, his eyes sensing something the others couldn't.

Jayce felt his heart accelerate. "Mai Lu, remind me, what is Paimon's powers?" Jayce questioned, as he too realised what Falconer had – the entire group frozen in place. "Paimon possesses great wisdom and foresight... and the gift of touching the past and future," Mai Lu answered cautiously. Jayce nodded, flicking out Sola and Luna into a pair of swords. "Baal, speak to your friend," Jayce ordered softly.

Caelie glanced around, confused as to what was going on. She stepped forwards, walking over a claw mark on the ground. She immediately screamed in pain as a heavy paw raked her back, tossing her aside. "Caelie!" Jayce cried, weaving between the claw marks to her side. She grit her teeth as the wound closed, her eyes wide in confused pain. "The scratches are attacks from the past. Paimon can change when they occur, but not the trajectory," Falconer warned to the group. "The air is thick with enchantment."

Caelie's face went blank, and the white mask of Belial formed over her. "We will be fine, Captain," stated the Demon, standing up. Jayce nodded, cautiously stepped back and watching the floor for claw marks. "Paimon!" called out Baal, similarly, taking control of his host. "It is I, your King! Come to me!" he ordered. A loud roar rumbled the forest, creating a cacophony of panic as birds took to the air in all directions. "There!" called out Thalia, pointing to a shimmer as a giant brown bear materialised out of nothing, a sizeable distance away.

Paimon was gigantic: a tank of an animal and far larger than any grizzly bear had a right to be. She had a crown of six large golden horns, pointed and twisted like the horn of a narwhal. The fur on her chest was golden, with a black outline that blended into her lighter brown body. Her eyes were a flame-like orange, mixed with a deep obsidian black. She roared once more before she let out a deep reverberating growl that echoed across the trees. Both Belial and Baal took

defensive stances. "What did she say?" Morgana questioned, floating a little higher off the ground on her broom. "I do not know," Baal said quietly.

Jayce heard the ground shift behind him, a claw mark fading on a tree as Paimon took its place and charged the group from a far closer distance. She roared, the ground thundering beneath her heavy paws as she charged towards Baal. "Paimon, I command you to kneel before your king!" ordered Baal, raking Mai Lu's nails along her arm before throwing large shards of black-red crystal at the Demon. The giant bear weaved between the thrown spears of crystal before swiping through and shattering a large shard that Baal dropped between them. Baal backed away, dropping through Belial's portal and reappearing safely out of harm's way.

Jayce rushed forwards, uncertain what, if anything, he could do without harming the Demon. Paimon rounded on him, standing up on her hind legs before crashing back down towards him. He prepared to strike, angling his blades upwards to thrust straight into her chest. But he couldn't do it, instead diving to the side to avoid the crash. As he dove, he passed over a claw mark on the floor – Paimon did not hesitate like he did, the giant bear batting him aside, into and through a small tree.

Similarly, neither did Thalia.

Paimon reeled backwards, spraying blood from her broken nose as Thalia swung her strongest strike through her anchor into the bear's snout. Paimon screeched in pain, staggering and tumbling before turning around and running away. She made it three steps before she shimmered out of sight, disappearing from view. "Jayce! Jayce! Are you okay?" asked Morgana, dropping to the ground next to him as he lay dazed in a mound of moss. He groaned and she forced a healing potion into his mouth. "Where'd she go?" he grunted, forcing himself to sit upright. "Likely back to her lair," answered Falconer. "Should we follow?"

Jayce looked towards the two Demons, still in control of their hosts. Belial looked towards Baal for an order, but Baal looked conflicted – unusually uncertain for the King of Demons. "We must. If she cannot see reason... then she deserves mercy, to be at peace," Baal said quietly. "That is my command... Captain," he added, disappearing back into Mai Lu. Thalia offered a hand to Jayce and he took it, letting her pull him up with a soft groan to his feet. "Okay then, let's go."

It didn't take long to track down Paimon's lair, even without the tracks and claw marks leading to it, she had dug a large cave for herself, nestled underneath a

central tree in an open grove. The entrance was huge, and covered in the bones of prey – almost ceremonially from the orderly arrangement. However, to Jayce's immediate curiosity, there were no claw marks – no traps placed around the area. Only the remains of the dead. "Watch your footing," Jayce warned, taking the first steps inside.

Morgana immediately chanted to herself, lighting the tip of her wand with a white flame – illuminating the darkness of their surroundings. Thalia carried on forwards, the cave continuing to stretch deeper and further underground, but the others faltered – all enamoured and curious as to what they were seeing. The mud and stone walls had carvings that were omnipresent. "The Great War..." Belial muttered, looking towards a Giant fighting a colossal Dragon. "Mother..." muttered a joined voice of Mai Lu and Baal, the group looking up at an indescribable horror that stretched across the large ceiling. The creature was bloated, worm-like, like an insect queen, but with a mask-like face, moth-like wings and numerous spindly arms. Jayce shuddered just from looking at the crude image, and the way Belial and Mai Lu both cowered from the drawing told him more than he needed to know.

A low and pained growl blew through the cave. "We need to catch up to Thalia," Jayce stated, pressing forwards, his eyes glancing towards every shadow as he waited for an ambush that never came. The images distorted, some repeating but in twisted visions of the originals. Soon non-sensical words began to cover the walls. "Names of our kin," Belial answered quietly. It wasn't long before they were replaced by only: 'Paimon'. "She's fallen to madness..." concluded the Demon.

The cave shook, a plume of billowing dust and dirt blasting towards them before throwing the group back into darkness. As the others faltered, the darkness only broken by the glowing eyes of Mai Lu and Belial, Jayce rushed forwards. He came promptly to a large dug pit, the sides covered in large tree roots and the floor covered in scavenged foliage. Another crash staggered Jayce as Thalia met Paimon's heavy paw with her anchor, the two near-equal in might, despite the vast disparity in size and raw strength.

The wound on Paimon's nose had healed, leaving only dried blood, but Thalia's relentless and reckless strikes were taking a toll. Paimon was exhausted, her movements sluggish and heavy, yet Thalia had hardly begun to sweat. Jayce couldn't help but feel pity for the terrified animal, forced into the ring against one of Jayce's strongest predators. Paimon roared, rearing up before slashing wildly

with strikes that Thalia easily avoided. She took a step towards the colossal bear before faltering, an unusual hesitation overcoming Thalia.

Almost goadingly, Paimon scraped the ground as she backed up and Jayce quickly realised why Thalia was hesitating. It was a trap, plain and simple. But Thalia had never been fond of traps in battle. She grabbed the base of her weapon's handle, releasing its chain before throwing her anchor at Paimon. A swarm of claws struck the weapon as it tore through Paimon's desperate shield, the anchor landing just behind Paimon before Thalia reeled in her catch. One of the curved hooks of the anchor found a home around Paimon's leg, the poor creature getting dragged across the floor towards Thalia. Paimon scraped her front paws across the ground, trying to resist Thalia as she pulled the chain.

"Enough!" declared Belial, stepping next to Jayce and looking down at the arena. Thalia glanced upwards and Paimon twisted, swiping at her in animalistic desperation. Instead, a giant shard of red-black crystal pierced the Demon's side, unleashing a pained howl that threatened to burst Jayce's eardrums. "My King!" Belial cried, turning towards Mai Lu. Baal did not answer or show himself and Mai Lu raised her hand once again to strike.

"Wait!" Jayce called out. Mai Lu froze, slowly lowering her hand. Belial turned from Baal to Jayce. "Captain, I beg of you. Paimon is loyal – has always been loyal. There must be another way," Belial pleaded, in an unusually human display. Jayce nodded. "Get down there," he said plainly, Belial leaping down without hesitation to Paimon's side. The two Demon's stared at each other, both in pain, both trying to understand one another. Paimon groaned, blood continuing to spurt out of her side as Baal's innate magic interfered with her regeneration. "Paimon..." Belial attempted, slowly removing Thalia's anchor from around the giant bear's leg. Paimon looked up at him, her eyes wide and seemingly recognising him. "Remember who I am, old friend."

Paimon roared, charging into Belial before leaping up and towards Jayce, scrambling up onto the ledge before slamming her body into Jayce. Mai Lu struck, impaling the bear with several small shards, but Paimon shrugged it off, pushing past the group and running back along the tunnel in an attempt to flee. She disappeared back into the darkness, but a loud shattering sound rang out, along with a death moan, as Mai Lu reached out towards the darkness.

They found Paimon crawling out of the cave, a long smear of blood on the ground following her torn body. She panted heavily, in deep, pained agony as she fought with every breath to continue to live. "I will end it," Thalia said gently, hefting

her weapon. "Wait, please, there must be a way to save her," Belial once again pleaded. Jayce looked down at the ruined body, the giant bear falling still in her final moments.

A caw startled them all, the group immediately glancing away from the body towards Urien – Morgana's raven familiar – sitting on a branch above them. Jayce frowned, thinking hard as he formulated and disposed of several ideas. "Morgana, your familiar has its own soul, right?" Jayce questioned. Morgana folded her arms, looking at him curiously as she too began to follow what he was thinking. "Of sorts... but I doubt very much what you're thinking of could work. A pact requires a ritual, a soul... a body."

"Falconer, have you got any clay on you? Morgana, do you have any spare soul stones?" Both of them nodded. "It's worth a shot," Jayce stated. Morgana and Falconer both looked at each other before shrugging. Morgana then turned towards Paimon's dying body, reaching down and coating her hands with hot, sticky blood, taking it and painting a ritual circle around the bear. Falconer took clay out of his bottomless bag, moulding it into a small humanoid doll before passing it over to Morgana.

To Belial, the process felt like an agonising lifetime, especially once Paimon stopped breathing, but eventually Morgana sat back and nodded to Jayce. "Are you sure about this, Jayce? If this works... I won't have any control," she questioned. "Do it." Morgana took in a deep breath before beginning to chant. The circle began to glow a deep red before sparking into purple flame that circled and ensnared the small clay doll and the giant bear. The heat was intense but brief and when it died only a charred doll remained.

The entire group edged closer, all peering down at the clay person. Each waited with bated breath, but nothing happened. "Damn," Jayce eventually muttered softly, turning and looking towards Belial – a look of pain and misery on his mask-like face. "I'm s-" A crackling and a long groan rang out as the tiny clay doll stood up and stretched. The tiny body twisted and swelled, sprouting realistic brown fur, tiny paws on its hands and feet, before its head bubbled into that of a tiny teddy bear – with a crown of pointed horns.

Paimon looked up at the six giants surrounding her, her orange and black eyes glancing across each of them. "Who in the abyss are you?" she asked, with an aged and wise voice. Baal emerged from within Mai Lu, stepping forward and drawing the tiny Demon's stunned attention. "M-my lord? Is that you?" "Paimon, it has been too long," Baal said shakily, with Mai Lu's hand clenched

behind her back. "Who are these mortals? What is this form I'm in? What has happened, my lord?" Paimon asked almost pleadingly. Baal turned and looked towards Jayce. "There is much to discuss," he stated. Jayce simply nodded. "Agreed. But fortunately it's not a short walk home."

It took a while for Paimon to process all that was spoken, and as the hunters arrived at the ruins of Sonorous Reaches, the Demon had long fallen silent as she lay somewhat limply in Caelie's arms. Jayce couldn't help but acknowledge the peculiarity of it all, least of all that the clay doll housing the sealed Demon had fur, saliva and blood – a miniature living vessel, a miniature living Demon. But Jayce's mind truly lay elsewhere, and he was far from the only one.

"Do you still possess your abilities?" Jayce eventually asked the contemplating Demon. "Huh? Apologies, I was lost in thought," Paimon said quietly, propping herself up in Caelie's arms and looking towards Jayce. "Your... gift, the ability of foresight – does it still work?" Jayce questioned, half-willing to make a pact himself for such a power. "My magics are... difficult to explain to a mere mortal," Paimon attempted.

"Try me, and if not me then her," he stated, gesturing towards Morgana as she floated lazily alongside the group. Paimon faltered, confirming Jayce's suspicions. "You've lost your powers, haven't you?" he pressed. The Demon sighed quietly before Caelie squeezed her. "Yes," she confirmed. "This vessel is enough to survive in – little more." She looked immediately towards Mai Lu. "Is Lord Baal able to hear me?" she asked. A red mouth formed on Mai Lu's neck. "I hear all, Paimon."

"Are you able to...?" Paimon eased cautiously. A growl of warning came from Baal. Jayce looked towards Caelie for answers as Paimon shrunk away. "Belial, the form you take through Caelie is a far weaker version than your own, right?" Jayce ascertained. Caelie nodded, receiving the answer from within. "Belial!" Paimon exclaimed in shock, as Baal growled fiercely. Belial emerged on Caelie's neck. "We are not alone, pretending to be stronger than we are will get us killed. There is no pride in death, but shame in living without trust," Belial stated. Caelie looked towards Jayce and raised an eyebrow, drawing out a smile from him. "I appreciate that, Belial. Paimon, you'll be safe on the ship, but that means if we get into trouble then you'll need to find a place to hide. You're responsible for yourself, understood?" Jayce commanded. The tiny Demon nodded.

They returned to the ship as night began to fall, the others immediately coming to greet them and their new addition, but Jayce stepped away from the

introductions, finding Astris waiting for him. "Status?" he questioned, spotting a sullen Arthuria leaning over the edge of the ship. "Jeanne's barricaded herself inside her room, she's refused to eat," Astris stated. Jayce let out a long sigh. "Okay, let her have her space. But check in on her every-so-often." Astris nodded and he stepped past her, his body and mind exhausted as he staggered to his room.

It had been a long day, a long twenty-four hours.

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Bound Souls**

Mai Lu and Caelie both lay in their own beds, separately across the Stacked Hand, but both in an identical manner. They both lay in the darkness of the night, their Demons quiet in their minds as they held a clay doll representing them in their hands. There were plenty of soul stones to go around, with more each day as Morgana continued to chip away at her philosophers stone in search of Zoya's soul. Freedom was within reach, and possible – most likely.

Caelie let out a sigh, laying back and shutting her eyes. Sleep was hardly necessary - her body didn't need to rest, nor did the Demon within her - but she liked to do it anyway. She liked the silence - the peace of it all – she wanted to sleep. Mai Lu didn't want to sleep, but her mind needed to shut off – to still for a moment until the dawn. They both felt the same, they both wanted to return to the lives they once could have had.

But they both knew they couldn't. Not yet. Not whilst they still needed to fight.

### **Chapter 166: What's Yours Has Been Mine**

Jayce let out a long sigh, as he looked out towards the lone tree and the empty dock that marked the ruins of Sonorous Reaches. It had saved them, but with a cost that Jayce would have been happy to have gone without. The Stacked Hand was repaired and as stocked as it could ever be. The treasures they had taken from the dead village felt unclean, but would more than help to ensure the Stacked Hand could find refuge elsewhere. Enough money would bribe the locals to see past any risk they posed – that was something Marisha had sworn by. “Get us out of here,” Jayce ordered to Bjorn, turning away and stepping inside his quarters.

Ditching their Guild transponder and hiding within Sonorous Reaches proved almost immediately to have been a good decision. Several days came and went without incident, without attack or conflict, but Jayce was equally certain word of the wake of destruction they had left behind had begun to spread – and with that would come its own natural deterrent. Instead, it gave Jayce a chance to look inwards – to face the problem that was on almost everyone’s mind: Jeanne d’Arc.

Jayce glanced towards Arthuria as she sat in the corner of the living quarters, a ghoul of herself with sunken eyes, greasy, unkempt hair, and baggy clothes that had become her most common outfit. Her eyes lit up as Marisha entered the room, only to fall as Marisha sighed and lay down a tray of uneaten food. Marisha glanced towards Arthuria, who immediately looked at the floor, before approaching Jayce.

“This makes five days. I don’t know if she’s drinking or not,” Marisha whispered. “Enough is enough, she’s not in a position to make choices for herself.” Jayce begrudgingly nodded, he hated the idea of taking away his crew’s autonomy, but suicide by starvation was not something he was going to allow. He stood up from his seat, Arthuria instinctively standing and looking towards him. “Go wash your hair, change your clothes, look after yourself,” Jayce told her bluntly. “You can worry all you like, but you’re not helping her, or yourself.” Arthuria’s face fell and he turned and walked away.

Jayce knocked quietly on the door at first, glancing from the gold and black sign displaying Jeanne’s name on the door to Astris who stood next to him. There was no response. He knocked once more, this time more loudly. Again, nothing. He hammered the door with his fist and this time he heard a noise from within. The door budged slightly, as if something hit it from the other side and he heard the

sound of clothes sliding down it as Jeanne sat against it. "Go away..." came the softest of voices.

Jayce felt a hand tug his shirt and he looked down at Astris. Her white and obsidian eyes expressed concern and he nodded in agreement. Each crew member had the right and ability to control the locks on their doors through their own enchanted ring that Tempest had made for them. They were uncopiable and, once locked, the doors were almost indestructible, almost without exception. However Bjorn's ring worked on Jayce's bedroom, and Jayce's ring worked on every door. "Hmm," he uttered loudly and deliberately, to identify himself, looking at the hinges on the Jeanne's door. They swung inwards, like any bedroom door. "I'll get Tempest to fix it later..." he muttered, unlocking the door and then channelling his Focus to rip it backwards off its frame.

Jeanne tumbled backwards as the door she was leaning on was torn away from her. She stared up at Jayce and Astris in abashed horror, her face sunken, fatigued and quickly turning red. "Wh-what?" she questioned in stunned disbelief, immediately getting to her bare feet and backing up into the safety of her room. She was still wearing the same clothes that she had worn on the day of the massacre, and she and her room smelt musty and rancid. Jayce intruded into her sanctum as Astris used her communicator to inform Tempest of the broken door.

Jeanne fled from Jayce, backing away to her far wall. But he ignored her, approaching the fake window displaying an image of the outside and pulling the curtains open before tugging the latch to let fresh air into the room. With daylight inside and a new breeze erasing the musty air, Jayce approached Jeanne. She looked up at him, like a child awaiting a scolding. She braced herself in fear. But Jayce stepped past her, sitting down on her bed so that she was taller than him. "What do you want to happen?" he asked her plainly and gently.

Jeanne stared at him in confusion and distrust, glancing from him to Astris. "I-I don't know..." she said quietly, taking a glass of water without thought as Astris placed it into her hands. She drank nervously, the water painful to her cracked lips and dry throat. "Do you want punishment or forgiveness? To live or to die?" Astris asked simply, taking the empty glass back and refilling it in Jeanne's bathroom before setting it down on her beside table. Jeanne shook her head. "I-I don't know..."

Astris approached her closely and stared at her, the pair of them of near equal height and a foot shorter than Jayce. Jeanne broke eye contact and looked away with a mixture of shame and fear. "Look at me," Astris commanded coldly.

Jeanne apprehensively glanced towards her and Astris pulled out her pistol in a single motion, pressing the cold barrel to Jeanne's forehead. Jeanne stared at her in terror, backing away. Astris pulled the trigger. "No!" Jeanne cried, holding her hands up defensively and cowering away. An audible click brought silence, the weapon empty. "You want to live," Astris answered for her, looking to Jayce.

He nodded and stood up as Jeanne fell to her knees, placing her hands to her face as tears streamed from her wide eyes. "You're in Astris' care from this point forwards. She holds your life in her hands and you will follow her instructions without thought or hesitation," Jayce commanded, drawing Jeanne's gaze. She nodded ever-so-slightly, and he turned away, stepping out of the room and passing Tempest as the djinn quickly began to fix the door.

The door closed as Tempest finished fixing it, sealing Jeanne and Astris inside the room. Astris let a few moments pass before she took in a deep breath. "I understand how you're feeling," she said gently, standing in front of Jeanne and looking towards the ocean. Jeanne shook her head, her arms falling limp by her sides as she looked up at Astris. "No," she said adamantly, "no you don't. You can't possibly understand what it feels like to have done what I've done. It's not possible! You have no idea what I-"

"You enjoyed it, didn't you?" Astris asked, cutting through Jeanne's words like a knife. Jeanne flinched before she dropped her head and stared at the floor. Astris stood in silence, building up her own courage. "Sparrowhawk's Trove had a population of sixty-three people, that number almost triples if you include the animals on the island," Astris began. Jeanne looked up at her. "They were kind people, good people, humans, young and old – that took us in and treated us right: a short stop to recover after a storm."

Astris looked away from the window towards Jeanne. She forced a weak smile, tears brimming her eyes. "I had just been turned, made into... this. And I had been rejected by my people, so I starved myself – refused to feed, to be one of them: a vampire. It hurt, agonisingly so, but I resisted, I refused, and when we were docked... I gave in," Astris stated, sitting down opposite Jeanne. "The others believe I lost control, but the truth is I was awake, I was more... me than I had ever been... and I couldn't stop. I killed, slaughtered - not for food but because it felt good. Because I liked it. So when I say: I know what you're feeling, I really do. Unlike anyone else, Jeanne, I understand what you're going through."

Silent tears dripped from Jeanne's chin. "I know what it feels like to have hands that can never be washed clean and a soul wreathed in the lives of innocents. I

know what it feels like to know that there is no one to forgive me, no one who can. But... but that won't stop me. The only thing you and I can do is try to be worthy of forgiveness so when our ends come we are able to stand before those we murdered and so we can say that we tried to be better than our worst."

"I don't know if I can... I don't know if I'm strong enough," Jeanne said quietly. "That's not for you to decide," Astris stated, standing up and extending a hand to Jeanne. Jeanne looked up at Astris, the daylight shining on her face – her odd-coloured eyes glowing red. The vampire smiled softly, her fangs peering over her lip. "Sonorous Reaches, Sparrowhawk's Trove, they're both gone – dead - will you join them, or will you try to balance the scales you've drowned in blood?" Astris asked. Jeanne reached up for the hand and Astris pulled her to her feet. "Follow me."

Astris led Jeanne towards the training hall. Each face they passed stared at Jeanne with disgust, apart from Arthuria, who approached immediately. "Jeanne?" she attempted. Astris shook her head, Jeanne refusing to lift her eyes off the floor. "Jeanne, please..." Arthuria whimpered. The pair of them carried onwards, leaving her behind and stepping into the training hall. Thalia and Ordo were both sparring inside, Ordo in his draconic form. "Out," Astris commanded, both immediately packing up and beginning to leave. Jeanne avoided their gazes, only looking up as a wooden sword clattered on the floor at her feet.

"Pick it up," Astris ordered, loading her pistols with non-lethal bullets. Jeanne looked at the weapon, slowly bending down to pick it up. The handle slipped from her grip, the surface slick with blood that wasn't there. "Pick it up," Astris repeated, stepping into the training ring. Jeanne picked it up with both hands, mirroring her in the ring and holding the stick weakly in front of her. Astris raised one of her pistols and fired.

Jeanne yelped as she hit the floor, knocked off her feet, the rubber bullet knocking the air out of her lungs. "Stand up," Astris stated coldly, as Jeanne rolled over onto her front and tried to stand. "Pick up your sword," Astris ordered. Jeanne looked at the blade before she shook her head, beginning to cry. Astris pulled the trigger and Jeanne hit the floor again, rolling in pain. "Why?" she cried, in pain and anger. "Why aren't you fighting?" Astris returned.

"I don't want to kill again! I can't!" Jeanne yelled, sitting up and getting to her feet. Astris shot at her again. This time Jeanne twisted, stepping to the side and avoiding the shot as it grazed her shoulder. "That's fine, don't kill. But this crew is reliant on you. If you don't fight, you die, and we die. Don't kill anymore, that's

fine – there's nothing wrong with that. But when you fought us – you were as strong as all three of us. You are a soldier, a leader, and you have the potential to be the greatest of us, but only you can decide that."

Astris raised her pistols and Jeanne snatched her blade off the ground, diving to avoid the barrage before surging towards Astris. Jeanne snarled as she leapt, lunging at Astris with anger and frustration in hope to deliver a strong hit on her as she stood out of ammo. But Astris wasn't out of ammo. "Bang," she stated, delivering a powerful shot straight to Jeanne's forehead. Jeanne flew backwards, crashing to the ground in a heap.

She awoke several moments later, her head ringing and blood on her face. Astris was knelt over her, Jeanne's head in her lap. "Until you beat me, or I otherwise deem you fit, you're mine to use as I want. You are my puppet, my plaything, my pet. I own you. I control you. And you can fight that if you want, I dare you to, but we will work together towards redemption, understood?" Astris questioned, reloading her pistol. Jeanne looked up at the devil who owned her, a grin on her face, her eyes bright red. And Jeanne felt her heart beat again. "Yes, Astris."

Arthuria hugged her knees, alone in her room as she cried tears of anguish, hurt and worry. But a knock startled her, forcing her to desperately wipe her face as she rushed to the door. She pulled it open, looking down at the blue-haired girl in front of her. Zeta stuck the tip of her tongue out at Arthuria. "We're stopping off at an island soon, misery guts. We're going shopping, getting drunk, and hitting up a red-light district. Your girlfriend just tried to kill you, so... are you single again?" Zeta probed blatantly. Arthuria shrugged, she didn't know. "Good enough. Come on – I'll do your makeup," she stated, stepping inside and kicking the door closed behind her.

Jayce held his breath as the island of Lucky Day came into view. It was a popular hub, with countless trade ships docked, large, tall buildings that screamed of opulence through multiple sculptured features, and bright lights, as well as a well-defended port. Almost immediately, Jayce spotting lights flashing towards them: a sailor's code. Jayce and Bjorn glanced towards each other, before both scanning the area for anything they recognised. "Welcome Rising Aces," it flashed. "Uh oh," they both stated.

It was both relieving and unnerving to find a welcome party waiting for them in the docks. Out of caution, Jayce had ordered his crew to wait for introductions to conclude. As such, he found himself, along with Bjorn and Marisha, stood on the

pier facing their observers. Like the island, the group of delegates were fantastically decorated – all bearing a multitude of sparkling jewellery and fine clothes.

“Oh, my dear boy, you have no idea how good it is to see you,” stated a short, male goblin, dressed in a bright purple suit, a large floppy hat and furs, and lathered in makeup. He extended a wrinkled, manicured, and glittering hand to Jayce, as if expecting him to kiss one of the gemmed rings. Jayce simply glanced the goblin up and down before looking to his attendants: a mixture of similarly dressed middle-aged human men and women. “You have earnt me so much money by witnessing your survival,” he added, taking his hand back with distinct disappointment. “Who are you?” Jayce questioned.

“Call me Mystique,” he said flamboyantly, “esteemed ruler and lord of this island. And you, Rising Aces, are more than welcome to spend your fabled wealth wherever, and however, you so please.” He clicked his green fingers. “Brochure,” he ordered simply, one of his followers pulling a folded piece of paper from out of their handbag. He took it, glanced at it with disappointment before handing it over. “This is a pleasure island, so please... enjoy yourselves. But first, I must enquire as to what has happened to you. The world perceived you as dead – fortunately I am well read enough to bet against such a thing, but even I – your greatest fan – had doubts.”

“That’s none of your concern,” Bjorn growled in Jayce’s stead. The goblin pouted, placing his fingers to his lips. “My my - shame, but understandable. Regardless, should you wish to sell your story to me, my office is that building there,” he stated, gesturing with a foldable fan to the tallest building on the island. “Farewell, Rising Aces,” concluded Mystique, turning and walking away with his troupe in tow.

Jayce and Bjorn glanced at each other. “So people thought we were dead, that’s not exactly bad news. It might be worth buying some newspapers to catch up on the world,” Jayce stated, turning back towards the Stacked Hand. Bjorn nodded, raising his arm and gesturing towards the island: granting permission for the crew to disembark. “Marisha and I will sell our... loot, the sooner it’s gone the better,” Bjorn informed. Jayce placed a hand on Bjorn’s arm, nodding in appreciation. The scavenged treasures from Sonorous Reaches felt unclean to them all, getting rid of it would help to put the incident behind them. “I’ll find out what’s gone on then,” Jayce stated.

Jayce had been expecting Caelie to join him, it was rare for them to be apart, but according to Zeta she was needed elsewhere. Jayce had then turned to Red. "Apologies, I am busy," stated the jiaoren, stepping to the edge of the deck and then diving into the water. "Right..." Jayce muttered. It was far from uncommon for Red to seek 'me time' whenever they docked, but Jayce couldn't help but feel disappointed. Tempest floated past him, heading into the living quarters, so Jayce followed. "Tempest, do you fancy-"

"I am busy, Captain," the djinn buzzed back, floating horizontally over the rear deck and carving arcane runes into floor. "What are you doing?" Jayce questioned, leaning against the railing and glancing at the arcane circle on the floor. "An experiment, if you would," answered the djinn. Jayce raised an eyebrow, briefly glancing away as the roar of a grey flyer drew his attention to the skies. "What kind?"

The djinn took from within his bottomless bag a metal ball. It was sizeable, the size of a head at least and quite heavy from the looks of it. Tempest placed the orb into the centre of the circle. He then drew out a paintbrush, dipping it into a small container full of glowing blue paint muddled with pink sparkles. He traced several lines from the arcane circle, up onto the railings surrounding the rear deck. Tempest then withdrew a metal disk, placing it onto the nearby railing before fusing it to the wood with Xander's artificer hammer. Jayce observed curiously as the djinn tinkered, before eventually Tempest rotated several wheels on the metal disk and held his hand over it. He began to chant and the arcane circle sparked and glowed a deep blue before turning purple. With a flash of purple lightning, the orb disappeared. "Success, I believe," Tempest stated.

Jayce followed Tempest to his workshop, finding a near identical set-up to that on the rear deck. The metal orb was sat in the middle of the floor. "You... teleported it?" Jayce questioned, in partial disbelief. Tempest nodded, fiddling with the controls before chanting and sending it back. "It only functions with established teleportation rings and at the moment I'm not confident enough to transport living matter, but potentially in the future it could be used for our crew. You needed me for something, or would you prefer I continue working?" Tempest questioned. "Please, carry on," Jayce stated, leaving him to his work.

It didn't take Jayce long to achieve what he wanted to do, but as he returned to the Stacked Hand he couldn't help but notice a pair of figures watching him from afar. He stared at the two Null Legionnaires, both covered in their grey uniforms, their weapons held in their hands. They both stared back through their skull-like,

elephantine masks and one nodded to him before breaking eye contact. The other reached into their pocket, pulling out a small circular device before speaking into it. They were too far away for Jayce to catch their words, but the pair of them then immediately walked away – bringing both ease and unease to Jayce.

It wasn't until late evening that some of the Rising Aces slowly began to drag themselves back to the Stacked Hand. Jayce left them to it, his attention elsewhere as he read through the stack of newspapers he had bought at an extortionate price. He couldn't help but smirk at the front cover of one: 'Rising Aces killed?'. "Not yet," he answered, scanning through the paper before moving onto the next one.

His stomach lurched as he saw an advertisement on the front page of another, an image of a poster that looked almost identical to the one he had seen all the way back in the Imperial Capital: an advertisement for the Champion's Run. Similarly, Vexx was on this one, but this time he was faced off against Elaine. "Come and face the Betrayers in a one-off challenge of might," it said. "Earn the grand prize of a million pearl." Jayce scanned the advertisement for information. The date was set for a month's time, at the start of autumn, at somewhere called Watergate.

He stood up, setting it aside for the morning. Any opportunity to get closer to the Betrayers was something they couldn't miss – especially if it was Elaine and Vexx. The fridge clicked closed behind him and Jayce turned to look. There was no one there. He frowned, entering into Focus to see if there was anyone hiding through magic, but again he saw nothing. He shook it off: it must have been his imagination.

### **Seize the Seas Tales: A Gift From Afar**

Wicke let out a sigh as she sat on a boulder staring out towards the Frontier in a bathing suit, a towel underneath her. She looked down at her watch, accounting for the time difference, she was exactly where she needed to be, exactly when she needed to be. He was late. And Tempest was never late. She shook her head, standing up and picking up her towel. She must have gotten the date wrong, or it had not worked, either way – there was no point waiting any longer.

A bright flash of purple lightning sparked in the corner of her eye, her mouth falling slightly open, as moments later, a small white box floated to the surface of the ocean and bobbed on the waves. She dropped her towel, racing forwards and diving into the water from the top of Last Drop's slate cliff. She swam quickly,

grabbing the box and dragging it back to shore before opening it. The box popped open, the insides having been sealed shut to protect from water damage.

“It worked... It worked!” Wicke yelled with joy, carefully pulling out a toy polar bear from within and lifting it into the air. She hugged it tightly before setting it aside and throwing a rock into the box. She swam back out with the box and her grimoire, floating over the teleportation circle Red had placed down, just under two months prior. She held the box carefully, trying not to let excitement overwhelm her. She began to chant, her grimoire floating in front of her – its pages resistant to the water. She thought about Tempest, about the markings he had mailed to her and their location in the world before, with a zap, the box disappeared.

It reappeared moments later and Wicke screamed with joy, before sinking beneath the waves.

**Chapter 167: Personal Invitation**

Although groggy to say the least, the following morning, the Rising Aces were more than ready to leave Lucky Day behind. It had done exactly as Jayce had hoped: provided a genuine opportunity for fun for his crew to make up for the last few hellish weeks. And with their coffers filled from the selling of their accumulated loot - thanks to Marisha's golden tongue and Bjorn's passive presence - the mood was joyous and excitable for the first time since the crew's arrival into the Old World almost two months prior.

Jayce took in the air of the ocean as the Stacked Hand slowly moved away from the port: it felt fresh and exciting. "So, this Watergate place is our destination?" Bjorn questioned, as he and Falconer looked over a map. "It makes the most sense," Jayce answered, looking across his staggered crew throughout the main deck. Zeta was stood looking at the main mast with an eye of curiosity. "Hey, does anyone know what this marking is? Come on 'fess up! Who's been carving?" she called out. Jayce ignored her. "We need to talk to Vexx, Tanare and Elaine, and this may be our best chance before the Revelry. And at the very least, it gives us a chance to see where we fit on the hierarchy. Who knows, perhaps the Sea Sovereign's reputation is overexaggerated?" Jayce stated.

The sound of burning drew Jayce's attention back to the main deck, a red flame floating on the main deck directly in front of Zeta. "Uh, guys?" she called out, only to yelp and duck as a flaming sword extended outwards in a sharp jap - narrowly missing her. "Raise the alarm!" Jayce ordered, the blade cutting downwards to create a floating flaming line before it retracted. Bjorn froze in place, and Jayce felt his breath leave his body, his knees crumpling underneath him as the fiery line was stretched open into a flaming doorway.

Jayce looked around, an omnipotent power pressing into him from all directions; his crew were frozen - all stood like statues and unable to move as a single figure stepped out onto the main deck. Jayce stared in terror, forcing himself desperately to his feet as he recognised her instantly - despite never having met her face-to-face. The Sea Sovereign looked up at him, an unnerving and bright smile piercing his mind as she looked around the main deck.

"Lovely ship," she stated openly, as Jayce grabbed onto the aft-deck railing for support - his body refusing to obey him under her constant stream of all-consuming Panic. She looked exactly as he remembered, but begrudgingly slightly more good-looking than the images had made her out to be. She had short and messy dark orange hair, pulled back into a loose ponytail, fair,

somewhat pale skin, with freckles across the bridge of her nose and a dark mole under her left eye. Dark, twisting tattoos covered almost her entire neck, tipping slightly over her jaw like a cursed mark. Numerous piercings filled her ears and nose, and a small lip ring sat at the bottom right of her mouth. She had forgone her usual dark makeup: her brown eyes, filled with tinges of purple, were bright and excited. "Why are you here?" Jayce barely got out.

She vanished from his sight in a shadowy blur, and he felt her breath on his ear. "I feared you were dead, ex-Lord Exarga. I'm glad the rumours were wrong," she said, her voice deliberately deeper than normal. She stepped away from him, looking up at Bjorn with an exaggerated expression as she placed one hand on her hip and leant back. "Woah, he's huge - neat," she stated, placing her other hand to her forehead to block out the sun before tapping Bjorn's arm and caressing his fur with her finger.

"Don't touch him," Jayce growled, seeing the panic in Bjorn's eyes – the only part of him unfrozen. Scáthach turned and looked at Jayce, sticking her tongue out at him as he struggled to remain standing, fighting to take one step closer towards her. She moved away with ease, stepping next to Falconer and looking closely into his eyes before tapping his shaved head. "What do you want?" Jayce questioned. She turned to face him, standing directly between Bjorn and Falconer. "As I said, I wanted to check up on you. You see... I have some... investments riding on you. And any good investee should check on their investments from time-to-time. Surely Marisha would tell you that?" Scáthach stated, vanishing once again and leaning onto Marisha's shoulders with her elbows. Jayce groaned as he struggled to press through her consistent Panic, his body and mind shaking. "You can do it, I believe in you! Go Jayce! Go Jayce!" she cheered, as he staggered his way to the stairs before tumbling down them.

"Hmm," she said disappointedly, standing over him as he lay pressed to the floor. "I don't have that much time, unfortunately, so... oh, go on – I expect better next time," she stated, releasing only him. He stood up immediately, getting into a defensive stance. She tutted before shaking her head. "If I wanted you dead, you'd be dead already. After all, I've had countless opportunities ever since you entered the Old World about... forty-eight days ago. About then – right?" she questioned with a sinister tone and accuracy. Jayce refused to answer: she was spot on. "How did you get on board? How did you even know where we were?" Jayce demanded.

Scáthach approached Zeta and guided her arm so she was picking her nose before she began to walk to the living quarters, poking Thalia's stomach on the way past. Jayce followed, sensing no other choice. "I've known since you crossed the Frontier – nice touch getting Dragons for yourself by the way. I asked Sétanta to pay you guys a visit - he highly recommends your baths so next time I visit I might have to check them out. Perhaps with a few friends from across the world. You don't mind hosting, right?" she stated. Jayce felt his body turn cold, his heart stopping in his chest as he realised they had had a completely undetected intruder for an unknown length of time. "When?" Jayce asked quietly.

"The baths, or when did he visit?" she questioned, approaching the fridge and getting out a snack before guessing correctly on her first attempt which drawer was for cutlery. She then sat down on one of the sofas and invited Jayce to sit next to her. Jayce glanced around, and he spotted movement in the corner of his eye. He turned sharply and Sétanta swore loudly as he was caught. Jayce stared at the Betrayer in horror, he had seen him before - back at Final Bastion. "It was you! You tripped me, asshole!" Jayce stated.

Sétanta's narrow brown eyes widened and he burst into laughter. "Sorry, my bad," he stated casually, before flinching as Scáthach glared at him from behind Jayce. He was tall and lean, roughly Jayce's height but with a lighter frame. His brown hair was cut shorter at the front, but left much longer and tied into a thin ponytail that ran down his back at the rear. He wore an open shirt and a leather vest, his stomach extremely defined. "Get," Scáthach ordered. He let out a long sigh and stepped back. "Be seeing you," he added, disappearing through a purple portal.

"Anyway, as I was saying," Scáthach stated, scooping some leftover chocolate mousse into her mouth before faltering. "Oh, that's good!" she moaned. "Can I take this with me? I think I should," she suggested simply. Jayce nodded. "Right, um, oh that's it. I wanted to invite you to this event I'm running, I think you're already aware of it," she stated, gesturing to the newspaper on the main table. "You worried me with your disappearance, and because of it, I can't help but wonder just where you really stand in the world. So I think this would be a fantastic opportunity for you to see exactly where you do stand. And you know... give you a chance to talk to your old crewmate," she added, sticking her thumb over her shoulder at Vexx's bounty poster on the wall with the others. "We'll be there," Jayce said cautiously.

She scooped the rest of the dessert into her mouth before looking at the empty bowl with disappointment. "Damn, it was just too darn delicious. Well, on that note and, since not all of your crew are taking this lying down-" The door to the living quarters slammed open and Ordo dragged himself inside with his club in hand. "I hope to see you there, and please do enjoy yourself. Don't die, I have too much in store for you and your... friends." She winked at Ordo before drawing a giant flaming greatsword from a small purple portal and cutting a gateway for herself.

The world unfroze and Jayce heard his crew collapse across the ship, immediate panic following suit before the living quarters' door burst open and they rushed in. "Where is she?" Bjorn questioned. Jayce shook his head, looking at the empty bowl in front of him. "She's gone. I think they're both gone. Check for anything that looks runic or out of the ordinary, report it to Tempest – I don't want anymore unexpected guests," Jayce ordered. His crew acknowledged before running off, leaving only Ordo and Bjorn behind. "That was..."

"Unfathomable," Ordo concluded for Bjorn. Jayce nodding in agreement. "I've never seen or felt anything like it. Undeniably she knows far more about Focus than the entirety of the New World. There's more to understand, a higher ceiling to breakthrough. I'll start us all on a new training regime. If the Betrayers are even close to that... I fear for our future," Ordo stated, as Jayce bit his lip nervously. "Thank you."

"What did she say?" Bjorn asked, as Jayce felt his heart rate slow back to normal. "Just that we're an investment for her. She knew Marisha's name, I'm guessing Sétanta told her everything," Jayce stated. Ordo and Bjorn looked at each other. "Sétanta? How does he factor into this?" Ordo questioned. Jayce shook his head softly. "He was on board, and has been for an unknown length of time," he stated, much to their immediate horror.

"That at least explains the odd sounds and left-out food that no one's been owning up to. Still... I don't like that at all," Bjorn stated. Jayce stood up, looking to Bjorn. "Get Tempest to use some of our soul stones to make golems, sentries may at least help deter him coming back, or give us a warning. Ordo, make that routine – break through that barrier and teach us how to follow. This was a wake-up call, and one I'm glad we had now - we can't take it easy."

Astris was slightly glad to have missed the intrusion. She had felt it, even all the way down in the cargo hold, and it had not been pleasant. But its effects had at least finally diminished, allowing her to get back to her job at hand. "I've got it!"

Jeanne cried out, holding a rat aloft with pride as it wriggled in her hands. It screeched terrifically, piercing Astris' ears. Astris looked towards Little Witch, sat on a barrel next to her as they both looked across the room at the dozen-or-so rats of various sizes scurrying around. Little Witch growled softly, her stomach full already, so Astris turned her attention instead to Soteria and Paimon, both sprawled out lazily at the top of the steps as guards against the invaders.

"Paimon, snack time," Astris called out, the small Demon-bear rolling over to look at her. "I find this role demeaning, why must I be fed vermin?" questioned Paimon. "You know the deal, help out around here and we are more than happy to help you build up your magic by feeding you stones," Astris returned. The Demon growled before groaning and stepping down the steps of near-equal size. Astris glanced back to Jeanne and nodded, who threw the squealing rat towards the Demon.

Instead, a protective bubble surrounded the rat and it bounced back down the stairs before being re-released amongst its kin. A laughter-like bellow emerged from Soteria and Astris immediately raised her pistol at the Dragon. The laughter stopped and the Dragon retreated with a hiss, replaced almost immediately by a curious Yuthura. "Are you still at it?" she questioned, leaning on her cane as Astris rolled her eyes. "What does it look like?" she returned, continuing to sit on her barrel.

"You're trying to catch them... by hand? Wouldn't it be less cruel to use your weapons?" Yuthura questioned. Both Jeanne and Astris pointed to the hull of the cargo hold where a sword was firmly embedded in the wall. "Ah," Yuthura stated. Astris hopped off her barrel and immediately water began to seep out from underneath it. "Oh," Yuthura further added, as Astris sat back on the barrel. "I shall leave you to it."

"They're still rat-catching," Yuthura stated, as she hobbled into Jayce's quarters. "Ah... still?" he questioned, glancing from Yuthura to Morgana as she sat cross-legged on his bed. Yuthura simply nodded and he shrugged it off. "Thanks for checking," he added, spinning on his seat to look at the golden soul stone sat on his desk. "Are you sure this is a good idea?" Yuthura questioned. Jayce shook his head, turning and looking back at Morgana. "Are you sure it's Zoya?" he questioned. "Eighty... seventy percent sure," she responded.

Jayce and Yuthura looked at each other: they both knew what this opportunity meant to Jayce, but Yuthura could see the fear in his eyes. "She's dead Jayce, regardless of what she says, you can't undo it – you cannot bring her back. If you

need Astris then wait for her, but—" Jayce crushed the stone in his hands, releasing the soul inside. "Can I have some privacy, please," he requested softly, the pair departing without further word.

Jayce found Zoya waiting for him at the bottom of the steps of the black pyramid within the underworld. She was sat on a bench and, as with most ghosts, completely nude. "I had a feeling I would find you here, but you're younger than I had hoped," Zoya said softly, her raven hair floating ethereally behind her. She looked the same as he remembered: fair skin, that now held a ghostly green and translucent tint to it, with a pointy nose. She had a mole under each of her heterochromatic eyes, one a light blue colour and the other bright green. Even now, she was still the most beautiful woman Jayce had ever seen.

Jayce smiled nervously, looking down at her as he stood in front of her. "I'm not dead, don't worry." She nodded slightly, looking down before noticing her form. Shyly she crossed her arms, a silk robe appearing and clothing her body. "How did you do that?" Jayce asked, drawing her attention and trying to sit on the bench, only to fall straight through it. She laughed quietly, covering her mouth with her hand as he floated back up to standing. "I just extended myself, that's all. Reimagined my form. Picture this bench that I've created as real and it will become real... I think," she stated. Jayce looked at the spectral bench, imagining a solid surface to it before sitting down. "So..." he stated.

"I'm guessing I have you to thank for my freedom?" she questioned. He shook his head. "No, Morgana got you out." There was a faint look of surprise before a genuine smile crossed Zoya's face. "I would expect no less from her. I am happy she found her way to you. I wish more of the youngsters could have been saved..." Zoya said. "I take it you were victorious against the Church?" He nodded. "I thought so."

"Why did you kiss me?" Jayce asked bluntly and somewhat harshly. Zoya flinched, her mouth slightly open before she sat up more straight on the bench and placed her hands in her lap. "We were enemies," Jayce stated. "You... betrayed us and, in the moment you thought you'd won, you kissed me. Why?" he asked, his body cold and his eyes glancing to the countless souls passing by on their way to whatever came next for them. Zoya smiled, leaning forwards to catch his eye and looking at him. "Because I liked you, dummy. And I wanted my final action to you to be one that was my decision, no one else's. Mine alone. Was that so bad?"

Jayce faltered, not sure how to answer. He couldn't help but feel conflicted. It made him feel like a teenager - once again caught between two very different people, wanting two very different things. He thought to Alara and what she meant to him, for the past and future that they had yet to have. But as he looked at Zoya, he couldn't help but think about what could have been. "No," he answered quietly.

She looked up and nodded to herself before turning and looking out towards the steps leading up the pyramid. "Then I'm certainly glad that I did it. But I wish I'd done it sooner," she spoke softly. Jayce felt his heart twist and he looked down at the floor. "Maybe I'd have liked that," he answered nervously, feeling her hand pass through his. He let their hands sit together, connected but not really touching, the pair of them in quiet silence until he finally looked at her. "Why did you do it? Why did you go against us?" he asked.

"For better or for worse, the Daughters of Shade were my family. The Councillors made me, forged me into... this. They carved arcane runes onto my bones, enchanted my food, isolated me and made me theirs. I was their puppet, their prize, their Witch Queen. But had I succeeded in the ritual, even with their power - they would never have been able to control me again. I would have been finally free. I didn't see a choice then, although I see now there was one," she stated, looking into his eyes. "When your entire life has been built and designed, it's hard to see any other paths for yourself."

"I get that," Jayce stated, thinking to the machinations of his parents and the Empress. "I thought you would. There are always those who control and manipulate, but they do it for a reason: out of fear, desire, or a need for control. My grandmothers were afraid of being condemned for their ways - regardless of if they had initially been out of good intentions. You were made to be a weapon of change, the tool of your parents and those around them."

She stood up, her hand still reaching out towards him. He stood up and took it, standing face-to-face with her. "This world is broken, it has been for a long time. So, before I go, can I ask for you to do something for me? As a favour... to what we could have been to each other," she asked. Jayce nodded, his heart racing in his chest. "Rebuild this world. Take it into a new age where children don't have to be forged into weapons. A world where a farm girl could have lived quietly and maybe stood a chance with the son of Admirals. A world that should have been. A world of magic and wonder. Can you try to do that for me? Be the one that brings peace?" she asked.

Jayce couldn't help but feel the task was impossible, but the words left his mouth before he could even think. "I will try to," he stated. She smiled, leaning forwards and placing her lips to his. She was ethereal, but for the briefest of moments, he thought he could feel them. She pulled back, beginning to walk up the steps of the black pyramid. "Zoya!" he called after her. She stopped and looked down at him. "Come and find me when you're ready. I'll be waiting, Jayce Exarga."

He watched her approach the portal at the top, before she stepped through and vanished, leaving the world and Jayce behind.

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Familial Thoughts**

Morgana nursed her drink as sensibly as she could, as she sat in a bar watching the other girls amongst her crew go wild. Alcohol was still very much a new taste for her and the people of Lucky Day appeared to drink it like water. She looked at the neon drink: it reminded her of some of the potions she used to brew back when she was a Daughter of Shade – it tasted as bad as it looked but at least it was sweet.

A hand placed itself firmly on her back and she turned and looked up towards Thalia as she towered over her. "You alright, little one?" she asked, throwing herself onto the stool next to her before pointing to one of the spirits on the top shelf. "Glass or shot?" asked the barkeep, grabbing a step to stand on to the reach the sparkling crystalline bottle. "Bottle," Thalia stated, slapping a fistful of colourful pearl onto the bar. The barkeep shrugged and counted the value, returning some back to her before leaving the bottle with her. "I guess..." Morgana answered somewhat quietly, but Thalia had already sauntered off.

Morgana glanced behind her - between Zeta singing her heart out to one of her own songs, Thalia readying herself to wrestle anyone who looked at her funny, and the extremely drunk Demon girls - the only other member of their small group that seemed vaguely as miserable as she was, was her sister. Arthuria did her best to look happy for her friends, but Morgana could see each momentary slip, each glance towards the entrance as she waited for Jeanne to walk in, each glazed expression as she fell into her own thoughts. It didn't particularly matter to Morgana; she liked and cared for her sister but Jeanne had always had a reputation for being a zealot. Arthuria had simply chosen poorly and now was suffering the consequences for that. Morgana swigged the rest of her drink, setting it down and standing up before heading to the exit.

She found her own spot to sit - nowhere was quiet, but it was good enough to have a moment to think, a moment to breathe. Slowly, she reached into her bottomless bag and withdrew a small photo frame. It had four people in it: a recent photo of herself and Arthuria hugging each other whilst laying on one of the sunbeds on the Stacked Hand, both grinning wildly in their bikinis, another held a clipped photo of Elaine that she'd plucked from a newspaper, and the final photo was of a young, toothy girl with silver hair and golden eyes.

Morgana frowned as a droplet of water landed on the glass, her face twisting as she saw her reflection in the glass and realised she was crying. Defensively, she tucked her legs into her body, sobbing quietly into her knees. Morgause was out there somewhere. She had to be. "Happy birthday... little sister," she cried quietly.

### **Chapter 168: Chasing Ghosts**

Alara shook her money pouch gently: it felt light – far lighter than she'd have ever liked. But the lack of money made up for itself with access to a wealth of information. And that information brought her, day after day, closer to her parents. "I can't say I recall much about these 'Reapers' you're talking about. My memory has been hazy ever since my injuries," stated an old soldier they had followed out of bar. Alara grit her teeth - each informant was the same: greedy and, more often than not, desperate. Alara glanced to Wulf as he stood guarding the alleyway, dressed from head-to-toe in a large cloak. She had more Marines scattered throughout the city of Ixil, one of the old industrial cities that had once powered Brun – the outer swirls of the Brunxchume 'clubs' region.

Alara took a small handful of pearl, extending it out to him in a closed fist. "Perhaps this will open your mind a little," she stated coldly, the rain pattering on the streets around her and quieting their conversation to any potential onlookers. He looked at the fist, holding out his palm and looking at the amount with surprised disappointment. He then glanced to Alara's glaive, held loosely in her other hand, and took a nervous gulp. "From what I recall there was a... bust-up that took place in the Capital city, Chull, within Chume. Something about rebels seeking to undermine the Sea Sovereign. A well-known event that led to... executions," he said cautiously, leaning in close. Alara could smell the stench of spirits on his breath, but the calmness to his hands, and the cool and controlled look to his eyes told Alara he was speaking the truth. "Keep this conversation to yourself," Alara warned, stepping away and tapping Wulf before they both disappeared into the rain.

Alara scratched her head as she sat in her quarters reading the copies of her parent's reports that Cyrenna had given her. The whole thing was convoluted and messy, requiring both the sudden and discrete assassination of a Pirate Lord to create a public lie for their disappearance, as well as a quartet of ships with crews that seemed expendable at best. They had crossed the Frontier in pursuit of an old 'Pirate Lord', almost fifteen years prior to the current day, and the original information that had made its way back across was spotty – up until roughly the day that Pirate Lord Dick Valentine had crossed the Frontier himself. A date that matched almost exactly the emergence of Atalana Scáthach. Alara didn't like coincidences, and she hated the idea of fate even more.

The door opened and closed, a fatigued sigh drawing her attention to Riley as she took her usual chair in Alara's room. Tilly leapt up from Alara's lap and

crossed over to Riley. "Traitor," Alara muttered quietly, leaning back and setting down the documents before glancing towards Riley. "Give me some good news," Alara commanded. Riley chuckled and shook her head, as Tilly purred in her arms. "Beowulf has come across one of - what the locals call - the Three Sentries. A massive fortress with some sort of magical observatory: a superweapon. Theories suggest there's one in each Brun, and given what we found..."

Alara nodded, shutting her eyes before standing up and walking to her window. A half-sunken fortress lay before her. It was colossal, the size of a compact city, and formed of pointed spires wreathed in cannon placements. But it had been blown open – cracked like a nut with the insides turned to glass from extreme heat. It was terrifying, but what was worse was that the fortress had toppled over, revealing what looked like engines underneath. The Fortress Ship once could have moved, and it wasn't the only one in sight.

"At least that explains some of it. I'm guessing they're still in operation?" Alara questioned. "Yep, and then some. Witchford's worked up some theory, but given this region was described as a Naval powerhouse, it seems likely that the Sentries were turned against their own Fortress Ships when the Sea Sovereign took over." Alara's face darkened and she turned and looked at Riley. "So she conquered them by force... alone?" Riley shrugged and Alara looked away. There were too many questions that needed answering, but all evidence continued to point to their presence in enemy territory seeming more and more like suicide. "Prepare all teams. Let's get inside, see what we can find. Inform the scouts we're coming in. "

It took a few weeks to arrive at Chull, the capital city of the stem region of the clubs continent. Alara was initially surprised to find that it sat on the coast, directly in the middle of Brunxchume, but it became immediately obvious why it had been chosen as the old nation's heart. "Keep us well clear of it," Alara ordered, as calmly as she could, her heart racing as she stared at the Fortress Ship docked at Chull.

Compared to the derelict wrecks of the others, this one looked pristine, almost new. It bore clean, flat and brutalist grey paint across the majority of its spires. The only colour present being the black cannons scattered across the fortress and the large grey and red banners that flapped in the wind. "This complicates things," Alara muttered. "Let's not draw any attention to ourselves. Artemis, Brett, Riley – you have your mission. Wulf, prep your squad."

They found a somewhat obscured harbour, docking inside and settling the docking fee. "Aliciaa Fenris, the Stratagem," Alara told the harbourmaster, ensuring it was written down with a discrete bribe. Without question or glance the harbourmaster pocketed the pouch and wrote down the details. "Welcome to Chull, miss Fenris," she stated, before walking away. Alara looked towards Wulf and his squad of therians. "Let's go," she commanded, the group transforming into their human forms – their clothes adapting to the change in size – before following after her.

The city was quite something to behold, a bastion of smooth sandstone that painted the city into a yellow cream colour. The entire coastal city was built upwards away from the waters, coming to a sharp and sudden halt inland, with a giant stone wall known as 'the Gate' defending against the desert sands beyond. Towards the waters, near where the Fortress Ship was docked, was a huge expanse of shipyards that now lay mostly empty – a reminder of the once dominating Navy that Brunxchume used to have.

Alara could see that same feeling everywhere: it was as if the city was hollow – despite being so busy and so bustling with life. The citizens, dressed in somewhat drape-like clothes that made Alara's cloak blend in, all went about with clear and determined goals. They didn't linger, they didn't stand around and they didn't have much time for idle chitchat. "Up to the right," Channing said quietly to Alara, pointing out another Null Legionnaire observing the city guards. The local armed forces were dressed brightly, in bold blues and golds, and visible almost everywhere they went, but it was clear who was really in charge.

"So it's his Fortress," Alara eventually murmured, staring up at a giant banner displaying a face as they approached the royal district. General Barca Khalid's face stared down at them. He was a handsome man in his late forties, or so, with light-brown skin, reddish-brown eyes, and militaristic salt and pepper hair. He had a firm and gruff expression, with hard wrinkles from years of frowning, and eyes that pierced through Alara, even from his image alone. His banners were everywhere, along with statues and posters that told everyone he was in charge.

Alara drew her attention back to the citizens, as she and her group took a short break on a bridge overlooking the high-street. "Sir, do you see what I see?" questioned Boot to Wulf, pointing out along the street and to the streets beyond. Alara followed Boot's hand with her eyes, looking closely at what he was seeing. To her surprise, she saw it almost immediately, as did Wulf. "The locals are

avoiding that part of the city, why?" Alara questioned, answering for Wulf. "Only one way to find out."

Making their way through the streets that the locals avoided brought Alara and her therian squad to the city's main square. It was unnervingly quiet and Alara immediately felt on edge as she felt eyes fall upon her from countless directions. Across the colossal square lay a huge set of golden gates, leading towards a large and beautifully colourful garden, beyond which marked the entranceway of the Royal Palace. Numerous local guards patrolled back and forth, but they weren't the eyes upon them.

A dozen Null Legionnaires stood in the centre of the stone square, all spread out around a set of gallows. A soft creaking filled the silence as several corpses swayed in the gentle wind. Alara looked away, her eyes immediately widening as she spotted scorch marks scattered across the ground – all in outlines of people in defensive or surprised poses. A wall right next to her held the perfect charred outline of a woman, her hands held up in front of her. Alara looked back towards the Null Legionnaires – they were stood in firm formation, alert and on guard, and even through their expressionless, skull-like masks Alara could see them staring at her. "Let's go," Alara commanded quietly, turning and leaving the square behind.

They found a quiet, underground café to sit and talk and only then did the tension in their chests disperse. "By the gods," muttered Kix, the youngest of Wulf's squad. "Agreed," murmured some of the others, but Wulf and Alara shook it off, looking around then at each other. "That's where the Reapers were executed. That's where they met their end – it has to be," Alara surmised. "But we're still no closer to finding the location of their last stand," Wulf returned. "I wouldn't be so sure," Alara stated, as the bell over the doorway rang out and a trio walked inside.

"I get the feeling we've been given a far harder mission than the others," Brett complained, as he crouched on a rooftop overlooking a heavily-guarded building within the royal district. "Quit your complaining, Sir," Artemis stated, as she tied her hair up, took off her cloak and placed a black mask onto her face. "We can trade if you want," she added, looking down to the pair as they sat with Riley's sniper rifle and a pair of binoculars. "I wish Soner was still here - this was his job," Brett muttered, immediately regretting his choice of words as Riley's face fell. "Sorry," he quickly added.

"Are you good to go?" Riley asked Artemis, ignoring him. She nodded, finishing her stretches. "We've got your back, but if you can get out without issue..." "Got it. See you soon, Commander," Artemis stated, leaping off the side of the building. Riley let out a soft groan as she stretched before she lay down and looked down the scope of her rifle. Usually she'd have had one of her snipers as her spotter, usually Artemis, but it was pointless to have an assassin on board and not use her abilities. But why Alara had chosen Brett of all people to support her, Riley did not know.

"So..." he attempted, only to receive a soft and deliberate kick as Riley repositioned herself. "What do you normally talk about during these?" he questioned, laying down next to her. "We don't," Riley returned. Brett nodded. "Ah. Well, uh, what did you and Soner used to talk about? You spend so many hours together, I can't imagine you two didn't talk about something," he reattempted, vaguely following Artemis with his binoculars as she easily vaulted a barbed-wire fence and passed the patrolling guards. Riley grit her teeth as she now realised Alara's intentions.

With a sigh, she let it go. Consistently for the last few months, she'd almost always left the room whenever his name had been brought up – it hurt too much to think about him: his moronic, suicidal smile was scorched into her memories as his final act. She owed Chase Soner her life and that was a debt she could never repay. She would never speak to him again, and that hurt so, so much. "Funny enough, you were often a topic."

"In a good way, or... 'that asshole has done this' kind-of way?" Brett questioned. Riley smiled. "Bit of both. Mainly how much you had come around," Riley targeted, feeling heat radiate from Brett's scarred face. The wound hadn't healed much over the years: the right side of his face was still an angry burn, his right eye still milky blue compared to his other icy eye. "Right..." he said more cautiously, questioning to himself whether or not he wanted to talk anymore. "What did he say?" he eventually asked.

"That you'd unclenched that silver spoon your family had fisted you with." Brett chuckled softly and nodded. "That perhaps you stood a chance of rivalling Witchford someday, of being the best of us." Brett felt his body turn cold, his eyes dropping away from his binoculars to the floor. He'd never really had much chance to speak to Soner, never so much out of choice, but more-so because he'd just never thought much of him. Soner had always been a simple man, a plain person without much story, he'd always been in Riley's shadow, or the shadow

of someone else. "Astris is the best of us, I'd argue – or Alara, if she counts," Brett stated.

Riley nodded in agreement: the Rising Ace and the Captain were hard to not look up to. "They both don't count, they're Admiral-spawn," she stated. He thought for a moment. "You're not so bad," he told her. She broke contact from her scope to look at him. "What?" he questioned. She shook her head and looked back. "I don't know if you've ever complimented me before, that's all." He scoffed. "I'm not that much of an asshole, am I?" he asked. Riley didn't immediately answer. "No, I guess not. But you're no Soner." Brett nodded simply. "I don't think I ever could be." Riley didn't respond.

No one ever could be, she thought.

"You'll have to trust my word on it, Captain, but the Reapers had a base within the shipyards," Artemis told Alara as she, Brett and Riley joined them. "I figured it best to ensure I was untraceable so I didn't take anything." Alara nodded in simple agreement. "They used a false company to organise and dispatch materials to their other bases, whilst using one of the dry docks as their main base of operations. I have the location and route memorised," Artemis concluded. Alara looked across her team. "Then let's go."

It wasn't particularly difficult to find the dry-dock they were after. With so many sat empty, the location was practically deserted, even in the middle of the day. Signs and warnings had been left up as wards against intruders, but they were promptly ignored by the group, who entered with caution but little concern. There were signs of battle: bullet holes, fragments of armour and weapons, but no bodies, and it was clear it had happened some time ago.

Riley leapt up to a vantage point, scanning the area with her eyes before she pointed to a spot on one of the walkway rings that would have surrounded a ship. "There," she stated, "the conflict surrounded that spot. Look for an entrance, or a button that opens one." Wulf tore off the concealed door, tossing it aside with a crash. "That works too, I guess," Riley muttered, as she clambered down. A small hole had been dug into one of the concrete walls, with stairs spiralling down into darkness. Her crew stood cautiously around the area. "Riley, Artemis, stay here and watch our perimeter," Alara ordered, stepping inside into the darkness.

The stairs carried on for a while, eventually widening out as they descended into a cavern. They found themselves in a destroyed workshop. Books, glass and

papers decorated the floor – some splattered with traces of dried blood. Worktables and benches had been broken and tipped over. A bedroom of sorts filled with rough bunkbeds and floormats had been riffled through, with feathers and bedding torn apart and strewn everywhere. “Look out for traps, find anything you can,” Alara ordered, her group spreading out to search.

Alara’s heart raced in her chest: her parents had likely been in this very spot - she had not been this close to them in years. Her foot tapped something soft as she righted a table. Her eyes widened as she crouched down and picked up a children’s doll. She turned over papers nearby, finding a photograph of humans and non-humans, men and women, along with a few children. She saw her parents, both far older than she remembered, both far more weary, but still smiling. She pocketed the photo, standing up before drawing her glaive in a single movement. “We’ve got company!” Alara called out, hearing fast movement coming from another entrance.

Immediately, gold and blue guards rushed in, rifles raised and aimed to mirror Alara’s own group. No one fired, the area tight and enclosed, and likely deadly to all involved. “Who is in charge?” questioned a slightly more golden man, with a tight and thin moustache. The translator send the words straight to Alara’s mind. Her Marines waited for her signal, for her command to engage, but she couldn’t help but be curious as to how and where the other passage went. And if anyone could give her more information on her parents then the local forces were the ones to ask.

“I am,” Alara stated, drawing the Captain’s attention. He glanced towards her, briefly eyeing her up and down before a hint of recognition crossed his face as he looked at her face. “Identify yourself,” he ordered, a pistol in one hand, a sword in the other. “You first,” Alara returned. He glanced away from her, looking towards her pack of therians - all armed to the teeth and waiting to pounce. She saw hesitation and doubt.

“I am Captain Irall, of the Royal Defence Force. You have intruded upon a sealed area, why? For what purpose and for what reason?” he questioned, speaking directly to her. “We’re trying to locate two Admirals from the New World, they were last known to be with the Reapers,” Alara probed. There was a look of warded surprise. “You’re from the New World, I should have known from the accents. This battle will result in needless casualties. In exchange for letting your people go, I request you surrender yourself to me. I swear no harm will fall to you, and we will offer you information that may answer some of your questions.

You have already drawn too much attention, and we will not go down easily – this is your best option.”

Alara felt Wulf’s eyes on her. She knew what he was thinking, but this was an opportunity that was worth the risk. “Fall back,” she ordered to her Marines. “Captain?” Wulf questioned. Alara stepped forwards and disassembled her glaive, presenting the pieces to Captain Irall. “Get back to the ship. I will meet you there. That is an order, Commander.” Begrudgingly the wolves and Brett stepped back, retreating out of the workshop and leaving Alara behind. “A good choice, needless bloodshed weakens us both against our true enemy. Please, come with me. There is someone who will wish to meet you.”

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Light Reading**

Witchford was never a fan of sitting missions out, it always made him fear the worst, but he knew why Captain Vanathur had left him behind. She was preparing him to command his own ship, something he was both terrified and excited for, and that meant preparing for his absence in her missions. It felt inevitable, he and her had both had conversations about it with their superiors, and the only reason it hadn’t occurred already was that Witchford was not ready for it. His words, not theirs. He was a nervous fellow, after all.

It was something the others often missed about him. When they lost crew, friends, family – to them it appeared as if he didn’t feel it, or he was too good at focusing on the task at hand instead, but he did feel it. More than most would expect for someone as... cold as him. And, as he sat in Alara’s quarters surrounded by the wealth of information they had salvaged from the wrecked Fortress Ships, his mind wandered back to Axel, to Soner, to Gale, to all of their friends that had fallen.

A knock drew his attention to the door, the Weapon standing at attention in the doorway. “Sir, do you have a moment?” asked the cyborg. Witchford nodded, remaining seated and gesturing for the Weapon to sit. He opted to stand. “What can I help you with, Weapon?” Witchford asked, sitting up and looking towards him. There was hesitation and nervousness to the otherwise stoic man’s face. He looked unusually human. “It was about the question you asked me before we departed. About taking a command position,” Weapon began. Witchford nodded – it had been a passing comment whilst he and Alara had been constructing their crew. The Weapon had more than proven himself, and as Alara had put it, he deserved a chance to lose his name, to become a person again. “What have you decided?”

"I still don't know, Sir, the more I think about it the more confused I become. This whole affair confuses me. I was loyal to the Empire, to the Emperor, but that was all a lie. Now we serve the Republic, but we're not serving the people – we're looking for revenge. I don't know what I am anymore, and I think I'm better at following orders than giving them." Witchford nodded, looking back to the documents all around him. "I understand," he said, picking up a single sheet of paper before handing it to the Weapon. "The Hearts continent?" he questioned.

"This world was at war. Mages versus non-humans versus people like you versus a nation like our own. I cannot answer for you, but perhaps this nation might hold some answers for you. The information is limited, but you're welcome to help me understand all of this," Witchford suggested. The Weapon paused before he nodded and sat in one of the seats. "Nothing wrong with some light reading, I suppose." Witchford chuckled.

"No, most certainly not."

### **Chapter 169: One Step Forwards**

Alara almost immediately began to question her own sanity: she had handed herself over to the enemy without even a fight. She was risking everything - least of all, her life – for what? A potential lead on her parents. It was foolish, dangerous – something that Jayce would do. Yet, as her captors led her deeper into the city but away from prying eyes, she couldn't help but feel a little more at ease. Captain Irall spoke little, but his actions were clear: they were being discrete. He didn't want her capture to be known.

Alara glanced around: her hands and feet were unshackled. Albeit she would hate to lose her glaive, she could escape if she really tried. "How much further?" she pried. Captain Irall glanced back to her. "Close. My men are just ensuring there are no witnesses," he stated, coming to a halt. A gunshot rang out nearby. "Go and support. It likely won't be enough. Your sacrifice will not be forgotten or unpaid," he ordered, a trio of volunteers rushing forwards without question. "Sacrifice?" Alara questioned. Captain Irall pushed forwards, gesturing for her to follow as he broke into a run. Alara followed closely, only four of his original fifteen men still with them.

They came to narrow alley with a mahogany door built into the stone: an underground bar. "Head inside. They will be waiting for you," he ordered, handing her glaive back to her. "Do not let this meeting be unfruitful." Captain Irall and his men rushed off, more gunshots ringing out nearby. Alara faltered as she stood alone in the alleyway. It made no sense. It all seemed strange. She turned to the door, pushing it open and stepping inside. There was only one way to get answers.

The bar itself was quite something. The place was small, with room only for a handful of people. It was lavishly decorated with red felt and dark, varnished woods. A low light lit the bar and the few stools around it. A pair of elderly men were inside: a barkeep, dressed in smart black and white clothes behind the counter, and another sat on one of the stools. There was no one else present so Alara cautiously approached, sitting down next to the lone patron. Without question, an ochre-coloured drink was poured for her into a small glass with a ball of ice. Alara nodded appreciatively and took a cautious sip. It was strong, with a powerful smell and a brutal kicker, but not unpleasant. "Cheers," said the man next to her in a deep growl, raising his glass to her. Alara clinked her glass against his.

He was dressed formally, with a long, fitted white coat that sat tightly on his body. A short and shiny blue cape sat across his left shoulder, with a golden clasp that held it to his body. A golden sash bound his waist, and white trousers were visible beneath his long coat. His shoes were dark leather, and looked pristine. Simple jewellery adorned his fingers: a wedding band and a signet ring, both gold. A silver pocket watch ticked away in his left hand and a lone blue gemstone earring hung from his right ear.

“Captain Irall said you had information on the two Vanathur Admirals?” Alara questioned. He looked to her, his face tired and worn from years of duty. His eyes were a yellow-brown colour and held curiosity and, what Alara felt was, disappointment. He had wrinkled brown skin, and was bald – other than firm eyebrows and a dark walrus moustache. “I respect your desire for answers in relation to your parents, Captain Vanathur, but where I come from it is normally polite to ask the name of those you are drinking with.”

Alara tensed, her body telling her to run - but she fought it and remained where she sat. “I apologise, but it appears you know who I am already. So I presumed this was more business than personal pleasure. What is your name, sir?” Alara questioned, nursing her drink. He chuckled. “There are few in this world who would be unaware of who you are. The Warhorse displayed you and your nation quite clearly to the world and, although she may not recognise your name, I have.”

“It speaks greatly of your military that you braved this side of the world so boldly and so carelessly. It worries me, yet also brings me hope. I was Fleet Admiral Abdul Malik, of the first fleet, but you may refer to me now as old man, or Advisor Malik if you wish to be formal. I hold no such titles anymore, but some still view me as important, for some reason or another,” Advisor Malik stated. Alara cleared her throat nervously and righted her posture. “I... appreciate your words and for seeing me, Admiral,” Alara said cautiously.

“I am no Admiral anymore, I have no fleet. Please, for the sake of our conversation, I am but an old, curious man,” he stated. Alara nodded and he smiled. “You said you were an Advisor - in what way, might I ask?” Alara questioned. “I am retired, a gift from the Warhorse in exchange for the longevity of my people and family. But I volunteer to the Empty Throne to ensure her puppets and Null Legion do not overextend in my seas,” he answered, the barkeep refilling both of their glasses. “The Warhorse?” Alara questioned.

"She rode in from afar, her mane fiery and eyes fierce. Untempered and unstoppable, the mighty beast trampled all in her path. Through the unbroken gates she galloped, through the walls of our deepest sanctum she rode – into the heart of our world, into the hearts of our people. And she tore it out for the world to see. Our royalty reduced to ash beneath her feet," he told in a poetic manner. "Your nation has no leaders?" Alara questioned. He shot her a warning glare. "There will be always be leaders for my people: we are unbroken, but we mourn the descendants of those who created our nation. The Warhorse holds her name because she was unwavering in her goal to decimate us and all of our previous enemies."

"I understand. We were also caught off guard when she attacked, we were at the end of a civil war and... well, it doesn't matter," said Alara. "We lost to her too." He nodded. "And so you have been sent here to find those you sent before, your parents, in hopes they have information that you could use to mount a retaliation against the Sovereign?" he questioned. Feeling little other option, Alara nodded in confirmation.

"Sending you was a mistake, you are too close to your mission – you will take risks that endanger your mission and your people. You cannot afford to be discovered by the Sovereign, her influence spreads easily, even to those closest to you. The Betrayers hold their name for a reason. Khalid was once a great General under my command. Can you truly trust those around you?" he questioned. Alara didn't answer. "I would recommend you go home, you are too desperate for victory. Too visible. You cannot win. The Sea--"

"In all honesty, sir, it doesn't matter. If I succeed or not, this... secret war won't end. It won't be won by me or my people. My parents won't have some magic secret that will destroy the Sea Sovereign. But there is someone out there who I believe will find a way to bring about a better world. I just want to find my parents, to see them again after so long. I will do what I need to ensure that happens," Alara stated, as respectfully and honestly as she could. He looked down for a few moments before eventually nodding.

"That is disappointing, I had been hoping that you and your people may have been our salvation... Foreigners like you stand out, but sometimes that isn't a bad thing. If you seek to openly challenge the Sovereign, then there is a princess of the southern continent, that was a well-known benefactor for the Reapers at their earliest creation. Her name is Alice. Finding her may lead you in the direction of your family. I believe there is some festival due to occur at Watergate,

to the south of here. For all of our sakes, I hope your... hero appears soon." Alara nodded. "He's already on his way. Thank you, truly. I should probably get going. My people will be getting worried. But before I go... my parents, were either of them at the executions?" she questioned, worried about the answer. He stood up, looking up at her before extending a hand to her. "I do not recall their presence."

"Are you okay?" Riley questioned, as she met Alara on route back to the ship. Alara nodded, her mind racing as she thought through the conversation she had just had. "I met the Fleet Admiral of this region, the old one. There's lots to discuss. Are we good to leave?" Alara questioned. Riley nodded and they picked up speed. "I want everyone back to the ship, be ready for immediate departure," Alara ordered into her communicator.

It was only as the city disappeared from the horizon that Alara began to relax. She immediately summoned her Commanders into the strategy room and told them of what had happened. "Correct me if I misheard you, but did you say Alice? As in the Betrayer... Alice?" Riley questioned. Alara nodded. "Great." "For one reason or another she was helping the Reapers. We need to find out why and Watergate is apparently our best shot. Do we know anything about this city?" Alara questioned.

"There is a prominent arena found there, one that is backed and owned by the Guild. There were flyers being given out and the newspapers have been advertising an opportunity to duel members of the Betrayers for a prize of one million pearl," Witchford clarified. Riley's mouth fell open. "It is likely the Rising Aces will be heading there. They were recently spotted west of us." Alara let out an unconscious sigh of relief. She knew Jayce was most likely fine, but it was reassuring to have confirmation. "They will have their own goals, we have ours. We find where Alice is staying and force her to tell us what we need to know. Mark a heading, get us there."

Alara returned to her quarters and promptly collapsed onto her bed. It had been a trying and exhausting day that she was glad to have over. It had helped get her one step closer to her parents, but at the same time had raised so many questions that she wanted answering. With a groan she rolled over and grabbed a stack of notes Witchford had created for her to summarise of his research. There was work to do, she didn't have time to rest.

Wulf too struggled to sit still. The journey to Watergate was predicted to take a little over two weeks. And that was two weeks that he was not going to sit around and wait to pass. Alara had given herself up and there had been nothing he could

have done to stop it. If there were to be a next time, it would be unlikely to end anywhere near as well as it did. He couldn't afford that. He couldn't afford to lose another friend.

"Pick up the pace!" he ordered to his wolves, as they ran on the ship's treadmills in therian form. "Our target is a Betrayer. She could be stronger than we are, faster than we are – most definitely smarter than we are - and we need to be able to take her down. Captain Vanathur is counting on us." He glanced at the dial indicating their distance before glancing at the clock. "Time!" he declared, stopping the treadmill and stepping out into the main room of the training hall. "Free for all, top three don't have to do chores. Go wild!" he ordered, taking a defensive stance in the large ring in the centre of the hall.

Almost immediately his exhausted troupe turned on him, as they normally did. The rules were simple, get thrown out of the ring, the upper half of your body touches the floor, you get choked out – you're out. Boot and Channing held themselves back as the others surged forwards, all desperate for the punishment to end. Wulf grabbed the closest member to him, throwing them over his shoulder and delivering a swift kick to their back to ensure they landed out of the ring. He swept the legs of the runner up, using his elbow to drop them to the ground. A fist flew at his jaw and he pulled back, pressing into the elbow to direct it towards another of his troupe. A fist caught his ribs, another the side of his head. "Is that all you've got?" he yelled, charging forwards into his wolves.

Eventually the melee came to an end and Wulf staggered his way to the side of the room, his Marines sprawled across the floor in various positions. Their training sessions almost always ended this way: they all hated to lose. Wulf transformed into his human form, the pain fading from his body before he transformed back. It was a useful gift, a means of staving off injury, but he still hadn't figured out how to partially transform like Fleet Admiral Truth. He sat down and lowered his head. They could fight, but could they really beat a Betrayer? He wasn't so sure. A hand floated in front of his face and he looked up to see Boot stood over him. "We'll get there, won't we, Commander?" he questioned. "Damn right," Wulf returned, taking his hand.

Alara tried not to smile as she was handed a letter written in Jayce's handwriting. She took it with a nod and went into her quarters, locking the door before tearing it open. "Alara, I hope you're doing well. It's been a rough couple of weeks to say the least. There was an incident with Jeanne and that has led to tension amongst the crew. Astris has taken her under her wing and I couldn't be more proud of

them both. It's taken a lot for them both to reach a point where they see each other eye-to-eye and I know the Astris of old wouldn't have been able to do what she is now."

"We were visited by the Sea Sovereign. She had been watching us since we arrived in the Old World. Sétanta boarded the Stacked Hand without us realising, so be careful, it could happen to you as well. She said she had plans for me; I don't know what, but I'm worried. We're currently heading to Watergate to compete in the Sea Sovereign's game and try to speak to those we're after. I don't know what your goals are – don't tell me, if this goes wrong, I don't want to compromise you – but, if by some chance you're nearby, I would like to see you."

"Tempest has developed a functioning teleportation circle and it might help with your mission if fitted to your ship. Wicke should be heading to the Capital within the month, so I'm sure chaos will ensue. We managed to pull Zoya out of the orb... I spoke to her and she's moved on. But it filled me with thoughts on the future, ours and the world at large. Until the power balance is shifted, things won't change – they can't change. I will do what I can but, as always, I'm counting on you. Stay safe, stay hidden. I'll see you hopefully soon. Love from Jayce."

She set the letter down and leant back on her bed. It took a lot to unsettle Jayce, but a visit from the Sea Sovereign and a Betrayer hiding on his ship was more than enough reason to be spooked. She set the letter aside. The risks of their messages being intercepted were higher than ever. She couldn't tell Jayce her destination, and the odds of being able to see him were low – especially with eyes likely on him at all times. But it was good news at the very least. It was something she could work with.

### **Seize the Seas Tales: A Not-So-New Journey**

Wicke took in a deep breath as she stood on her flying carpet above the Last Drop. The heat of the Frontier Archipelago had finally started to fade away. Autumn was coming and it was coming fast, and with it she was ready to leave. Staring across the island in front of her and ignoring the few fishermen beneath her, she stepped forwards, dropping like a rock towards the water below before crashing into it. She sunk like a rock, holding onto her breath and slowly letting it out as she tried to feel the water on her body. And, for the first time in months, it didn't sting. She was healed.

"Damian! Damian!" Wicke yelled, still dripping wet as she banged on the door to their house. A crash came from within and the door opened. "What?" he

questioned in alarm. "Get packing, we leave on the first ship we can find going to the Capital," she stated, stepping inside. He watched her pass: she still had a faint burn scar on her cheek. She wasn't entirely healed. "But Yuthura said not to leave until you're fully healed."

"I am fully healed. The water didn't hurt today. This mark is probably not going to go away and, even if it does, that'll happen on our way to the Capital. Pack anything and everything you think we'll need. We have a ship to catch," she stated, trying to force her grin away. Damian stared at her dumbfounded. "Come on! Chop chop!" she ordered. "I'm going to shower, change and pack, but if there is a ship today we're getting on it. Understood?" she questioned. He nodded and she grinned. "It's time to explore some Dungeons."

### **Chapter 170: The Mountain Yet To Climb**

"Do we know if he's alright? It's been days," Arthuria questioned to Bjorn and Astris, as they stood outside of Jayce's quarters. Jayce's right and left hands glanced towards each other before back at Arthuria. "It... happens from time to time," Bjorn explained, his own concerns for Jayce's wellbeing mounting. "When he gets an idea, or some strategy comes to his mind, he falls into it – dives into it. It's normally a good thing." Arthuria looked towards Astris, her face betraying her thoughts as she stared passively towards Jayce's door. "Then why do you both look so worried?" Arthuria cut through.

Jayce barely registered the door to his room creaking open, it was only as he heard the wind rustle and move the papers he had carefully and precisely decorated his floor with that he turned to see who had intruded into his mind. "Are you okay?" Bjorn questioned, looking at the fatigue across Jayce's weary face and hunched body. Jayce nodded, straightening his back with a groan before stretching. Bjorn glanced down at the chaos: it was insanity - scrawls of countless papers that held no real reason to them, but undoubtably meant something to Jayce.

"Have I missed anything?" Jayce asked at last, standing up from his chair and beginning to collect up his notes. "A few fights, a few arguments, and a few days of Ordo's bone-breaking training, but otherwise no. Tempest's golems are online and we think we've had no intruders, but it's impossible to tell at the moment. Explain... this to me. What have you been doing? The others are beginning to worry."

"It's nothing particularly important," Jayce passed off. Bjorn folded his arms. "Plans for the future, little more. A longshot built on a lot of luck and everything going right." Bjorn helped pick up some of the documents, glancing them over before handing them to Jayce. Bjorn spotted both Damian and Wicke's names on multiple sheets. "Well, anything I can do to help with this?" Bjorn asked. Jayce nodded. "You already are."

"We're about three days away from Watergate," Bjorn summarised, as he and Jayce stepped out into the open air. "So we're going to be there early? Good," Jayce stated. "It gives us time to find the Arena, scope it out, and maybe get the drop on the Betrayers before it begins. If we can separate Vexx, Tanare, or Elaine from the others then we may be able to achieve our goal without even entering." Bjorn nodded in agreement. "If not, who do you plan on entering? Bar yourself,

of course,” he questioned. A faint and mischievous grin slipped out through Jayce’s face. “Who do you think?”

Thalia let out a long yawn as she leant on the railing next to Jayce, as Watergate came into view. The city was beautiful, with little doubt in her mind about that. It was a metropolis on the waves, crafted like a magnificent wedding cake, only with large aqueducts of water that painted the city. There were endless ships surrounding the island, but Thalia could see Jayce’s attention was elsewhere. He was looking up and, moments later, she too saw what he saw.

Beyond the city of Watergate, floating in the sky, or perhaps even sailing along the winds, was a battleship. It was ginormous: a floating bastion of metal and wood, with a haze of metal flyers in escort. There was no question of its allegiance, the sheer exuberance of status and the bold jade colours told them both immediately that it was the Guild’s. “By the Gods!” Bjorn stated, noticing it too as the flying citadel began to descend. “What is that?” he asked. Jayce faltered before answering. “I think that’s where the prize money is coming from,” he stated. “Can we get one?” Bjorn asked. Jayce chuckled before shaking his head, only to then pause in thought as an idea came to his mind. “I don’t think we can afford that, but I think a flyer might be within our budget.”

They brought the Stacked Hand into dock and, after a few moments to disembark, Jayce pulled the ship into its container before turning to his crew. “Enjoy your rest, stay together. I’ll see you at the arena,” he stated, before his crew split up into their usual groups. Only a few remained behind, the most curious of being Marisha – who distinctly looked like she had something to say. “Jayce,” she said softly, drawing his attention.

“Hmm?” he questioned, turning to look at her. He had been expecting her to join him, Bjorn, Caelie and Thalia, but she clearly had other plans. “I’m...” she began, before faltering. “I think my mother will be on that Guild fortress. I should go and see her. Can I take Caelie and Mai Lu with me?” she requested. Jayce glanced past her to Mai Lu as she stood tapping her foot on the floor impatiently. “Okay, yeah – go ahead. Get us a flyer if you can, one that fits our empty berth. And stay safe.” She nodded appreciatively, before glancing towards Caelie and then tilting her head away from Jayce’s group. Caelie let out an exaggerated sigh before she glared at Jayce and then stomped off. “What?” he questioned obliviously, before turning to Bjorn and Thalia. “She wanted to spend time with you. Make it up to her later. Let’s go, I’m getting bored,” Thalia answered, before walking off. Jayce and Bjorn shrugged to each other before following.

It was quite something to be in a city as large as the Republic Capital once again, and it was clear from the volume of lost-looking people that the incoming event had drawn in a large amount of tourists. For a prize as large as a million Pearl and combatants as famous as the Betrayers it was far from surprising, but everywhere that Jayce looked were advertisements for the Watergate Arena – advertisements showing Vexx, showing Elaine and other Betrayers. It made Jayce nervous: it was finally time to see Vexx again.

They did some light shopping, mainly clothes to blend in better with the locals. Watergate sat between the southern, northern and western regions of Diasta, Brunxchume and Crea – and with it came a blend of a variety of cultures. The clothes were colourful – reminiscent of the Crean tribes of the West, flowy yet neat – representing the rigid and militaristic naval background of the Brunxchume North and, finally, functional, with pockets galore and an inner leather lining that provided a small amount of protection to the wearer. The last of which came from the southern lands of Diasta. Bjorn and Jayce immediately came to like their new outfits, but the loud ripping of cloth as Thalia altered hers brought only great shame and horror to them both. “Animal,” they both muttered, as she turned her sleeves into bandages before putting them away.

As they climbed the ring-like layers of the city, they came to a viewpoint overlooking a large courtyard. It was extremely busy, with a heavy buzz of travellers that swarmed like ants as the trio looked down upon them. But the people seemed to circle, their attention drawn inwards to someone leaning on the central fountain. Even from afar, Jayce, Bjorn and Thalia recognised the familiar tunes of their friend – her long and flowy blue hair distinct amongst the mass of brown. Jayce couldn’t help but smile, the city was where Zeta thrived – it was where she belonged, and once this was all over, he would do everything he could to ensure she became the star she dreamt of.

It had been several hours of exploring the city before they found the Arena. Even before they arrived they could hear the cheers of the crowd inside. “The event hasn’t even begun, but there’s still fights going on?” Jayce questioned curiously. “Warmups or preliminaries, I would guess,” answered Bjorn. “Just imagine how many people will want to test themselves against the Betrayers – they can’t fight everyone.” Jayce nodded in acknowledgement. It made sense, but made him wonder whether it meant that he too would have to prove himself before he could even see Vexx.

They rounded a corner, entering the long road leading to the main entrance of the giant bowl-shaped arena. It looked very similar to the one back home, but was even larger with a trio of smaller arenas placed on the outside. Bright orange banners decorated the surface, along with numerous green markings - identifying the area as Guild property. "The Ogre," Bjorn stated, pointing at the closed fist symbols on the orange banners. "What?" Thalia questioned, glancing at the large statues lining the path. "One of the Guild Masters. He bought the old Capital Arena. It seems he owns this one too." A moment passed and then Jayce and Bjorn looked at each other. "You don't think...?" Jayce questioned. Bjorn shook his head. "He couldn't be here, right?"

Their questions were answered almost immediately as they entered the main entrance, finding a large portrait mounted on one of the walls showing the current arena owner: Ming the Magnanimous. "Excuse me," Jayce immediately stated, stepping through the bustle to the main desk. The desk worker looked away from the customer she was serving - the large man immediately beginning to size Jayce up. "You'll have to wait your turn, sir, please head to the back of the queue." Jayce unleashed a flash of Panic in all surrounding directions, other than the main desk, the queue stepping away to let him in - including the man at the front. "Jayce Exarga, I'm here to see the owner."

They were brought almost immediately to Ming's office, along with a slew of apologies and bowed heads. Normally, Jayce didn't particularly like flaunting his status or power, but he had no intention of waiting when he was this close and he had better things to do than wait in line. After being led through a very similar structure to the Republic Arena: travelling along a large overlooking ring of boxed rooms, separated by paper sliding doors, they found themselves stood inside a brightly lit room.

Treasures and trophies of large monstrous beasts lined the walls, along with ornate sets of armour and weapons. Paintings of mythical fights hung over the main desk, and a loud ticking pendulum clock sat on top of the shiny, silver wood. The room was empty but the attendant with them immediately gestured to an array of seats in front of the large desk. "May I get you a drink?" they requested. "Something strong," Thalia stated, as Jayce and Bjorn dismissed the question. Soon they found themselves alone.

"This brings back memories," Bjorn eventually stated, leaning back in his chair - the wood creaking. "Which ones?" Jayce questioned, his own mind wandering. Bjorn reached inside his pocket and pulled out his Guild token, the one signed

personally by the Phoenix. "The time the Guild tied me up and beat me, and when Vexx then got me out," he said quietly. Thalia eyed Jayce and Bjorn carefully. "This whole thing stinks," Bjorn stated. "It's either arrogance from the Sovereign and she wants the Betrayers to lose, or they are unbeatable and this is aimed at killing off potential challengers. Either way this isn't worth the money, and it wasn't then either."

"Then it's a good thing we're not here for the reward money," Jayce stated. "Vexx, Elaine or Tanare. We need answers and-" The doors opened and a small group of people entered the room. Jayce and Bjorn stood but Thalia remained seated, taking a small glass of a strong liquor from the attendant whilst lazily looking backwards to see who had arrived. "Captain Exarga, welcome," came a deep growl of a voice.

Several Guild guards stood at the back, dressed from head-to-toe in their gold and jade armour, but before them stood a well-dressed, giant man - not quite in height, but in volume. He was built like a wrestler: short and broad-shouldered, with large arms and short legs. He was dark-skinned, with a bald head and a thick, black moustache. "The Ogre, I presume?" Jayce questioned, stepping forward and shaking the outreached hand. The grip was firm and crushing, probing Jayce's hand to see how he would respond. Jayce crushed back and the Ogre quickly released his hand before chuckling. "Indeed I am. Welcome, I presume you are here for the festival?" he asked, stepping past Jayce and walking to the desk before sitting down. "I am," Jayce answered, his attention away from the Ogre and towards Ming as he shied away from Jayce.

The middle-aged man looked exhausted, but he hadn't changed much from their last tense meeting. He was still dressed unusually and in bright cyan and magenta. He still sported his noodle-like moustache and strings of hair from his chin but they had started to grey. He tried to meet Jayce's eyes before he looked away and bowed his head, retreating to the Ogre's side. Jayce sighed quietly before he walked back to his seat and sat down.

"Well, I cannot say anything other than that's good to hear. Having another Pirate Lord - oh, excuse me - ex-Pirate Lord, entering this event will help with our sales, and hopefully deal with a portion of this monetary black hole that's been forced upon us," he grumbled. "Any of your crew as well?" Jayce raised an eyebrow. "Who else is here?" he questioned, leaning forwards as Thalia clicked her fingers for a refill. "Only Ruyn, what's it to you?" the Ogre questioned. Jayce

shook it off. "There's three of us entering. Myself, this one and another called Arthuria. We will skip the preliminaries," Jayce stated.

The Ogre faltered, thinking cautiously as he read Jayce's casual yet firm demeanour. "Fine – not my problem. Ming, you pathetic rat, get it sorted," he growled. "Y-yes s-sir," squeaked Ming, before furiously scribbling on a notepad. "Anything else?" the Ogre questioned. Jayce couldn't help but admire that the Ogre was smart enough not to try to extort anything from him. He wasn't asking for fees or anything similar, and there was no discussion of payment either. "No, that's all. Thank you." The Ogre nodded and gestured towards the doors. Jayce stood up and Thalia and Bjorn followed. "Ming," Bjorn said softly. The old promoter glanced towards him and Bjorn nodded to him. "Thank you for getting the boys out. Goodbye," he stated.

They left the manager's office behind. "You didn't ask about the Betrayers?" Bjorn questioned. "The Ogre's worried about a no-show - they're not here yet," Jayce answered. "Odds are they won't arrive until the day. So let's find a place to stay and get some food," he added, stepping towards the window and looking down at the arena beneath him. "And figure out just what I'm going to say to him."

The days passed quickly and, as Jayce had suspected, the Betrayers didn't arrive until the day of the festival. The entire city of Watergate was alive with excitement, with every seat in the arena filled and large crowds on the streets outside. But Jayce, Arthuria and Thalia had other things to think about. They stood in one of the boxes overlooking the Arena – the rest of the crew amongst the crowds. The entire area roared with energy – the crowd cheering as a man dressed in golden armour, with a helmet covered in a large red plume, stepped onto the sands.

Ruyn Masse seemed unchanged, but no one had seen Ruyn's flagship and, for a ship that big, it was unusual. Ruyn bounced on the balls of his feet, a pair of large black swords in his hands, as he awaited his opponents arrival. And moments later, a figure floated down from above into the Arena. He had tanned skin, a huge grey beard and long messy hair. "Myrddin," Arthuria muttered, curious to see how the Mage would fight.

The crowd fell into silence as the announcer spoke, but Jayce's eyes drew away from the floor of the arena, instead aiming towards a quartet of large stone pillars at the edges of the ring. They each pulsed with arcane energy, with green rings of light rising up the white monoliths. A worker stood at the base of one, carrying

a huge, purple magic stone that they then slotted into the pillar. They turned and raised up a thumb before rushing off, and a moment later the fight began.

Ruyn charged towards Myrddin, his armour glinting in the sunlight and flames wreathing his swords. The old Mage stood unafraid, staring down Ruyn as he advanced – chanting. A spellbook floated in front of him, its leather cover glowing bright white before the aura spread out and surrounded Myrddin's entire body. Ruyn swung his swords, but Myrddin stepped to the side as the heavy blades slammed down into the sand where he had been. Ruyn seemed to freeze, his eyes wide beneath his helmet as Myrddin brought his arms back and out before he clapped his hands together.

The glass in front of Jayce shattered and when Jayce looked back to the arena, having turned away to protect his face, the sands in front of the Wizard had been painted red. What remained of ex-Pirate Lord Ruyn Masse was scattered on the grounds in front of Myrddin, and there was very little of him left to see – other than a still-standing bit of leg and a hand on the floor. "My turn next," Thalia stated excitedly. "No, absolutely not," Jayce countered, his heart racing in his chest.

The red across the ground began to glow green before it lifted off the sands and was pulled back together – reforming into the naked body of Ruyn as he was fully regenerated. Jayce glanced towards the pillars, spotting that one of them had depowered, the green rings of energy completely gone. "Tempest, can we get one of those?" came Bjorn's voice through Jayce's communicator. There was a moment of thought before the response came. "Potentially, Quartermaster, however the crystals required to run such a machine may render it not worth the cost," answered the djinn. Jayce glanced down towards the depowered pillar, another huge magic stone being loaded into it. "I would prefer not to need an immortality field on my ship, if it can be helped," Jayce added.

"How are you enjoying the show?" came a voice that sent a shudder down Jayce's spine. He brushed glass off his shirt and turned to face the Serpent as she stood by the sliding doors to the box, Marisha by her side. She hadn't changed much since he had last seen her. She still looked almost identical to Marisha, only twenty-something years older and without the burns on her face. Her light-brown hair hung over the left side of her face, her orange eyes locked onto his.

Jayce couldn't help but feel uneasy, his memories of her cold, cruel and calculating tactics were still burned into his mind. He scanned her using Focus, she appeared to be present and, given the unusually casual autumnal clothes she

had on, he was cautioning that she was actually here and he wasn't looking at an image. As if reading his mind, Marisha placed a soft hand onto her mother's arm, drawing her attention off of Jayce. "Mother, play nice – please." The Serpent smiled, before nodding. "I simply asked a question of your Captain, dear," she said softly, looking back at him.

Arthuria and Thalia both glanced back and forth between the Serpent and Jayce. This was their first meeting with the Serpent, but the stories they had heard from the crew drew out immediate caution from Arthuria. Thalia just shrugged and turned back to the Arena to watch the next fight. "The immortality field is... interesting," Jayce eventually answered, glancing towards Marisha and silently checking in on her. Wordlessly she responded with little more than smile and he eased up.

"Isn't it just," the Serpent responded. "Manticore and Kraken argued for weeks over its ownership, and unfortunately we've only found the one. The Sea Sovereign insisted we use it as to not... damage her toys. And as you can see it works quite well." Jayce felt eyes on him and he turned down to the fight beneath. Vexx withdrew his blood-covered fist from the torso of a huge man covered in body armour. The corpse fell back with a crash and Vexx immediately began to walk off the field. "He's here," Jayce muttered, only to flinch as he turned and looked down at the Serpent who had moved to his side. She held a key in her hand, spinning it on her finger.

"There's a rather pleasant hotel for those who can afford it," she hinted, a clip on the keyring stating: the Everest. Jayce looked at her in confusion as she stepped back and pocketed the key before walking towards the doors. "Good luck, I hope you find what you're looking for," she stated promptly before leaving. Marisha stood in the doorway, uncertain as to what to do. "Daughter!" came her mother's voice a moment later. "I'll see you later," she quickly stated, before following.

The doors to the arena opened and Jayce stepped through. The air of the afternoon was cool, and the sun was beginning to set, but Jayce hardly noticed. The ground shook with each step, the endless onlookers chanting his name as he stepped out into the open. He was the first of his crew to fight and it was time to see just how well he measured up to the Betrayers. His heart pounded in his chest, his breath short and sharp, every muscle and tendon taut and ready for a fight. Sola and Luna chattered in his mind, his anticipation passing on into them as he circled and spread his arms out for the crowd, before he commanded them

to form into a pair of large curved blades. The crowd cheered for him, but moments later the cheers changed and a different name was cheered.

“Knight! Knight! Knight!” roared the arena, as Elaine stumbled in. She was drunk, that much was immediately obvious. On close glance, she truly did look like Arthuria – only broader, bulkier and a fair bit taller. Dark makeup surrounded her golden eyes, a spattering of freckles covered the bridge of her pointed nose, and her ears were slightly tipped, with a variety of piercings in them. “Elaine,” Jayce stated, trying not to show disappointment.

She looked at him with a tilted head before rolling her eyes and letting out a sigh. “I’m Jayce Exarga, I’ve come here with your sister – Arthuria,” he attempted, as the claxon rang out to initiate the fight. She ignored him, surging forwards with her weapons still sheathed on her lower back. Jayce raised his swords, gritting his teeth as he thought about what he could possibly say. He had been counting on it being Tanare or Vexx. He knew nothing about her.

Jayce blinked as she disappeared, his eyes wide in confusion as he stared at the crowd behind him, her hands on his head and the rest of his body facing the other way.

*Fuck*, he thought. He then died.

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Long-term Foes**

“Jayce, can you hear me? Jayce, please respond! To any members of the Rising Aces, we’re nearby, can you hear us?” Alara questioned, as her crew docked at the giant city of Watergate. She had tried numerous times and a moment of worry filled her mind as she questioned whether or not her communicator had stopped working. “Alara?” Bjorn questioned, bringing immediate relief to her. “Bjorn is that you? Where’s Jayce?” she returned, pacing back and forth across the deck of her ship. “He’s... got a head injury – he’s recovering at the moment but will be fine in a little bit. Where are you?” he questioned. She faltered, a flash of worry crossing her mind before she shut it down. “Docking bay eighty-three.” “Okay, I will send Tempest there. We’re at the Arena, and about to head off to visit the Betrayers in a hotel called Everest.” She grinned. She’d always liked Bjorn, now she liked him even more.

Wordlessly Alara counted down, using her fingers. Three. Two. One. Wulf kicked open the door and charged in with the Weapon close behind. Alara

followed, her glaive in hand as she scanned the room, before turning her attention to a red-faced girl sat at a dinner table holding a knife and fork. "Put the weapon down," Wulf ordered, as Alice's knuckles turned white. As if to make a point, Alice threw her knife across the room – the blade passing Alara's head before going straight through the wall behind her. "Can I eat my dinner in peace?" she asked. "I get awfully hangry," she threatened with a growl. Alara looked at the food on her plate. It was a steak of some kind – the meat practically raw and barely seared. Alara looked at her squad. "Guard the doors. I'll be fine," she stated, looking Alice up and down.

She was young: a teenager, or in her very early twenties, with pale skin, baby-blue eyes and slightly curly blonde hair. She wore a simple t-shirt and cargo trousers. On close inspection, she had a scar at the left corner of her mouth and, when she opened her mouth to bite her steak, Alara noticed she had a few extra pointed teeth. She glared at Alara but otherwise tried to ignore her. "What do you want?" she eventually asked, with a distinct essence of anger.

"I'm looking for information," Alara stated, trying to be as intimidating as she could whilst adding a layer of Panic to her words. In response, Alice lifted her hands off the table and made a mocking face of fake fear. "Ooh, scary. And no shit, what information?" she asked, going back to her food, before giving up and clicking her fingers at Brett. "I need your knife," she ordered. Brett shook his head. "No."

"Then cut my food for me, scarface." Brett grumbled as he stepped forwards on her orders before faltering as Alara stared at him. He stepped back, a look of confusion on his face. "Do that again and I'll slap antimagic cuffs on you," Alara threatened. Alice rolled her eyes. "I want information on the Reapers. You used to be their ally, what happened? Why did you betray them?" Alara questioned, reaching down to Alice's plate and sliding it out of her reach. "It's in the name, it's what we do," she responded. Alara didn't react, staring down at her. "Ugh, look – uh, Al... uh, um, Alicia?" Alara didn't respond.

"Look, I believed in the cause. The undead should be buried. But it was futile – pointless, and inevitably suicidal. I helped at first and I didn't betray them until there was no other choice, at that point the Vanathur's – oh yeah, Alara Vanathur, that's your name. Your parents...? I'm guessing. Were fools to think they could stand up to the Sea Sovereign. I warned them – everyone warned them." "Where are they?" Alara growled.

Alice shrugged. "I don't know, probably in any one of the mass graves the Reapers made for themselves." Alara stepped forwards placing the blade of her glaive to Alice's neck. "Bullshit! You know more than you're telling. Where are they? Last chance or I paint this room with you!" Alara threatened. Alice cackled, rocking on her chair before she stood up and grabbed the blade of Alara's glaive holding it firmly to her own neck. "Go on, kill me! Do it! The Sea Sovereign would string you up for it, just like she did your mother's Commander. Perhaps your crew will get to watch. There's something poetic to a reversal like that."

"Captain, we need to go! Now!" called out Wulf from the corridor, just before a hand burst through the brick wall behind Alice and dragged her backwards through it. A moment later, as the dust began to settle, Alara found herself staring at Sétanta, his spear in one hand. "Go!" Alara ordered, throwing her glaive at the window overlooking the city and shattering it, before jumping out after it.

### **Chapter 171: A Long Road Still to Walk**

Jayce let out a groan as he came to consciousness in a medical bed. A rolling series of sighs of relief drew his attention to those watching over him: his crew – Astris, Caelie, Bjorn, Yuthura and a few others. Jayce rubbed his eyes before squinting as the bright lights of the large room blinded him. “What’s going on?” he questioned, trying to sit up - only for Bjorn to hold him down. His crew looked at him with concern and his eyes quickly widened as he recalled why. “How are you feeling?” Bjorn asked.

“Better than I’d expect for someone who, I’m guessing, just died. I feel fine. How long have I been out?” Jayce questioned. Bjorn took his hand back and Jayce sat up. “About twenty minutes. Arthuria’s just started her fight,” Astris stated. The doors to the infirmary opened and a bed rolled in with Arthuria laying upon it – her armour broken open around her waist in a manner that looked like it had been thrust through from behind. “Correction: Arthuria’s just lost her fight,” Bjorn stated.

Jayce stood up from his bed, his legs slightly wobbly as his mind came back to life but he quickly shook it off. “We have the location of the hotel that the Betrayers are at. Alara and her crew have already headed there,” Bjorn summarised. “Alara’s here?” Jayce questioned, watching Yuthura as she checked over Arthuria before nodding back to him. “She is. I’ve sent Tempest to her ship.” “Perfect. Then let’s get going. Where’s Thalia?”

Jayce couldn’t help but grit his teeth as he looked down from one of the boxes at the arena field below. Vexx darted across the battlefield in cautious and deliberate leaps as Thalia pursued him with her anchor. Vexx had clearly underestimated her. His left arm was broken – nastily, from the visible blood – and Thalia was out for glory. She swung downwards, smashing the ground hard and throwing up sand that completely obscured her.

Jayce switched to Focus, seeing the sands shift and swirl as the pair fought each other at an unfathomable speed. Thalia was wreathed in cyan colours, but in the sharp bursts that Vexx utilised his own dark noir emerged. She swung and he stepped into her reach, throwing a sharp fist towards her chest that forced her to drop her weapon in order to block it with her hands. Thalia skidded backwards, her body shaking as she breathed heavily. Her eyes were wide, her mouth hanging slightly open as she licked her lips. To anyone else it was an expression of fear; to all that knew her it was her adrenaline fuelled insanity, that teetered

the line between an animalistic lust for blood, and a pure search for proof of being alive. And Thalia had never felt so alive.

She roared as she raced forwards and, without thought, Vexx took a protective step back that brought a flash of confusion to his face. In the moments that passed for him before she arrived, all occurring within microseconds to the rest of the Unfocused world, Vexx analysed her body - her spirit - her aggression. They were unrefined: trained, yet not controlled. Yet as he caught himself stepping back from her blast of subconscious Panic – something far beneath his own – he realised that she was improving with every moment. Every second the fight prolonged, she grew closer to him. He actually could lose if it went on too long. Vexx grinned back.

He had time: the stages of Focus were exponential and Thalia was beneath him. His strength was twice hers if applied properly, his reaction time half of hers. He gripped his forearm, the bone broken in several places – with a large piece sticking through his skin. He yanked, isolating the nerves in his arms and shutting them down as he forced his bones back into their positions with his muscles and other arm. The wound was far from healed, but it would hold – just long enough for him to put on a show.

He glanced briefly towards Jayce and Bjorn in their box. What did they think of him? Was he still the pathetic scum that they had no choice but to remove? It had all been his fault. They had been right: he had been out of control – an addict that nearly got Wicke killed. He would have gotten one of them killed had he stayed. He looked down. He wished he could apologise to them. Go back to them and start again. But Jayce probably hated him for leaving, and Scáthach was his new master. The best Vexx could do was protect them, and that meant staying away at all costs.

He looked back towards Thalia, but she was far closer than he had been expecting. “Fu-” he grunted, as she hooked his waist with her arms, twisted behind him and then lifted him backwards over her body to slam him into the ground in a Suplex. Vexx groaned as he lay on the floor, his neck injured and mind dazed. He immediately rolled, squeezing his muscles to put pressure on his damaged spine, but Thalia grabbed his ankle with both arms – lifting him up to her shoulder before she swung him again down towards the floor.

The crowd cheered, but not as loud as Ordo. “That’s my girl!” he roared inside the box. “I taught her that!” Jayce and Bjorn glanced at each other. Vexx had been one of the greatest fighters they had known. He had been an Emperor’s Fist

Assassin, capable of coordinating and utilising every part of his body - down to even controlling the processes of his organs. If there was anyone who could handle a brutal combination from Thalia – it was him.

Thalia didn't release him. She pivoted and attempted to slam him again but, as she swung him over her shoulder, Vexx dislocated his hip. He twisted around, placing his hands over Thalia's face and digging his fingers into her eyes. She released his leg and screamed in pain. With a crack and a pop, Vexx fixed his hip by controlling his muscles – pushing off Thalia as she swung an elbow to him. She turned and stared at him – one eye burst, the other bleeding.

"It was a good fight," Vexx stated earnestly. "You should be proud." Thalia charged him, and Vexx took a defensive stance. She leapt, concentrating on her fist as she prepared to throw. It erupted into black flames. Thalia grinned as she threw it, the air warping around it. But it missed as Vexx tilted his head to the side. "Congratulations, you're the strongest," he said coldly. Throwing a slow fist into her chest. It hurt but felt light. Vexx threw another, again making contact but this time to her ribs. Then came another, and another, and another.

Jayce stared in horror as Thalia stood paralysed, one blow coming after another in a continuous stream that blurred between Vexx and her. They were uncountable and, after the first hundred or so, Thalia began to react - her body shaking and spasming as it finally caught up to what was being done to it. The fists turned red before stopping and Thalia stumbled backwards in distinct confusion. She looked down and then back at Vexx. Before she took a step and shattered into a thousand fragments.

Vexx stared in horror, a moment of genuine fear having crossed his mind as the juggernaut, that had been Thalia, had stepped forwards after receiving his hits. No one had done that before. It shouldn't have been possible: the sheer shock and trauma his hits had dealt should have destroyed her nerves beyond use. The arena roared with his victory and the immortality field began to regenerate her. Unusually, Vexx waited for her to be rebuilt. She had earned a moment of his attention – she deserved his respect.

He stepped forwards, taking off his bloodied and dirty shirt to lay over her naked body. Her eyes immediately bolted open, portraying stark madness, and she lunged for him. He slapped her hand away and the shock of her death passed into her mind – her body slumping once more. Vexx smiled as he stepped back, glancing up towards Jayce before nodding his subtle approval. He then walked out of the arena – a renewed hope in his mind.

“And with that concludes our challenges. To the surprise of perhaps no one, the Betrayers are unparalleled in their battles – indomitable and supreme. But don’t go anywhere folks. To conclude this festival, the Sea Sovereign has granted a special show for you all. The Betrayers found no equals on the battlefield today, but this evening – perhaps they shall find equality amongst each other. Book your tickets now!”

Jayce let out a short sigh: partially of relief, partially of disappointment. Thalia had lost, but even at a disadvantage had done considerable damage. Where Vexx lay in internal ranking within the Betrayers would tell them all a lot about just how much, or how little, of a chance they stood against them. He had to see the fights later. Jayce had to know. He nodded to himself, turning to look at Bjorn and the others.

“Thalia is down and needs to rest. Zeta, go and be with her. Yuthura will want your help. Tell Arthuria to come to us,” he ordered. Zeta nodded, rushing off without word. “Boys and Ordo, head to Tempest’s location. Keep him safe. Mai Lu and Marisha, make sure that we have everything we need for our journey west. Here’s the ship.” Jayce handed the vessel to Marisha before looking at the rest of his crew. “Let’s go pay the Betrayers a visit.”

“Stay here,” Jayce ordered to a few of his crew, looking at the broken glass on the floor outside of the hotel that the Betrayers were staying at. Quietly and cautiously, he, Bjorn, Astris and Arthuria made their way inside. A swarm of attendants immediately rushed towards them. “I do apologise, but we are fully booked,” stated the leader, with a deep look of nervousness. Jayce nodded, turning and looking at his lieutenants. “They say they’re fully booked. It’s a good thing we’ve been invited by the Betrayers,” he lied, adding a firm level of Panic to his words. The group immediately cowered away. “My apologies, sir, we were not informed. Please follow me to the elevator.”

The four of them rode the elevator in silence, each of them nervous for different reasons, but equally ready for what seemed to be an inevitable fight. “Whatever happens,” Jayce said softly, “prioritise getting yourselves out of here. I will be fine.” The doors dinged and opened, revealing a long corridor full of destruction. A fight had occurred, one that had been clearly one-sided. Bullet holes scored the walls, along with giant claw marks. Bullet casings littered the floor along with broken blades, blood splatters and torn dark clothes. Astris and Arthuria glanced at each other as Bjorn and Jayce stepped forwards without fear.

Jayce entered into Focus, immediately noticing a figure watching him through the walls. She sighed. "For fuck's sake!" came a voice from a room up ahead. Jayce led the way, stepping into one of the only rooms that hadn't been trashed. Alice was sat on a sofa, nursing a bruise on her eye and a split lip. She glared at Jayce, completely ignoring the others whilst drumming her fingers on her leg. "I would offer tea but, as you can see, my last guests behaved badly," she said sarcastically.

"Where are the others?" Jayce questioned, standing defensively and expecting a fight. "Gone, busy... drunk? I don't know. What's it to you? Who are you looking for?" she pried, with distinct and immediate tactical questioning. Jayce bit his tongue, feeling a subconscious desire to answer her question without thought. "Vexx," answered Bjorn, Alice's subtle magic working on him before he could stop himself. "Elaine," answered Arthuria, similarly falling for it but stopping herself from saying their relation.

Alice's eyes widened slightly but she hid her expression as much as she could. She read Bjorn's body and face before trying to do the same through Arthuria's helmet – her armour for the most part still broken. Even with the four of them before her and Alice completely alone, she seemed unafraid – unconcerned – and, most worryingly, in control. "Why?" she pressured, sitting forwards and this time physically displaying her Bardic magic – her throat, mouth and eyes glowing a radiant blue.

Jayce felt his mind warp. He couldn't understand it. All magic required a chant of sort, or some other means of channelling the arcane intention of the wielder. Alice seemed to not need it. Zeta, the closest in abilities to her, still needed to whistle or make some other melodic sound. His mouth opened, his thoughts bubbling out of him as he readied to spill his secrets. "Stop drumming, or I will shoot off a finger," Astris threatened, aiming her pistols at Alice's hands. The magic faded and Alice folded her arms. "You're no fun!" she protested, leaning back on the sofa. "But as I said, they're not here."

"Want me to leave a message? Or should I call them all here?" she asked with a wide grin. "Jayce, this isn't going to go anywhere we want," warned Bjorn, turning and looking towards the door as an imminent sense of danger began to fill his body. "Captain Vanathur jumped, I'd just like to state," said Alice with a grin, pointing to the window. A loud ding indicated the arrival of the elevator to the floor. Jayce summoned Sola and Luna, swinging towards Alice with intent to kill. Like a coiled gymnast, she vaulted backwards – performing a handstand on

the back of the sofa before tucking and kicking as hard down to the floor as possible. It gave way and she disappeared to the floor below in a fast retreat. "Damn," Jayce muttered, turning towards the door as he questioned who had arrived before looking instead to the nearest wall. "Get ready!" Jayce ordered, as something cut a large cross through it.

The wall fell away, revealing a very angry Sétanta on the other side. "She has a real mouth on her, but the lady still deserves some peace from time to time. I don't appreciate this intrusion, Exarga," he growled. Jayce glanced at the pair of spears in his hands. "What happened to Vanathur?" Jayce questioned. Sétanta frowned, tilting his head in curiosity. "Why do you care? Let's say she got away," he stated, before flicking one of his spears towards Jayce – a splatter of blood spraying the floor. "Or perhaps she didn't."

Jayce surged forwards before the others could stop him, but as Sétanta lunged with his spears to impale him, a barrage of bullets backed him up – splitting his attention. He darted to the side to use what little cover he had to avoid Astris, but Jayce cut him off, forcing him to step backwards towards the broken window. Bjorn charged forwards, backing Jayce up as Arthuria chanted. "You know, the Sovereign likes you, but that doesn't mean she can't admire your head in a box!" Sétanta snarled.

Arthuria released a wave of magic, decorating herself and her allies in a shimmering prismatic shell. Sétanta continued to back away until he stood on the edge of the broken window, a large fall behind him. Jayce, Bjorn and Arthuria surrounded him whilst Astris trained her pistols upon him. "Back off, or we will kill you," Jayce threatened, a spark of relief filling his body as they had the upper hand.

Sétanta looked at them with confusion: he had not been injured at all – they hadn't hit him once, nor he them. Yet they seemed to believe they had won. "Hmm. Why am I so worried?" he questioned, throwing one of his spears before they could even react. A grunt came from behind Jayce, Arthuria and Bjorn – their eyes all wide in horror as Sétanta's spear impaled Astris and pinned her to the wall. She groaned and writhed in agony, her feet off the ground as she tried to pull the weapon out of her stomach. "The next one goes through her skull. Try and regenerate from that," he stated, gripping his remaining spear with both hands and taking an offensive stance.

"Go!" Jayce ordered, lunging forwards and commanding Sola and Luna to form into copies of Sétanta's spears. He threw one as Bjorn and Arthuria retreated

towards Astris. Sétanta batted it aside before they clashed together with their spears, snarling face to face with each other. Sétanta was still on the edge of the room, so Jayce pushed, trying to knock him out of it. Instead Sétanta pulled back, leveraging his weight to try to send Jayce out instead.

But Jayce had expected it, he twisted, tucking his head down and barging his shoulder into Sétanta's chest. Sétanta fell backwards, dropping straight down and out of sight, but Jayce spotted his fingers holding onto the ledge – one hand still hanging on. Sétanta vaulted upwards in an unfathomably fast speed, flipping over Jayce to land on the other side of him. "Nice try," Sétanta stated with a look of smug pride.

Glass shattered in the room next to them as Bjorn, Arthuria and Astris leapt from the skyscraper. Sétanta's eyes widened as he turned to look and Jayce didn't hesitate. He dove backwards after them, falling away from Sétanta. "You've got to be shitting me! Why do they always jump?" he growled, watching them fall and preparing to follow. A heavy hand grasped his shoulder. "Let them go," growled a voice from behind him.

Bjorn screamed as he fell, Astris calm and alongside him, with Arthuria following. "I can't use Focus!" he reminded. They had spread their arms and legs to slow their fall, and Jayce dove to catch up to them, the ground rushing to meet them. "Jayce," Arthuria stated, glancing towards him in the moments before they'd hit the ground. He nodded to her, glancing towards the injured Astris and trusting that she'd be fine.

"There!" Jayce ordered, using his Focus to push into Bjorn and guide their trajectory towards one of the aqueducts that carried ships throughout the giant city. "That's not much better!" Bjorn yelled, as Jayce kicked off the air past him with Arthuria, before cancelling his own momentum and leaping to catch Bjorn. Arthuria and Jayce wrapped their arms around Bjorn's shoulders, their Focus creating a platform to push off of, but it wasn't enough to stop him. The three of them crashed into the water.

Bjorn groaned as he floated to the surface, the current pulling them away from the area. "Nice catch," he stated, relaxing into the water. Arthuria and Jayce looked at each other before grinning. "I can't believe that worked," she stated. Another splash occurred moments later as Astris crash-landed. She thrashed in the water for a moment before Jayce reached her, supporting her body as she hugged her still-healing wound. She looked at him, her eyes wide in panic and fear, before she burst into tears and held onto him – the adrenaline fading. Jayce

held her as they floated downstream, his eyes glancing past her towards the ruined skyscraper, now burning in the distance. It had been too close, they'd never stood a chance.

It was a sobering feeling as the Rising Aces left Watergate behind. In almost every way they had failed. They hadn't managed to speak to Vexx, Elaine or Tanare. Other than Tempest, they hadn't met up with Alara and her crew. They'd gotten next-to-no information from Sétanta or Alice. And if anything, the entire experience had just shown how far they had to go before they could even think about challenging the Betrayers. Jayce watched the city fade into the horizon, the Stacked Hand sailing west.

He thought back to the final moments he had had in the arena. Elaine sat in the bloodied sands on her knees. Her swords discarded, her arms crippled. Vexx towered over her, one of his arms lost to the sands along with an eye. He had won. Vexx was the strongest Betrayer. Jayce let out a sigh, shaking his head and stepping away. He would find a way to get him back. And if that wasn't possible, then when their fight finally came – Jayce would take him down.

"Someday... we will sail together again."

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Not Out**

Alara hugged her knees as she sat in an alley, breathing heavily. Her body was in agony, but she was alive – somehow. It was hard to tell but Sétanta must have let her go, he had had her dead to rights. She didn't understand why he had let her go, but that didn't matter. She was alive, she could only hope her squad were too. Alara held her breath, steadying her heartrate before standing up. "Everyone back to the ship, get ready to leave," she commanded into her communicator.

She grimaced as she took a step, clutching her side with her hand and pulling it away to reveal blood. "Could be worse," she muttered, her mind quickly thinking back to what Alice had said. Scáthach had executed her mother's Commander, and likely the rest of the crew as well. Given Alice didn't join the Betrayers until relatively recently, it meant that it must have been a public event. In which case, it could be tracked.

Alara grinned. She had a lead. It wasn't over yet.

## **Chapter 172: Demons Amongst Men**

It had been almost two weeks since the Rising Aces departure from Watergate. The experience still sat heavily in their minds: the sheer danger the Betrayers posed to them, and the greater world, was undeniable – and that was without even considering their likely far stronger leader. All had been hurt by the defeats, with only Thalia – after great and considerable consolation from Zeta and Yuthura – holding any semblance of pride from the experience. But there was only so much moping the Rising Aces could handle from themselves and each other.

Thalia let out a long, deliberate and irritating yawn as she sat in her usual seat in the Stacked Hand's living quarters. Jayce rolled his eyes and sighed, his crewmates glancing away from their information packets towards him as they awaited to see his reaction. "Are we boring you?" Jayce questioned, sitting up straight in his seat as Yuthura paused her lecture. "Obviously," Thalia stated bluntly, reaching forwards from her half-laying, half-sitting position to pick up the papers before placing them over her face. "Thalia, this is important stuff. You need to know it – it may be the difference between victory or defeat," Jayce reinforced, hoping to draw her back in.

Thalia blew the papers off her face before she violently sat forwards and reached across the table. "Say what, Jayce, how about if you beat me in an arm wrestle – then I will. Come on, you can beat me, right? The strongest lead after all," Thalia goaded. Jayce grit his teeth. He had known it was coming. His eyes flashed as he entered Focus, staring at her extended arm. It burned with black flame – the signature of her Supreme-level Focus. He couldn't win. He knew it. She knew it. They all knew it.

"No," Jayce said coldly. Thalia's face darkened as he turned away from her. "You may leave. Doc, continue." Thalia sat back, most eyes looking away from her. Her ears burned red and she clenched her fists. "As I was saying," Yuthura continued, "the autopsy of the 'Engines' showed that their flesh had fused with the metal of their masks. Each of them had tendrils of metal throughout their brains and wrapped around their spinal cords. At all costs, do not put one on. Even with the death of the host the mask still functions, likely still connected to some sort of hive mind – so it can still merge with another body."

Jayce glanced from the brutal and disgusting sketches in Yuthura's documents towards Thalia. She was still sat stewing in her seat, but she was looking periodically at the documents Zeta slid towards her. "Thank you," Jayce stated,

to Yuthura once she concluded. "Ordo, you were next, I believe?" he questioned. Ordo nodded, handing out his own notes: far smaller and less detailed than Yuthura's. "Right, so, given everything recently I thought we should talk about levels of Focus and the difference between Basic, Advanced, Mastered and Supreme Focus," Ordo began.

Jayce ignored him, glancing back towards Thalia. She was the strongest at the moment – that needed to change. The door opened to the living quarters and Paimon strolled in in her tiny bear form. She froze, seeing Jayce's eyes upon her. "What?" she asked quietly. Jayce grinned, before shaking his head and looking back to the table. *It's time to find another Demon*, he thought. He quickly snapped out of his thoughts as he realised the others were staring at him. "Jayce? Are we boring you?" questioned Thalia, with a smug smile.

The waves rocked the Stacked Hand violently as it sailed across tidal wave after tidal wave. The skies were dark, gloomy and held an orange haze to them on the far horizon. It was the middle of the day, despite the darkness: hot, dry and smoky – brought on by the abundance of thermal vents bubbling the waters and the cataclysm of volcanic islands in almost all directions. "I think I'm going to be sick," Astris groaned, as she hung on to the ship's railing by the wheel, as Bjorn manned the helm. "Ride it out, you'll be fine," Jayce stated, quickly glancing towards the horizon as a flash of orange lava sprayed from the top of an island – a roaring boom following a moment later.

"Are we sure this is the right place?" Bjorn questioned, the ship settling as the waves subsided – another onslaught visible on the horizon. "I don't know," Jayce stated. "Morgana trusts her magic, and the Demons do too. We know the Nomads are in Crea. We know there is a Therian Kingdom there. Every island we've stopped off at has warned us of strange people who worship fire, brimstone and beast of both. The magic sticks said this way, and the rumours do too. We just need to find a twin volcano that looks a bull's horns." Astris swallowed her escaping lunch before pointing north. "Like that?"

"Bull's horns? Yeah, right," Zeta muttered, as they came into dock at the edge of the large island. From their brief circle of the volcanic island, there had only been one visible settlement: a small village of almost fifty buildings. For the most part the island was barren, completely devoid of greenery, and instead covered in a continuous volume of black sand, but around the village in a somewhat shielding design was a small wood of palm trees and long grass. Towards the centre of the island lay the volcano – its peak split into two large curving craters. Smoke rose

from the craters and a series of glowing tunnels led inside the mountain, painting an evil face across the stone. "That's a devil," Zeta stated.

"Devil, Demon - doesn't matter," Jayce stated, his crew gearing up for an expedition as he glanced towards the other ships docked in the harbour. "There's some kind of magical beast here. We're to find it, try to reason with it – and if that fails we capture it the same as we did Paimon," Jayce declared. Paimon looked up at Jayce as she sat on the main deck. "No offence," he added. She shook her head and looked away before Caelie scooped her up in her arms – placing the small Demon in an improvised baby carrier. "This is most egregious!" complained Paimon. "It's either this or a ball," Jayce returned, holding up RK's sphere. "Why must I be present? Lord Baal and Belial should suffice plenty." "Because you're more knowledgeable than both of them combined. Anything else? Good. Away team, let's go!"

Their arrival hadn't gone unnoticed, and almost immediately a congregation arrived to greet them, all dressed and painted in a variety of colours and fanciful accessories. "It's going to be one of those islands," Astris muttered. "We'll stay behind," she decided wisely from experience, turning back and climbing aboard the Stacked Hand along with Jeanne. "Can I skip this one as well?" Bjorn asked. "No," answered Jayce, along with the Beastly Boys – all eagerly excited for an adventure. "Damn," Bjorn muttered, pressing his hand to Jayce's back and pushing him forwards.

"Welcome to Avarro!" greeted the lead of the congregation, a barely clothed elderly man decorated with black, grey and red paints, and coloured glass beads and bands. "My name is Alos, for the most part I am the Mayor of this fair island. Are you visitors here for trade? Our expected shipments are due anytime soon, but even so you are early," Alos questioned, in a distinctly formal address. Jayce glanced from Alos to his party, the other members dressed similarly for the heat but sporting their own personal markings and jewellery. "We're happy to trade, but we're not your expected traders. My name is Jayce, of the Rising Aces. This is my crew: Bjorn, Mai Lu, Caelie..." Jayce introduced.

"Ah, I see. A pity but fortunate as well. Your arrival is well-timed. We are currently in the midst of the Festival of Bounty. Hence the music and attire," Alos explained. Jayce faltered, only just noticing a rhythmic drumming in the background. "Right... um, well actually we're also here as we heard there's a beast on this island," Jayce stated. Alos' face darkened, his eyes boring into Jayce

before glancing at his companions. As if to make some hidden point, the island rumbled and shook before quickly settling. "The Lord of this land is no... beast."

"Our apologies," Mai Lu cut in, seeing panic crossing Jayce's face. "We meant no offence. It's only that we've heard such... amazing things about your Lord and have travelled so far to be here." Alos seemed to relax and Jayce did his best not to show any outward relief. "Ah, of course. Well, uh, I humbly invite you to join the festivities. Who are we to turn down pilgrims such as yourselves. Please, this way." Jayce gave the simplest of nods towards Mai Lu as he silently thanked her. She smirked back, before gesturing for him to lead on.

The drumming only grew louder and louder as they walked through the village and - as much as Jayce's attention lay on their escorts - he couldn't but help admire the peculiarity of what he was seeing. The village, although small, was - by any other words - modern, and well-equipped. The tribal aesthetic reeked of falsehood, as if it was something new, or even forced. Jayce glanced to his crew - Bjorn, Fenn, Wam, Ohno, Mai Lu, Caelie and Yuthura: all apart from the three Beastly Boys seemed to have similar thoughts on their mind.

"This festival of yours, is it something new or a historic part of your people?" Yuthura probed, as they came to a market square of sorts with people dancing around a large bonfire. Alos faltered for a few moments, as if thinking what a sensible answer would be, before eventually he turned to the group with a somewhat-forced smile. "No, not at all. We have celebrated the bounties of our people for many years, but - to tell the honest truth - we are new to this. We only settled here a few years ago. But our historian believes the Lord has been here for centuries," Alos answered.

Jayce listened as Alos began a long-winded account of a light during a storm that guided the villagers to this island, but his eyes focused on the people celebrating. For the most part, they weren't young. There was a considerable amount of grey-haired individuals, with only a few clusters of children and next-to-no people in between. "You're refugees?" Mai Lu questioned, following Jayce's exact line of thought. Alos nodded, looking cautiously towards Bjorn, and the therian trio. "Please, um, this day is a celebration. Enjoy the festivities, I will answer any and all questions you may have tomorrow. If you would like to join our fire march, you are more than welcome to bring your own gift for the flames."

Jayce nodded appreciatively to him and Alos retreated away, whispering to the others with him as they departed. "Do you think they'll take kindly to us taking their God away?" Bjorn questioned quietly. Jayce shook his head softly before

looking back at the crowd of villagers as they gathered up trinkets before beginning to walk towards the volcano. His eyes drew towards two young boys, both in their late teens and dressed rather ordinarily. One was sat in an improvised wheelchair and looked frail and skinny, whilst the other, likely his brother, attempted to push the chair along from behind. The march hadn't even begun and already they seemed to be struggling.

Jayce turned away and placed his hands on the back of his head. "Okay, this complicates things. We might as well see what this festival involves – who knows, we might even see the Lord. Bjorn, Fenn, Wam, Ohno – they're afraid of you, so human forms, please. Look around, get any information you can, but don't push anything. Don't risk anything. We shouldn't risk the lives of these people. Understood?" Jayce ordered. The group nodded. "Doc, with me."

The group split up and Jayce wasted no time heading in the direction of the two young boys. Yuthura hobbled alongside him and they easily caught up to them as they struggled to make their way up the winding path leading to the volcano. "Here," Jayce stated assertively, stepping next to the brother pushing the wheelchair, "let me help." The able-bodied boy looked up at Jayce, his eyes wide with temporary caution and fear before Jayce noticed a hint of recognition. "Uh, th-thank you. Are you..?"

Jayce nodded. "Call me Jayce, this is my crew's Doctor: Yuthura." The boys were most definitely brothers - they had an almost identical face - but it was hard to tell who the older sibling was. They both looked in their late teens, somewhere around sixteen to seventeen, with dark skin and short curly black hair. Jayce took the handles on the wheelchair and began to push. It wasn't light or easy, but with a gentle touch of Focus it moved like it was made of air.

"Wow, I can't believe the Rising Aces are here. Look Viz, it's Jayce – the Pirate Lord," said the brother. The boy in the chair turned slightly, looking up at Jayce with difficulty before he stuttered out Jayce's name. Jayce smiled at him. "Hi," he said, before immediately glancing towards Yuthura. She gave the slightest shake of her head and the brother seemed to catch it – his face falling immediately. "Oh," he said softly, before forcing a smile and looking back at Jayce. "My name is Mikhail. This is my older brother, Viz. I can't thank you enough for helping someone as little as us."

Jayce shook his head. "You're not little, and I'm heading this way anyway. It's no problem. Say what, in exchange – could you help us out a little?" Jayce asked. Mikhail's eyes lit up and he nodded vigorously. "How long have you guys lived

here for?" Jayce asked. Viz raised his right hand holding out four fingers. "And have you seen this Lord before?" Both boys shook their heads. "Has anyone?" "Um, only Alos and Virgil, and a few of their close advisors." Jayce raised an eyebrow. "Alos is our leader, and Virgil is his brother."

Jayce nodded as he continued to push Viz up the mountainside. "We've met Alos. Have you seen any proof of this Lord?" Jayce questioned. There was hesitation and caution from the younger brother. "Yes," he said carefully, looking around. "Um, there were large claw and burn marks when we first arrived. But I've not seen much recently. Virgil says he sleeps inside the volcano, which is why we need to offer gifts of food and valuables. Sorry, I don't really pay much attention to the Lord, or the Grandfather as Virgil calls it."

Jayce and Yuthura exchanged glances. "Grandfather?" Yuthura questioned. Mikhail nodded. "Yeah, Grandfather or Lord. Why?" he asked. Yuthura shook her head. "Don't worry about it. It's nothing," she answered. They carried on in silence but before long Mikhail started to ask questions of his own. "Um, I know this is probably something you get asked a lot – but... Viz has gotten worse over the last few years. Is there anything that you can do, Yuthura?"

Yuthura shook her head. "I'm sorry, it's a genetic condition. Something that medicine won't cure. I might be able to alleviate some symptoms, but I'll need to look your brother over back at the ship. I am truly sorry. Have you got any guardians I could speak to." Mikhail shook his head. "Ah, right. Is there a local Doctor here?" she questioned, as they neared the summit of the lower of the two craters. "Virgil is our local Doctor. He said he didn't know." Yuthura glanced at Jayce. "I will speak to Virgil, be sure to come to the ship with your brother."

Some of the villagers had separated from the others. The majority of the older folk stayed at lower crater, walking carefully to edge of a constructed bridge before throwing metals and other valuables over the edge to the bubbling lava below. But others were carrying onwards and upwards towards the other crater with what looked like a body wrapped in cloth on a stretcher. Alos was amongst them. "Oh, that. We've had a few illnesses over the last couple of months. Nothing major. She wanted to be buried in the volcano according to her will. Um, we'll stay here if you want to go onwards," Mikhail clarified. Jayce nodded to him and then his older brother. Yuthura let out a sigh, placing a gentle hand on Viz's shoulder before following after Jayce.

"This path will be the death of me," Yuthura complained, as she hobbled after Jayce. He smiled and waited for her before offering an arm. "I hope not, I still

need you," Jayce told her, as she took his arm for extra support. She shook her head, her purple eyes watching the congregation up ahead with caution and curiosity. "If possible, I would like to take a look at that body before it's disposed off," she stated. "Can you do that for me?" she asked. Jayce nodded, the other walkers glancing towards him and Yuthura as they walked.

"Excuse me!" Jayce called, as the main congregation reached the top. Alos stopped and looked down at him before saying something behind him to the others. "Now is not the time, Mister Exarga. This is a funeral of sorts," Alos stated. Yuthura gently nudged Jayce forwards and he left her behind to pick up the pace on his own. "Sorry, I didn't realise we were intruding," he stated, the group stopping as Jayce neared the body – the carriers eyeing him with caution.

"My ship's Doctor, Yuthura, only just heard that you've had some deaths recently. Who's Virgil?" Jayce questioned. Numerous eyes glanced towards a hooded man near the front. He had a large, club-like cane and wore black robes compared to the loosely-dressed others. He turned and looked at Jayce, his eyes red beneath the hood, but, as he pulled it down, they changed to a more common brown. He looked like Alos, but older and more grizzled. To Jayce's disappointment, he looked normal, with long wiry grey hair. "I have done the examination myself," he said, his voice raspy and dry. "There's no cause for alarm – it was simply a malady of age."

Yuthura stepped forwards, and Virgil took a defensive step, before Alos held up a hand to him. "Mister Exarga, we have been hospitable to you. Please do not interfere with our ways of life. She died of natural causes, any rumours of disease or plague are unfounded. You may watch her requested burial, please do not desecrate our dead," Alos pleaded. Jayce glanced towards Yuthura. She looked at the body wrapped in cloth before looking toward Alos. "I apologise, we meant no offence. Please, carry on. This woman deserves peace," Yuthura stated, reaching out and gently touching the covered arm of the corpse. The group eyed Jayce and Yuthura cautiously, but they then proceeded forwards towards the edge of the volcano crater.

They sang a hymn and spoke of her memories before they cast the body down onto the lava below. The volcano shuddered and loud roar coming from below. Jayce hurried to the edge and peered down: the body had disappeared. "And so our Lord takes his creation back!" called out Alos, the other spectators praying and bowing to the mountain. Alos then turned towards Jayce. "The Lord is not

to be trifled with, we will permit you to stay here until the morning, but afterwards please leave." Jayce simply nodded.

Jayce and Yuthura waited until the locals had departed before Jayce reached for his communicator. "Jeanne, can you hear me?" Jayce questioned, looking out across the island. "Yes, Captain?" Jeanne returned, directly back to him. Jayce met Yuthura's gaze. "The Cannibals of the East, what did they worship?" he asked. "We never found out," she answered. "But they called it the Grandfather." "That corpse had no meat on it," Yuthura confirmed. "That arm was bone and padding."

Jayce let out a sigh, shaking his head. "I want everyone back to the ship. We've got a new problem to deal with."

### **Seize the Seas Tales: The Ordinary**

Mikhail stared at the crew of the Rising Aces in complete and utter awe at he sat and waited in the middle of the main deck. Something was going on, that much was obvious. Jayce had said he had a task for him and Yuthura was preparing some medication for Viz, but even as the crew just moved around to complete whatever task Jayce had assigned them, they moved with purpose and determination.

A dark-skinned man with a shaved head and strong facial features was petting a giant falcon-like bird as he glanced at a book. He glanced towards Mikhail, golden makeup sat around his eyes – each of which were green with golden crosses over his pupils and iris. "Come, young man. I see you staring, do not fear us." Mikhail flinched, his heart skipping a beat before he stood up and walked over. "Um, it's an honour, sir. Falconer, sir," Mikhail stammered.

Falconer glanced down at the boy. He seemed ordinary enough, he couldn't understand why Jayce had brought him aboard. "Here," he said, extending out his wooden arm and taking Mikhail's hand before guiding it to a spot on Wren's head. "She likes a soft caress here, she'll tell you where to go and when to stop," Falconer guided, stepping back so Wren could see him and realise that someone else was petting her.

Mikhail gulped. Her feathers were very soft and numerous, but he couldn't help but feel unnerved. Wren was several times larger than him – a colossal animal far larger than anything he had seen before. She cooed and brought her head closer to him before rubbing against him. An unconscious smile emerged and he quickly looked towards Falconer for reassurance. Falconer nodded back before

taking back control. "She likes you. That is rare for a first encounter," Falconer lied. Mikhail beamed before backing away.

"Mikhail," Yuthura called over, summoning him as she stepped up and out onto the main deck. "Excuse me," Mikhail said with a cautious bow as he backed off. He rushed over to Yuthura, his heart hopeful but mind guarded. She leant on her cane with an expression that caused his stomach to drop. "Your brother will continue to deteriorate. He only has a few more months, a year at most." Mikhail nodded, it was not new news. "Is there anything that can be done?" he asked, clenching his fists as he hoped for a different solution than the one he had been holding off. She shook her head. "I see," he said in defeat. She reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder. "You should go see him."

She led him through the ship, past numerous metal statues lining the corridor. She then paused outside of a room before knocking. The door opened on its own and Mikhail's mouth fell open. Viz looked up at him from a new and improved wheelchair, but he had opened the door on his own. "Mikhail," he said softly and clearly. Yuthura stepped to the side as Mikhail practically tackled his brother. "Viz?" he questioned. His brother smiled and nodded, before Mikhail turned and looked at Yuthura. "How? What did you do?"

"It will only suppress his symptoms for a few months, but it should help," she stated, handing him a small bottle full of pills. "Thank you! Thank you!" Mikhail cried. Yuthura nodded before she glanced towards Viz as he sat quietly behind Mikhail. "I will leave you two to chat," Yuthura said softly, stepping away and closing the door. Viz took his brother's hands and looked at him closely. "I'm sorry for what I've done to you."

Mikhail shook his head. "You've done nothing to me. Don't ever think that. I'm just so glad you're back." Viz nodded before he let go of his brother and sat back in his chair. "Mikhail, that plan... are you sure?" Viz questioned. Mikhail looked down before he looking back out of the door. "I don't know. But they say Crea has the cure for everything. Even the best Doctor in the world couldn't do anything. It's our only chance."

"I don't want you to risk your life for me." Mikhail shook his head, but Viz grabbed his arm. "Promise me you'll let me go and move on if it comes to it." Mikhail shook his head but Viz squeezed his arm. "Say it!" Mikhail looked down. "Okay," he relented. "But we're going to Crea. I'll ask Jayce-" he stated. "Ask me what?" questioned Jayce, startling the pair of them. Mikhail turned and bowed to Jayce. "Please take us with you to Crea. To the land of the machines."

Jayce raised an eyebrow. "Uh, okay. We should be leaving in a few hours, you're welcome to come along. But there's something I need you to do, something I need both of you to do for me. If that's alright?" The brothers looked at each other then back at Jayce. "Anything, Captain."

### **Chapter 173: On the Hunt**

“Are you sure about this?” Yuthura questioned to Jayce, as Mikhail and Viz departed from the Stacked Hand. Jayce couldn’t deny that his plan was risky – it was dangerous and foolhardy, but the benefits were worth it. He nodded, looking towards Yuthura. “They wanted to help, and if we don’t want the village to turn against us then it’s needed. They’ll be fine. I believe they can do it,” he stated, turning and walking away as the sun began to set.

Mikhail took in a deep breath as he approached the grand house of Alos and Vergil, with Viz in his chair. It was the largest house on the island: a mansion created for the leader of the village with an inbuilt apothecary, and usually its bright colours lit up during the day, but the colours faded as night fell – disappearing into the darkness. Only the orange glow of the hanging lanterns inside and out were visible.

“Are we sure about this?” Viz whispered, as they passed through the open gates sealing the house off from the rest of the village. Mikhail nodded. “It’s just Alos and Vergil – what’s to worry about? We just need to distract them long enough for Jayce and the others to do what they need to. Then we’re out of here and off to get you cured. Just pretend like nothing’s changed,” Mikhail responded, steadying his racing heart as they approached the main door. Viz found a comfortable position and went limp and slack-jawed. He tried not to laugh: after months of discomfort, the fact that he now had to act the way his body had forced him into felt almost ironic. But he trusted Mikhail. They would be fine, no matter what.

“Mikhail, Viz – what are you doing here at this hour?” questioned Alos, as he looked down at the two boys upon opening the door. “Weren’t you with the Pirates? Have they left?” he pressed somewhat urgently, before gesturing the pair inside. Mikhail pushed Viz across the threshold and almost immediately his hairs stood on end. He had been to the house before, normally for a medical appointment, but the air itself stung and itched like acid. Alos spotted his reaction, squinting curiously before waving the boys forwards towards the living room. “Vergil is... preparing some medicines. Pay no heed to it – you’ll get used to it before long,” Alos answered, before the question could be asked.

Viz glanced towards the grand staircase leading up to the floor above – a soft veil of fog seemed to lie on the upper floor, dripping down over the balcony before fading into the air. He glanced towards his brother, the pair sharing a similar thought of unease. “The Rising Aces haven’t left, yet,” Mikhail answered, as he

pushed Viz to a position where he could see all entrances, before taking a seat on one of the wooden rocking chairs near the lit fireplace. "That's why we came here."

Alos looked towards his maid: a scrawny brunette stood in the entranceway to the kitchen. "Teas please, Vanicia," he commanded, before looking towards Mikhail with a smile that did not reach the rest of his face. "One sugar, please," Mikhail accepted. "And the same for Viz." Vanicia hobbled away, before shutting the door behind her. "So, what is it you wished to tell me?" Alos asked, sitting in his leather armchair and scratching his nails across the surface.

Mikhail took a deep breath. *This is it*, he thought. "The Rising Aces said that you and Vergil are cannibals," Mikhail stated. Alos clenched his fist so quickly that he tore the leather on his chair. "Did they? And, um... what was your response?" "I said it was ridiculous. That it wasn't possibly true. You're a good person, so is Vergil. I told them to leave. They couldn't do anything for Viz, so why would I ever believe them after they said they could?" Mikhail lied. Alos relaxed in his chair, glancing backwards as Vanicia entered with a tray of drinks.

"It is good that you came to see me. I can't believe my suspicions of them was correct. But I should have known better than to trust Pirates, even someone of the Rising Aces' reputation. Thank you, for believing in me, in us. Here," Alos said, passing over a tea. Mikhail glanced at it, the waters were blood red. "It's a special brew, using a new flower we imported. It may even help regain your brother's strength. A thank you for your loyalty. Was there anything else?"

"No, we left straight away. They were beyond drunk and most of them were asleep when we slipped away," Mikhail added, setting his drink down without sipping it. "Where are the toilets again?" Mikhail questioned, standing up and glancing to Viz. "Past the stairs, to the left," Alos stated, drinking his own tea. Mikhail nodded and walked away, before heading to the toilets and loudly shutting the door as he stepped inside.

Alos glanced towards Viz, who stared blankly back at him, he then looked back at Vanicia. "Get the others and kill the Pirates. Leave nothing alive but try to keep their bodies untainted. We can't waste an opportunity like this. I will inform my brother." Vanicia nodded, hobbling into the kitchen before shutting the door behind her. Alos then turned and looked back at Viz before picking up a cup and approaching him.

"I know you're in there, trapped inside that body of yours. I can only imagine what you're thinking, but know this Viz, I'm no monster. I'm evolution: a progression of what we all could become. What you could become. Let me free you and your brother. Bring you both into our Grandfather's embrace," he monologued, bringing the cup towards Viz's mouth. Viz stared in horror: if he revealed himself, he and his brother were doomed to die. But there was no telling what would happen if he drank it. *Come back, Mikhail!*

A knock came from the main door and Alos let out a sigh before pulling the cup back and setting it down. "I apologise for the interruption, I'll be a moment," Alos stated to Viz with a growl, stepping away and storming to the door before wrenching it open. "What?" he snapped, startling the old man on the other side. "Oh my! Uh, I'm sorry for the intrusion, Alos. You asked me to keep an eye on the Pirates." Alos bit his tongue, holding his hands behind his back as he snapped his nails one after another to prevent himself from throttling the man. "Go on," he said quietly, forcing a polite smile back to his face. "Um, their leader, I saw him leave the ship. He's heading to the volcano, alone."

Mikhail opened the bathroom door, just enough to hear the conversation at the main door, and when it seemed appropriate, he stepped out. Alos glanced back towards him. "Thank you, Abel, for telling me. Go home. I'll handle it," Alos stated. The old man turned and walked away. "Mikhail, take your brother home. Now. I will come by in the morning to thank you for your loyalty," Alos ordered coldly, his hands dripping blood. Mikhail didn't need to be told twice.

Caelie couldn't keep her knees still as she sat in Jayce's room with the Demon hunting squad: Mai Lu, Morgana, Falconer, Paimon and Ordo. Jayce's plan was reliant on those two boys, and she didn't like it – neither did Belial. "It's taking too long. Those children are dead already," he growled through her, Paimon nodding in agreement. "Patience," Falconer returned. "Mikhail and Viz will come through, you will see." Caelie shook her head. The plan relied on getting the cannibals – however many there were - away from the rest of the village. None could be left behind or the consequences could be horrific. "Shh," Ordo commanded, sensing movement on the main deck. "Caelie, now."

"What was that?" Killian questioned quietly, as he hobbled across the main deck with a long, curved knife in his malformed hands, pointing towards a blue glow in the Captain's quarters that quickly disappeared. "It doesn't matter," Vanicia growled, looking towards the six others with them, each as malformed and monstrous as her. "Spread out and kill them all. No curses and be quick!" she

ordered, pointing to the hatch leading below deck before pointing at two others to go to the living quarters – the lights still on inside.

Killian approached the hatch, reaching down and lifting it up cautiously before setting it back down. There was complete darkness within, but a hot air flowed outwards along with a heavy breathing. Killian frowned, glancing back towards Vanicia as she shuffled up next to him, before both of their eyes widened as an orange glow illuminated the darkness of the deck below. A pair of red reptilian eyes stared up at them, along with a vampire alongside. “Boo,” Astris said coldly.

The door to the living quarters slowly crept open as Tate pushed it, his blade in hand. As a human he hadn’t been particularly tall, as a cannibal his hunched form put him at just below four feet tall, but the woman staring down at him with a terrifying grin on her face was gigantic. She lifted up a boot, its shadow eclipsing his face before she stomped down through him – ending his existence in an instant and painting Kelly red.

Thalia stared at the creatures. They were even more hideous than Jayce had described: both of them were small and round, with thin, pale and sweaty skin, that showed a spiderweb of dark veins beneath. They were hunchbacks, with virtually no neck and large boulder-like heads and torsos, but spindly and thin arms and legs. The eyes were huge, almost bulging out of the skull, and their mouths were also unusually large – but full of sharp, pointed teeth. Thalia lifted her boot up. Jayce had given simple orders: “Kill them all.” She was happy to oblige, crushing the nearest one before rounding on the other as it backed up. It turned around, only to whimper in horror as it witnessed two other cannibals get incinerated by Zhurong’s fire. “Poor choice,” Thalia stated, hefting her anchor as the other four cannibals came to rescue their friend – Astris walking out from the deck below.

Jayce glanced back as a blue portal formed behind him, Caelie emerging out of it with the others. “And I was just getting worried,” he stated with a smile, before continuing to walk. “They came through after all. Good call,” Ordo stated, hurrying to walk next to him. “Never had a doubt. I just hope they haven’t put themselves in any danger,” Jayce returned, glancing back to the Stacked Hand and watching as a burst of flame illuminated the surroundings. “Okay, Zhurong should be coming any moment now. Mai Lu, any ideas on which Demon this is? We won’t have long until the more powerful cannibals come for us.”

“Fire fits a few Demons, but - of those loyal to Baal – Asmodeus seems likely,” Mai Lu answered. “Asmodeus has always had a temper... Lord Jayce, if he has

gone mad like I did, then there should be no hesitation in sealing him,” Paimon warned. Jayce nodded, looking towards Mai Lu and Falconer. “You heard the Demon. Get ready.” A heavy beating of wings drew their attention to the rapidly approaching Dragon and a moment later a trio dropped from the skies and landed on the ground next to them. “They’re dead,” Astris confirmed, as Arthuria and Jeanne stood ready with their weapons.

Zhurong circled the volcanoes twin craters, looking carefully down for what he had felt since their arrival: a predator, and a powerful at that. “I’m here!” he roared, shaking the skies and the seas. The lava in one of the craters bubbled before a pair of wings emerged from within, a giant-batlike creature rising from the heat, before screeching and taking to the skies to accept his challenge. Zhurong grinned before diving down.

A roar alerted Jayce and his crews to the skies, and a moment later a colossal creature surged out from the volcanoes’ higher crater. “That’s Lord Asmodeus!” confirmed Paimon. “There we go, stick with the plan!” Jayce ordered, as Caelie and the others rushed off. As Zhurong and Asmodeus clashed, both huge in size and launching fire and lava at each other, the entire atmosphere seemed to change. A deep heat rising around them and swirling the clouds before unleashing crashes of lightning. “Are we sure they can handle that?” Astris questioned, glancing from the battle between the dragon and the lava-dripping bat, to Arthuria as she flinched with each impact. Jayce thought for a moment. “Arthuria, Astris, go and help! Taranis, engage,” Jayce ordered, the pair rushing off before surging into the skies. He then turned to Jeanne, her banner in one hand, her new sword in the other. “And now we wait.”

The darkness of the night vanished as fire lit up the skies, with a backdrop of purple and red lightning. Each swoop and crash of Zhurong and Asmodeus sent a loud boom across the area – the two huge beasts tearing at each other with bloody and vicious intent. But even against the red Dragon, Asmodeus fought back with an untempered ferocity and blasts of heavy magma that appeared from nowhere.

A splatter of blood crashed against the ground next to Ordo, Arthuria screaming in agony as she felt Zhurong get torn into. “Hang on,” he told Arthuria, a shadow circling in the clouds above – illuminating with each crash of lightning. Zhurong grappled with the giant bat, before pushing off and getting clear as a long charging whine screeched through the air. “Taranis!” Ordo roared, a javelin of lightning launching down from above and tearing a hole straight through the

Demon's left wing. A second later, the black and blue Dragon smashed into the flailing Demon from above, dragging him down before throwing him into the mountainside. "Now!" Ordo commanded, the two Dragons descending on the Demon along with Astris, Arthuria and Mai Lu.

Asmodeus screamed in fear and pain as he was assaulted from all directions and partly guided, mostly dragged, towards one of the multiple ritual circles that Morgana had painted across the mountainside. Mai Lu encased Asmodeus in black-red crystal, pinning him in place as the two Dragons pressed him down from above. And then, in a bright flash of red light, as an alternative was offered to the pain and inevitable death, the Demon disappeared into the clay golem prepared for him. "Done," Caelie said into her communicator, immediately opening up portals for the crew to leave through, so that Ordo and Arthuria could calm the Dragons lust for violence without putting others at risk. She glanced down the mountainside before hurrying in Jayce's direction.

Alos and Vergil looked up at Jayce and Jeanne as they stood on a small ridge above them. The cannibals looked normal, they looked as they had during the day, but there was no false warmth, no fake friendliness. Instead there was hot rage. "Why did you come here? Who sent you, Exarga?" Vergil growled, cautiously walking out and around to place himself on equal footing with Jayce and Jeanne.

"No one, but we're taking the Lord of this island with us. It's something beyond your level of understanding," Jayce goaded, his eyes mostly on Jeanne rather than the cannibals. She was shaking slightly, her grip overly tight on her blade and a look of terror buried in her otherwise calm face. She slammed her banner into the ground, an aura of warmth emanating from it and invigorating Jayce. "You think we don't know about the Demon. Don't underestimate us, mortal!" growled Vergil. Jayce placed a soft hand on Jeanne's shoulder. "Guard my back," he told her, stepping in front to face Vergil as Alos ascended the other side.

"Then what if I said we have multiple on our ship already. Does that change things?" Jayce questioned. Vergil glanced past Jayce to Alos, the two brothers sharing an expression that was hard to read. "You... are willing to bargain?" Vergil asked. "Perhaps, but only if I know what I'm involving myself with. Why are you here? A small village like this seems... a poor choice to set up in." "Brother," Alos said quietly.

Vergil held up a finger. "We are one of many within the Grandfather's guidance. To you this place may seem like nothing, but privacy has – had – its benefits. I

will ask one last time. Are you willing to find peace and bring an end to this conflict?" Vergil questioned. Jayce flicked out Sola and Luna, both blades made of silver. "If we leave there won't be any peace. You've proven that already. Jeanne, I only need one of them for information. Try to leave one alive," Jayce ordered. "Bastard!" roared Alos.

"Fool! We could have both gained from this!" Vergil growled, leaping backwards and beginning to chant. His skin melted away, and unlike the cannibals Jayce had seen before, he seemed different. He was far taller, more humanoid, but still with bulging, shark-like eyes, and white and sweaty skin. His mouth contained multiple rows of sharp jagged teeth. Jayce surged forwards but Vergil didn't seem bothered. Even with Jayce's expertise in his blades, the cannibal managed to keep a step out of reach, continuing to chant until he finished.

"Doom!" he growled. Jayce's entire being shuddered as the spell hit him and he fell to a knee before throwing up. Vergil lunged at him and Jayce swung, even whilst regaining his constitution, carving a deep gash through Vergil's robes. He screamed and fell back, rolling in agony as the silver burned his cursed flesh. Jayce didn't hesitate, commanding Sola into the form of a javelin before throwing it at the writhing cannibal. It impaled him through his chest and Vergil stared at it in horror before he slumped and perished. Jayce groaned as he stood up, it felt like his body had just tried to tear itself apart – and a worrying thought passed through his mind that it might just have without his training. But that didn't matter at the moment. He looked towards Jeanne.

Alos lunged at Jeanne with a pair of large knives. He was fast and even as her holy aura attempted to burn him, the shadows wreathing his body seemed to fight back. "I'll savour every bite," he snarled, ducking low and swiping at her face with a blade. She blocked and deflected instinctively, pedalling backwards in caution and fear. "I don't want to hurt you," she warned, batting another lunge away, before pressing her boot to his side and kicking him down the mountain.

He tumbled away and she followed, Alos rolling all the way down towards the lower crater before he got back up to his feet. He looked at her with caution as she faced him. "If you don't want to fight then throw down your blade, I will spare you – I swear. I only want Exarga," he offered. Jeanne looked at the cannibal, his form had shifted into something inhuman – but Astris had proven that wasn't a bad thing. Monsters weren't always the enemy.

She lowered her blade, only to grunt as he appeared in an instant next to her with a knife in her side. He opened his mouth wide, dropping his other blade to grab

on to her and readying to bite deep and hard. "Why?" Jeanne said in quiet disappointment. His eyes widened as she pulled an arm back. "Why must you make me spill more blood? Aren't I stained enough already?" she yelled, throwing a fist with enough force that Alos' jaw shattered in a spray of teeth and bone. He staggered backwards, clutching his ruined face before he screamed and ran at her. But Jeanne just lifted up her leg, pressing her boot to his chest before kicking.

Alos staggered away, stumbling towards the edge of the crater before his feet found nothing to stand on and he fell screeching over the edge. Jeanne pulled his blade free of her side, staggering forwards to the edge to look down. Alos was still alive, laying on the partially liquid surface of melted rock – the heat melting his flesh off his bone in an excruciating and horrific manner, before eventually he lifted his arm up towards her before it fell back down and he lay still.

"Jeanne?" Jayce questioned, as he found her, spotting the blood oozing from her side. "Are you okay?" he asked. She looked back and nodded, before turning back and looking at the corpse. "I killed again..." she said weakly. He stepped up next to her and looked down. "That's okay. If you didn't he'd have gone on to slaughter the village, and then probably others. It had to be done. You did the right thing. Come on, let's get you patched up."

The morning came quickly, and the questions from the villagers were endless. But the proof was undeniable, especially once Alos and Vergil's house was raided for evidence. They had been monsters, with plans that still remained a mystery. But Jayce didn't mind a loose end or two – answers would come eventually, he was certain of it. Their mistress and the Grandfather would be a problem for another time.

"So, are you two ready?" Jayce questioned, looking towards Mikail and Viz as they made themselves comfortable on the main deck. "Yes, Captain," they answered, looking from their home to the horizon. "Perfect, then Crea – here we come!"

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Beasts of Sky and Seas**

Jayce folded his arms as he looked at the small bat-like Demon perched on the railing next to the Stacked Hand's wheel. "I want a rematch," the Demon requested plainly, his voice deep and gravelly. "How many times can I say this? It's expensive to turn you to your full size, and it upsets the Dragons – they're not as agile and they don't like to lose." Asmodeus growled in disappointment

and Jayce let out a sigh. "Fine." Asmodeus' tiny lava-like eyes lit up and he bounced up and down on the railing. "I'll go prepare the Gambit."

Jayce looked down at Asmodeus as the Gambit – the Stacked Hand's new flyer – was lowered down to the waters below. It had cost a fortune to buy and cost an even larger fortune to maintain, thanks to the sheer number of requests to use it, but every time Jayce strapped himself into the cockpit, and roared the engines, he felt more alive than he had ever felt before. Asmodeus sat in his lap, the tiny creature warm to say the least, but surprisingly soft due to the fur across his rock-like body. "Ready?" Jayce questioned, glancing to the bag of magic stones he had brought along for the vessel and Asmodeus. "Yes, Lord Exarga."

Jayce pushed the accelerator before pulling back on the joystick between his legs. The Gambit roared as it built up speed and bounced across the waves, before it took to the skies and the Stacked Hand shrank beneath him. He reached an appropriate height, before he set it to glide and opened the cockpit, the wind thrashing around them before eventually settling. "Go on then," Jayce told the tiny Demon, offering him the magic stones to crunch on before tossing him out of the flyer.

With a blast of heat, Asmodeus grew to a colossal size and swooped around the Gambit. Jayce closed the cockpit and then reached behind him, pulling a string to release a trail of blue smoke from the back of the flyer. "Let them out," he stated to his communicator, glancing down to the Stacked Hand and watching as a pair of large Dragons launched from the side of the ship. "Come on. Try and catch me!" Jayce ordered, pushing the joystick down and pushing the machine the limit.

**Chapter 174: Meat or Machine**

"Hmm," Jayce uttered, as he sat cross-legged on his bed with Jeanne stood in front of him. It had been two months since the incident at Sonorous Reaches and, as such, it also marked two months of Jeanne's service in Astris' care. Both had left a mark on her – that much was obvious from an immediate glance – for better and for worse. Jeanne carried herself differently: from her interactions with the non-humans amongst the crew, to her now cautious attitude to violence, and to her new embracement of other ideologies that she would never have thought to have touched before.

Jayce tilted his head as he looked at her held-out wrist. It had been tattooed, with an image of a playing card containing a small version of her battle standard, itself an image of the Rising Aces' flag. She raised an eyebrow, waiting for his criticism as he read the phrase underneath: 'Ace of Banners'. "Well? What do you think?" she questioned. "It's, um, nice. Was it Zeta?" he questioned, surprised that a tattoo artist had emerged amongst his crew, and even more surprised that the first to brave the needle was Jeanne. She shook her head, pulling her hand back. "Morgana."

"Ah, of course, that makes sense. Who suggested it?" he asked, sitting up straight on his bed before gesturing for her to sit in his chair. "Astris wanted to get one, so I got one too," Jeanne answered plainly. Jayce couldn't help but smile. Astris had well and truly rubbed off on Jeanne: from the way that Jeanne now styled herself – with more heavy and dark makeup set around the eyes and darker clothes – even to some mannerisms she had copied subconsciously. She twitched her index fingers, often tapping them against her leg or a surface – a habit Astris had developed due to her weapons. Weapons Jeanne didn't use.

"So," Jayce stated, "it's been some time since Sonorous Reaches..." Jeanne clenched her fists. "Yuthura says you're - for the most part - fine. And Astris has only been complimentary of you. As such, your duty under Astris is revoked. You are free to move about as you please. But I am worried about your hesitations recently, it's fine to not want to kill but we don't always have a choice." Her green eyes glanced up from the floor to meet his. "I'm not putting you in any offensive teams. Your main task in battles will be to defend the ship and its crew. But I need to know if I can rely on you to do that. If it comes to it, will you draw your blade and fight for this crew?" he asked. She nodded and he smiled softly to her. "Okay. Go on then, I'll see you later."

Jayce stepped out after her, glancing down to Astris as she leant next to his doorway. They both watched her walk away, her dark hair trailing behind her in the cold wind. "Well?" he asked, as she looked away and up at him. "I've done what I can, the rest is up to her. She just needs to let others in. Needs to let her back in," Astris stated, looking across the deck towards Arthuria as she watched Jeanne from afar. "She's just missing her reason to fight." Jayce nodded, placing his hand on the top of Astris' head. "Good job, Commander."

The world had taken a sharply colder turn by the time the Rising Aces and their two guests lay their eyes upon the shattered continent of Crea. The end of autumn was coming fast, and with it came a steady drizzle of cold and wet winds. Jayce shivered as he stepped into the heat of the living quarters, a large chunk of his crew huddling around the fire and drying off from their respective shifts, but he headed straight over to the table, where Marisha was sat. "What's the news?" he asked, sitting next to her.

"The Governor is nearby, supposedly in the 'lands of metal and flesh'. It explains just who those river wardens were talking about," she answered. Jayce folded his arms. In order to follow Mikhail and Viz's request to go to the 'Land of Machines' they had been forced to go inland, following the numerous channels and rivers south, but as time had gone on Jayce had only grown more and more hesitant of their destination.

"It can't be. Where's his ship? They said they saw a man in rags, magics and gold – alone. Why would the Governor, of all people, be here alone?" Jayce questioned. Marisha shrugged. "The boys believe the cure for all disease is nearby, perhaps the Governor believes it too?" she suggested. Jayce glanced across the room to Viz chatting to Ordo. He was sat in his wheelchair and he looked far worse than he had the previous few days. He was deteriorating, and quickly. "Well, apparently we're not far, I guess we can only wait and see."

The rivers of Crea continued to open up as the Stacked Hand sailed south, and with a periodic scouting trip from the Dragons, Wren, Asmodeus, or by flying the Gambit, a civilisation eventually came into view. The weather had calmed from its steady drizzle - replaced by a soft fog in almost every direction – but, as the morning came to an end, a cool sun eventually emerged, revealing their surroundings to the Rising Aces and their guests.

Along the banks of the large river were tall and unusual flowers, each twisted and curled, green and metallic. The adjacent trees were also amalgamations of metal and biological matter: with the trunks of the trees cracked open and

melded back together. Glowing blue buds sprouted from the branches, sending a rippling and hypnotic pattern throughout its bare crown. In the distance, Jayce could see large farms – each patrolled by large and unusual beasts, all bearing metal masks with a singular red eye. Jayce then frowned as a small group of children ran along the bank of the river, staring and pointing at the Stacked Hand with excitement and joy. They weren't Engines. They had no metal masks. They were just ordinary children. They quickly fell behind as the Stacked Hand sailed onwards.

"Falconer, take to the skies and scout around. Stay out of sight as much as you can," Bjorn ordered, his unease obvious. Bjorn then looked down towards Jayce. "Should we turn around?" he asked. Jayce shook his head, glancing towards a red eye watching them from a nearby tree – the creature had been an owl before its conversion. "No, they know we're here already. We might as well see what's going on."

It wasn't much longer before they came across a large set of gates barring further passage along the river. "A city lies beyond," warned Falconer. "There are more gates, however they are all open. If this becomes a hostile situation, we could easily be sealed inside." Jayce glanced at the cannons lining the river banks and the top of the gates. *This is too risky*, he thought, as Bjorn brought the Stacked Hand to a halt.

"Captain!" Marisha called out, drawing his attention to the bow. She pointed up and he spotted Engines lining the gate wall with weapons. A clear leader stood centre and was dressed in metal adorned with glowing ornaments, similar to the ones in trees. Her long black hair flowed in the wind behind her, a massive crossbow – or more appropriately described: a ballista - hung in her arms. She observed the ship beneath her before she took a step forwards and dropped down to land on the bowsprit.

Marisha immediately drew her spear, but the Engine Captain didn't flinch – she didn't even raise her ballista – instead she looked past her towards Jayce. She took one hand off her weapon before beckoning him forwards. Jayce chuckled before shaking his head, obeying her command and walking towards the bow. "I would like to state you are on my ship. I give the commands – not the other way around," Jayce stated warningly on approach.

Jayce could not see her mouth behind the flat metal mask but he sensed a smile as her large red eye locked onto him. "My bad," she stated, with a soft and sarcastic bow. "However, my city – my rules. Why have you come here, Rising

Ace – Jayce Exarga?” she questioned, reclaiming her grip on her ballista and cautiously holding a defensive stance. “Accident, partially,” Jayce answered begrudgingly – looking back towards Viz and Mikhail, both watching from further up the main deck. “We find that hard to believe,” she answered. Jayce simply shrugged back.

“Last time we encountered you people you tried to kill us. I don’t owe you honesty or civility. Is the Governor here?” Jayce pressed. She faltered, as if thinking how to respond – or waiting for orders. “He is here. Yes,” she stated eventually. “You are granted permission to enter Altomechanica. Law breaking will not be tolerated, but you will not be shown any aggression, nor will harm be brought to you or your people. The Superintendent will be expecting you within the Grand Concord, which is where you will find your target.” She then nodded to Jayce before leaping off his ship to the river bank, almost twenty metres away. The gates slowly slid open, allowing the Stacked Hand forwards.

“What was that about?” Marisha questioned, as she and Jayce made their way across the main deck. “I don’t know, and I don’t like it,” he responded, approaching Viz and Mikhail. “I’m sorry boys, but this isn’t what you were looking for. The Engines aren’t healers, there isn’t going to be a cure.” Mikhail shook his head. “You don’t know that. How could you possibly know that?” he returned, looking down at Viz and then up at Jayce. “These... things – the Engines, they’re machines not people,” Jayce stated.

Viz groaned as he slowly raised a hand, pointing off the ship. Jayce turned and looked, spotting more people by the shores of the river – some sporting mechanical limbs and augmentations, without the masks of the Engines. “Have... to see,” he said weakly. Jayce shook his head but Mikhail grabbed his arm. “Please, Jayce, we need to see for ourselves.” Jayce bit his lip, eventually sighing and nodding. “Okay, but our deal is over. I’ve brought you here – we’re not staying.” Both brothers nodded.

“Everyone else stays here,” Jayce commanded, much to the disappointment of his crew as he selected his away team: Caelie, Zeta, Bjorn, Yuthura, and Morgana – along with the two brothers. “Until we know more and have determined we are safe - as safe as we can be - I need those that are here ready to defend the Stacked Hand and ready to get us moving at a moment’s notice. Whatever happens, don’t accept any gifts. Understood? Good.”

Jayce glanced towards Astris and Ordo as they watched his group disembark. He nodded to them and they nodded back. The ship would be fine, no matter what.

And, with that settled, he turned his attention to the city they had docked at. It was like nothing he had seen before. It felt new and old, alive and dead – all at once. The buildings were blockish and ancient, made of white stone and covered in plant life that had sprouted around it. Yet build over it – or from it – were large, twisted metal spires that housed balconies and higher floors. The city teemed with life, the majority seeming not to be Engines.

The people observed the Rising Aces as they walked through the city, following the periodic guidance of the observing Engines – who simply pointed to show which winding street to head down. Although it was appreciated, it was far from needed. In the centre of the city sat a giant, grey, metal cube, tilted so that its vertex was embedded in the ground. It towered over everything else – a soft red glow seeping out through its main arched entrance.

Eventually the group arrived, finding a corridor of Engines waiting for them. “Don’t let them intimidate you,” Jayce stated, stepping forwards and leading the way with his group in tow. They stepped inside the unusual palace, a spiral ramp lead upwards with paintings on either wall. “Fascinating,” Yuthura stated, pausing and observing the images. They depicted an ancient city made of white cubes, nestled on the banks of a large river, with what Jayce could only describe as Dungeon in its centre. Another image showed ruins, the city far off in the distance, with an entrance to a cave. Next showed an altar and a young, faceless man approaching it. He reached it and held aloft a grey mask towards a beam of sunlight. Before finally he put it on, turning and showing an Engine.

They carried onwards, arriving at a large circular chamber containing a tower of glowing rocks balancing carefully on each other in the middle. A few other passages led elsewhere, but were all sealed behind metal sliding doors. Jayce glanced around the large chamber, eventually settling his gaze on a trio of Engines talking to a wide man with olive-coloured skin, a dark, widow’s peak and green eyes accompanied by thick, curved eyebrows. A black walrus moustache sat under his large blockish nose. He glanced over, his face pale and clammy, and immediate recognition set in. “Exarga?” he questioned in disbelief, before glancing back to the Engines as Jayce approached.

“Governor,” Jayce returned as he approached, towering over the shorter man. Ellard Grifk looked dishevelled on closer appearance: he had lost weight, a lot of it, and he was hugging his side as if he had been injured. “I would question why are you here, but I know better than to ask foolish questions. Superintendent,

may we have a moment to speak privately – Lord to Lord?” the Governor requested to the Engine directly in front of him.

The Superintendent looked no different from any other Engine, only older – much older. She was short and hunched, relying on a metal staff to assist her movements. Her grey skin was shrivelled and thin, and her breathing was raspy and seemed to scrape against the metal of her mask. She nodded and a door slid open – leading to an external balcony. “Of course,” she stated, the two other elderly Engines with her stepping away. The Governor glanced towards Jayce, tilting his head towards the doorway before he limped forwards.

They stepped outside, the air fresh and a gentle breeze pushing past them. “I never thought I would say this, but it is good to see you,” the Governor stated eventually. Jayce raised an eyebrow. “What are your thoughts on the Engines and everything else that is going on?” he questioned, glancing towards Jayce’s crew as they stood talking to the Engines with Mikhail and Viz. “Truth be told, I don’t know what to think. It’s... all alien.”

The Governor nodded in agreement, cautiously limping forwards to the balcony and leaning against it. “Why are you here of all places?” Jayce questioned in turn. There was a pause as the Governor caught his breath, his breathing wet and ragged. “My time in the Old World... has been difficult, to say the least. It’s not been easy, I can imagine the same is true for you.” Jayce nodded, glancing out across the city. “Where’s your ship? Your crew? Your niece, Ellen?”

The older man shook his head. “Ellen and the rest of my assets are in the New World, a safety net and my legacy, should something happen to me. She should be safe, regardless of what happens to me. A good thing too - we were hounded on arrival to this damned world, and it only let up recently,” he stated, holding up his shirt to show a horrific and gory injury in his side. Jayce immediately beckoned over Yuthura and the look of shock and horror on her face brought little ease to both of them. “Anything you can do, doll?” the Governor asked. She looked at Jayce and shook her head. “Only with major surgery that you most likely will not survive. I am sorry. It will kill you soon,” she answered, before backing away.

The Governor let out a sigh, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a half-used cigar. He then fumbled around for a lighter, only to fail to find one. Jayce chanted softly and then lit it for him. “Ta.” He let out a long sigh, turning and facing Jayce directly. “You and your crew look well and unharmed. Have you had any losses?” he asked, somewhat hopefully. Jayce shook his head and the Governor’s

face fell. "Luck has always been your mistress. You're a fortunate man. My crew and ship are gone... I am alone."

"Is that why you're here? A desperate second chance? Hoping these... machines will take you in?" Jayce questioned. The Governor nodded, groaning as he finished his cigar before throwing away the butt. "They said they can fix me. And at this point, damned be the consequences. I want to see what comes next. I don't intend to die anytime soon. Least of all to some punk amateur calling themselves the Machinist." The Governor began to walk back towards the central chamber.

"The old ways are gone, Exarga, I guess I'm a relic of an age that has ended. So if I want to survive, a relic like me needs a new coat of paint. Or some other way to survive in this strange old world," he stated, an Engine stepping forwards with a mask in its hands. "Governor, Ellard – don't," Jayce stated, following closely. The Governor held the mask in his hands, turning to face Jayce as everyone else in the room stared and watched. "Sorry, my fellow Lord. Today's just another gamble. If something happens... if it goes wrong – protect our home. Protect our seas and its people." He stared at Jayce, waiting to see what Jayce would do. With a short sigh, Jayce grit his teeth and nodded. "Don't screw me now," Ellard Grifk stated to himself, putting the mask on his face.

There was a horrific crunching and tearing sound as the Governor froze in place, his body locked as his muscles tensed. He groaned, a gargling sound emerging before he hunched over in a violent spasm – clawing at his throat. Before finally he relaxed, dropping to a knee. "Governor?" Jayce questioned, looking towards the Engines with caution. They didn't move to help, and as Jayce did, the Governor stood up.

"Ouch," the Governor garbled, his voice the same metallic garble as the other Engines. He looked down at himself, at his hands, before he lifted up his shirt. A patchwork of metal cords had closed his wound. "Governor?" Jayce asked cautiously. He nodded, looking at Jayce with curiosity. "You look different," he stated, his red eye boring into Jayce. "I don't know if it's for the better," he added. "Thanks," Jayce scowled. The Governor chuckled, turning and looking at the Superintendent. "A deal is deal. I will serve," he stated. He then turned and looked at Jayce. "You should join me."

"Absolutely not," Jayce stated immediately, backing up as he felt all the Engines lock their gaze on him. "I will," stated Viz, drawing Jayce's immediate look of horror. Jayce approached the wheelchair bound boy, the Engines moving forwards to give him a mask. "Don't," Mikhail stated, stepping in front of Jayce

to block his path. "It's his choice," he stated, staring up at Jayce. Jayce looked down at the young man, his eyes brimming with tears, his body shaking. "Mikhail--"

"There's no other way for him to survive!" screamed the boy. "Do it Viz! Live!" Jayce shoved Mikhail aside, but an Engine placed the mask to Viz's face. Jayce lunged for Viz, but Bjorn blocked him. "It's not our call," he said softly, as Viz seized before finally falling still. "It's their lives," Bjorn stated. Jayce shook his head in disbelief. "It's their lives!" he yelled back, only to stare in horror as Viz stood up from his wheelchair.

Mikhail lay on the floor in a ball, mostly in shock from Jayce's sudden shove, but his eyes widened as he looked up and saw his brother towering over him. "Viz?" he whimpered, his brother reaching down to him to offer a hand. "It worked? It actually worked?" Mikhail questioned as Viz helped up. The Engine nodded, looking towards the others of its kind. One approached with an empty mask in hand. "It did, Mikhail... I feel better than I ever have before. You should join me. We could be heroes, just like we dreamed of. We have everything we need here."

"Shit," Zeta muttered, watching as the other Engines in the room pulled out spare masks of their own and began to enclose the group. Mikhail faltered, taking a cautious step backwards. "Viz? That wasn't what we said. You're healed, we can go. We can travel the world," Mikhail questioned, his eyes widening as he realised Viz had a tight grip on his wrist. "Viz?" he whimpered. "One Pirate Lord would have been enough," stated the Superintendent.

Morgana tapped a tattoo on her arm, slinging out a red spell through her wand that liquefied the Superintendent's mask. She slumped, killed immediately. "Two will be even better," stated the Governor in her place. Caelie immediately created a portal behind her. "Viz?" questioned Mikhail weakly, his knees shaking as he stared down at his brother's hand. "Goodbye," Viz said softly, letting go of Mikhail's wrist.

Bjorn grabbed Mikhail before darting through the portal as the Engines screeched and surged forwards. Morgana dove after them along with Yuthura and Zeta, leaving Jayce and Caelie alone with the Engines. "You almost had me," Jayce confessed, glancing from the Governor to Viz as he cut down the nearest Engines. "Don't stop us, or I will burn this city to the ground," Jayce threatened, beheading an Engine that lunged at him. The numerous red eyes in the room all began to glow. Caelie and Jayce immediately dove through the portal.

They landed on the deck of the Stacked Hand, a blast of red energy tearing through the portal before it quickly closed. "Get us out of here!" Jayce ordered, the Stacked Hand lurching forwards as numerous Engines began to race towards the docks. "Release the Dragons!" Astris ordered, a pair of shimmering shields surrounding the Stacked Hand as Soteria and Tempest emerged onto the deck. A duo of roars shook the ship as Taranis and Zhurong emerged, immediately taking to the skies before unleashing devastation on the Engines below.

"Problem!" Bjorn called out, Jayce immediately following his gesture to the numerous closing metal gates now blocking the river ahead. "Not for long. Boys!" Jayce yelled out. Fenn, Wam, and Ohno raced across the deck to the forward cannon. "Aim!" yelled Wam, loading the gun as Fenn sat in his seat and aimed the cannon. "Fire!" yelled Fen, Ohno pulling the lever. The cannon roared as it unleashed a black orb that bent and shattered metal gate after metal gate on its destructive path forwards. "Wind!" Bjorn ordered, the various Mages amongst the crew chanting before channelling the wind into the sails. The Stacked Hand surged forwards, leaving the burning docks behind.

### **Seize the Seas Tales: A Splitting Path**

Mikhail hugged his legs as the sun began to set and the Stacked Hand came to a halt. He felt miserable, his mind conflicted between the fact that his brother was alive, and would remain that way, and the fact that he had likely lost him forever. "Hey," Jayce stated softly, sitting down next to him. "How are you holding up?" he questioned. Mikhail shook his head before shrugging. "Okay, I guess. He's gone, but that's okay. He's alive, that's what matters."

Jayce looked at the young man next him. "You did everything you could for Viz. I'm sure he's thankful, in one way or another," Jayce attempted, not exactly believing his own words. Mikhail shook his head. "So, what now?" he eventually asked. "You could join us. You've more than shown your value and I'd be more than happy to have you along." Mikhail smiled, a few months back he would have leapt on the opportunity.

He shook his head, standing up and looking out to the setting sun. "I don't think I can. I need time to think this all through, but.. that will only put you all at risk. I'm not some hero who can fight cannibals and monsters. I'm not a Rising Ace." Jayce nodded in acceptance, standing up and placing a hand on Mikhail's shoulder. "Where will you go?" he asked. Mikhail shrugged, stepping away and grabbing the backpack he had prepared. "It doesn't matter..."

He walked to the edge of the ship and climbed down, stopping at the bottom and looking up at Jayce. "I owe you, Jayce. I hope someday I can repay it." Mikhail then turned and began to walk forwards towards the sunset, leaving the Stacked Hand and the Rising Aces behind.

### **Chapter 175: A New Start**

Damian had always liked snow. Growing up it had been a rarity – an impossibility within the Frontier archipelago, and a special privilege during his expeditions elsewhere on educational trips or visits to his family. Yet, whilst trapped on the Voyager – a simple, but large cargo ship, sailing north to the Capital – it had quickly become unbearable. Especially since Wicke had abandoned him.

“Hurry it up, Damian! Tie those lines down and get moving, if you want to reach the Capital by this afternoon,” ordered Lincoln, the First Mate. Damian grumbled as he did the duty that had been assigned to him, but his eyes kept glancing towards the helm – where Wicke stood smugly, wrapped in a fur-lined coat and talking with the Captain. It had been just under a month of service that she had forced upon him, and Damian was eager to get revenge.

The whole thing had come from a pointless argument over leadership. She had cited that it was her quest, her mission – as granted by her sisters and by Jayce. She had also pointed out they didn’t have a ship of their own, so there was no point claiming captainship. But it had been her final lines that had sparked the true fight. “You’re not a Rising Ace. You’re not one of us and never will be. You’re Jayce’s little brother, a nuisance he discarded and anchored to me. You’re not my friend, you’re not my Captain, and you have not earned anything from me.”

It had hurt far more than he had let on. But looking back on it, he regretted his own retaliating words far more than hers had hurt him. He couldn’t erase the look of hurt he had caused from his mind, from when he had thrown the same words back at her. And it had only made the start of their adventure far more difficult than it had ever needed to be. She had gotten him back by negotiating the voyage to the Capital for him. Placing herself as a deluxe passenger, whilst using his wages as a menial worker to give herself free travel.

“Wicke,” he said eventually, drawing her attention once his main chores had been finished. “Sailors do not speak to passengers unless spoken to,” Wicke stated plainly, glancing to the Captain. “Come on, we’re nearly there. Hasn’t this gone on long enough? We need to plan our next moves,” Damian pleaded. She looked directly away from him, her dark orange hair tucked into her hood. She still had a small scar on her upper cheek – a faint and near-invisible burn that had refused to heal. “I’m sorry,” Damian attempted. She looked back, staring down at him with her amber eyes as she measured his authenticity. “Then trust that I have a plan and get back to work.”

The Capital had changed significantly since their last visit. The damage dealt during the war with the Church, and the Sea Sovereign's invasion, had completely vanished and, if anything, the Capital had only grown in size. The bridges between the three islands had been rebuilt and reinforced, creating larger and thicker walkways with numerous buildings across them: a mixture of habitable homes and military defences.

The Isle of Duty had been rebuilt: the Navy Headquarters remained similar to its previous fortress-like form, only now with a large crater at the top of its mountain from when it had been hit by the Stacked Hand's forward cannon. A fleet of ships remained docked around it, ever-ready for action, alongside an arsenal of new cannons and artillery. It looked far more defended and the island looked busy, even from a distance.

The Isle of Majesty had previously been levelled during the conflict, and in its replacement was a metropolis. The houses had been rebuilt larger than before and the island itself had been expanded outwards, through means that neither Damian nor Wicke could answer. The large bay that had sat enclosed, between the three islands and their ocean walls, had been mostly consumed, turned into its own floating shipyards, for docking, repairs and upgrading. Alongside additional homes, and - what looked like - floating gardens containing dryads and other non-humans.

The isle of Sanctity had been purged of any and all reminders of the Church: the Holy Palace had been destroyed – replaced by what looked to be some sort of government building. It was shaped like a stadium, with a warped and bent roof made of a soft blue ceramic. The rest of the island had been developed for trade – with more external piers, a colossal marketplace and numerous large halls. A constant stream of traffic was moving to and from the island, and the Voyager was heading towards it.

They sailed past a partially-built ocean wall - one of multiple that had been placed defensively around the Capital – creating clear channels that ships had to sail through in order to approach, whilst also shielding docked Navy ships waiting behind the thick stone. In just a few months the Capital of the New World Republic had evolved, in ways that brought out both excitement and anxiety to Wicke and Damian.

Wicke was waiting for him when Damian was finally allowed to disembark and, as much as he tried to hide it, he couldn't help but feel relieved that she hadn't left him. "Took you long enough," she stated, turning and beginning to walk

along the pier towards the Isle of Sanctity. "Yeah, well, some of us had to finish work," he retorted. She glanced back with a smug grin. He picked up the pace to walk alongside her. "So... what is your plan then?" he asked, scooping up a handful of snow and letting it cool off the wear and tear on his palms. Wicke glanced cautiously down at his palms, the skin red and raw from the ropes he had worked with. "First, let's get some food."

Damian couldn't help but moan loudly as he shovelled steaming food into his mouth. Wicke stared at him with disgust but he didn't care – the Voyager had been far from luxurious and passengers had gotten the best food first, with key crew following after and the deckhands getting the scraps. "You eat like a dog too," she stated, pulling her own plate closer to her out of fear that Damian would take it for himself. "Muscle needs fuel, eat when you can, and eat as much as you can," Damian recited unconsciously. It had been one of Ottar's prime lessons during his time under Corina Liu. He looked up, realising she was staring at him.

He looked similar to Jayce, only almost half-a-foot shorter and likely the same weight. He had the same dark hair, the same fair skin, and the pointy nose, but his eyes were green compared to Jayce's blue. They even both had numerous scars, although Damian's sat uncountably across his muscular and huge forearms. Wicke shook her head, there was no point comparing the brothers – they had once been similar, but the similarity had long faded.

"What?" Damian questioned, picking up a napkin and wiping his face defensively. "Don't worry. Um, right – so there's a Dungeon here in the Capital. But it'll be under the close guard of the Republic, so our first point of call is to meet with your mother, or your father, so that we can get access to it," Wicke explained. "What if that doesn't work?" he questioned. Wicke stuck her fork into her steak, lifting it up and taking a bite. "What else? We break in."

"Here," Wicke stated, as they crossed the checkpoint leading to the Isle of Majesty, handing over a pouch of coins to Damian. "What's this?" he questioned, rattling it before opening it. The pouch was full of golden Pearl, the value somewhere around two-hundred thousand. "If we're sticking together, I can't have you asking me for pocket money. We split what we sell evenly. Any side jobs or ventures are your own. The Dungeons are dangerous, you'll need equipment – weapons that are magical, healing potions, the lot. Okay?" she questioned, reading his expression as he held the fortune in his hand. "Don't make it weird," she reinforced. He nodded, pocketing it.

They made their way across to the Isle of Duty, and Wicke was quite surprised by how far they made it before being stopped for inspection. "Identification," ordered the Lieutenant. "Do you not recognise him?" Wicke immediately questioned, gesturing towards Damian. "Should I?" returned the Lieutenant, the others around him glancing towards each other as they tried to figure it out. Damian let out a sigh. "I'm here to see my mother: Fleet Admiral Exarga," Damian stated, handing over his identification.

The various eyes widened as they quickly verified the papers. "Oh, uh, apologies sir – your mother is currently away from the Capital for an extended period." Damian glanced towards Wicke. "What about Admiral Exarga?" Wicke questioned, spotting a few of the Marines whispering to each other as they stared at her. "Also off base, ma'am." Wicke folded her arms and looked out towards the Isle of Majesty – towards where the Imperial Palace had once stood. "What about Fleet Admiral Truth?"

"Ma'am, I can't disclose-" Wicke lowered her hood and stared the Lieutenant down. He faltered – he recognised her, but couldn't grasp where from. "Lieutenant... that's Wicke, of the Rising Aces," stated one of the Marines, the rest standing at attention. "Ma'am, I apologise for not recognising you – I was under the belief that all Rising Aces were in the Old World," quickly stated the Lieutenant. "The Fleet Admiral is currently present in his office. I can send warning, but you'll have to book an appointment." Wicke gestured towards the Navy headquarters. The Lieutenant instead pointed towards the top of the Isle of Majesty. "Thank you, Lieutenant. Come on, Damian."

They headed quickly towards the old site of the Imperial Palace. It too had changed: the Palace had been demolished, replaced by a building that looked more like a castle. It was a defensive fortress built around the Dungeon, the top of the white tower visible from afar, and all along the route up to it were armed guards. Wicke was quite impressed by how quickly they stopped her and Damian for identification.

'Delvers must show identification,' read a sign, mounted to the gates at the base of the slope. A few groups of people were passing through, all dressed in various types of armour and wielding magical equipment. But Wicke and Damian, for the most part, ignored them. "Wicke, of the Rising Aces," she stated immediately. This time the guards recognised her on sight – most of them wearing patches on their uniform showing a city on fire. They all greeted her with respect, and completely ignored Damian, before letting them through.

The castle – simply referred to as the Commonwealth Citadel – had an interesting design. The building itself fit a star shape, and had five long range cannons pointing outwards. It had a central ring built around the Dungeon, and then multiple buildings sat unconnected from each other on the outside. A final star-shaped wall then surrounded the entire structure, with only two gates leading in and out.

Wicke frowned as she looked at the guards patrolling outside, some held staffs rather than rifles, or carried – what she could only describe as – grimoires. There were Mages amongst the therians and Navy. She shook it off, continuing to march forwards towards her destination. It took multiple questions for directions, but no one stopped her – even as she entered the Fleet Admiral's office.

It was nice: well-decorated with luxuries and trophies, smart and organised with various maps, photographs and titles. And it also had a drinks cabinet full of various liquors from across the New World. A rear view looked over the back of the Capital, and Wicke immediately noticed an abundance of prison ships docked far below. The double doors opened and both Wicke and Damian stood up from the seats they had taken, turning to find Admiral Truth in human form. His golden hair had been cut short, and he had shaved his beard – with only a thick layer of stubble remaining. His firm brown eyes looked frustrated, and his entire body was tensed – as if he was expecting a fight. He towered over the pair of them in his new white and gold uniform – his cape flowing behind him.

"I would say it's good to see you, but I expect you've come to cause trouble?" he stated, sauntering past them and sitting in his throne behind his gigantic desk. "Sit," he ordered, gesturing to the seats they had been sat in, his eyes locked onto Wicke. Damian sat, Wicke did not. He glanced away from Wicke to Damian. "Your mother is away on a mission," Truth confirmed. Damian nodded, raising his eyebrow in a silent request for more information. "The transition of power from the Empire to the Republic has been... complicated. The Navy is mopping up dissidents, crushing rebellions and consolidating power – your mother is at the forefront, that's all you need to know." Damian nodded appreciatively, keeping his mouth shut as Wicke had ordered.

"So why are you here in my house? What has torn you two away from Ex-Pirate Lord Exarga? What does he want from me?" Truth questioned, leaning forwards and placing his forearms on his desk. "We're not here on Jayce's behalf," Wicke stated, stepping forwards and sitting down. "We were hoping to have access to

the Dungeon. Can you grant us permission?" Wicke laid out. Truth sat back, scratching his chin as he read them both. "As I'm sure you two have no doubt already figured out – we are allowing explorers into the Dungeons, but only under the expectation that all magical stones are handed over and magical items are registered and logged. I see no issue in adding you two to the register, but I need to know why?"

"I want to know what's at the bottom, that's all," Wicke answered, mostly truthfully. Fleet Admiral Truth nodded. "I see. Then in the acknowledgement of that, I must warn you that our deepest expeditions have only just cracked beyond the fiftieth floor, and that return journey took a month." Wicke and Damian glanced at each other. "You don't know what you're getting into, do you?" Truth questioned. Wicke bit her tongue.

"What is said here does not leave the room, understood?" Truth questioned. Both Wicke and Damian nodded. "We have taken to utilising the excess in our prisons. These... squads are given a chance to explore – they receive time off their sentences for retrieving magical stones, artifacts, and for exploring new floors. The Guild has monopolised the other four Dungeons and are charging a fortune for magical stones. We cannot currently afford war with the Guild over the others, so all new technology is reliant on the supply we obtain from this Dungeon. This Republic is vulnerable, and I cannot afford to have you two ruining the ecosystem of this Dungeon. So, you may enter it, but I expect no damage, no destruction, no mayhem. Am I clear?" Truth growled.

"Yes sir," both Wicke and Damian returned. Truth quickly wrote a note and stamped it, handing it over to Wicke. She took it, standing up and beginning to walk to the door with Damian alongside her. "Oh, and one more thing," he stated, drawing back their attention. "I am not ignorant of the role you played in saving my kind, and the New World, from the Church, Wicke. Your status is earned as a Rising Ace, but be mindful that neither of you are Jayce Exarga. The next time you barge into my office, there will be consequences." Wicke glared back at him before she sighed and nodded. "Understood," she said quietly, turning and then leaving. "Damian, I expect better. Stop trying to copy Jayce. Watch her and don't be a fool."

"Who does he think he is?" Wicke complained, as they walked slowly back towards the city. "The Fleet Admiral," Damian answered bluntly, his own frustration evident as he grit his teeth. "I'm not copying Jayce," he said without prompt – his own thoughts escaping his mind. Wicke looked at him. "What?" he

questioned. She shook her head. He was most definitely trying to copy Jayce, even in the way he was trying to act nonchalantly. "What?" he snapped. "Nothing," she returned, keeping it to herself. Damian flashed bright red. "Screw you!" he yelled, storming off. Wicke stopped walking, watching him leave before she let out a long sigh and shook her head. "Such a child."

She let him go. There was no point pushing it and he'd cool off eventually. Instead, Wicke approached the nearest group of Dungeon explorers. "Excuse me. Is there a guildhall or somewhere where other explorers are meeting up and forming parties?" she questioned. She was immediately given directions and, after counting her pearl, she trudged through the snow back to the Isle of Sanctity.

"Looking for a Doctor, anyone with medical experience?" called out an explorer within the Dungeoneer Lodge, located in the centre of the island. It was a large hall full of stalls where people were selling magical items to each other, along with other loot that had been obtained. Wicke counted at least two-hundred people, and there was a reception manned by attendants and Navy who were accepting registrations and handing out Dungeon-delving licences.

A large wall full of advertisements was being scanned by numerous adventurers, each looking for their own complementary team. And hanging from the ceiling in the centre of the large room was a glowing number counter of sorts – except it didn't change numbers – it was stuck on fifty-six. Something that Wicke quickly realised was the current record. There were also manuals and guides being sold on what to expect, what to pack, maps and routes. Wicke bought them all.

After a quick read and a few conversations with various explorers, Wicke then turned her attention to what she had actually come for. Most groups had six to eight members – each with their own various roles to support each other and hold their own niche. Mages were in high request, but not as much as members that could heal. "Offering a ten percent split!" called out one recruiter. "Veterans only!" called out another.

Wicke pondered for a moment before she approached the main desk, putting down her own requests before heading upstairs to a waiting room assigned to her. It was mere minutes before a knock came from the door and a head peered inside. She was a slightly rotund woman of average height and brown skin. Her face was round, but she had otherwise sharp features, and almond-shaped, purple eyes. She had tied her wavy, dark brown hair up into a simple knot, and

a trio of nose rings pierced her septum and nostrils. She wore a large backpack and a metal shield sat on one arm. A large hammer hung from her belt.

"Um, excuse me," she said softly and nervously. "Are you Lilith?" she questioned. "Yeah, that's me," Wicke lied. "Are you here about the ad?" The woman nodded, stepping into the room and glancing around. "Were the rates correct? It seemed very high," she questioned, stepping forwards. Wicke nodded, reaching into her bottomless bag and pulling out her money pouch. Wicke retrieved a black one-hundred pearl coin. "One-hundred pearl per every ten floors, and a twelve-and-a-half percent split from loot. Along with a fifty pearl signing bonus," Wicke stated, taking a contract from the pile the Lodge had supplied her with. "Since you're first, you can have a starting bonus," Wicke offered, placing the coin down.

The woman rushed forwards, taking a seat and beginning to sign. "My name is Sabine, I look forward to working with you," she stated. Wicke nodded, glancing at the details before signing it in turn under her fake name. "You're seventeen?" Wicke questioned in slight disbelief. Sabine's face burned. "Is that a problem?" she questioned. Wicke shook her head, she and Damian were both only a year younger after all. "No, not at all. You have no next of kin?" Wicke questioned. "My dad's dead, my mother's... gone."

Wicke nodded, the door opening and disguising her embarrassment. "I'm here for the ad," stated the first amongst a small group of people. Wicke glanced towards Sabine and then quickly began to set out six contracts. "First come, first served," she stated, with a grin.

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Where It All Began**

Alara felt sick to her guts as she stared at the memorial in front of her - if it could even be described as such. She and her crew had sailed far south, to Diasta – the homeland of the Sea Sovereign. The land itself was pretty and vibrant, an unusual combination of marble and industrialisation. The buildings were white and featured red roofs and pillars. Statues were abundant and the streets were cobblestone. People wore robes and togas and golden jewellery.

But the Null Legion were everywhere, and where they weren't, Soldiers in machine-like armour stood guard. Their armour golden, enchanted, and spewing smoke from the engines on their backs. Vehicles patrolled the streets, ferrying passengers around the ginormous city, and factories spewed smoke into the skies

in the distance. Large automatons patrolled along with the Soldiers, creaking and groaning with each heavy and cumbersome movement.

Alara stared at the scarecrow in front of her, dressed from head-to-toe in the outfit of a Marine Commander. Blood had dried on the uniform, and it matched the purple colourations of her mother's old crew. "Captain," Wulf said quietly, his eyes glancing nervously from the row of scarecrows towards the guards watching them from afar. "We're too open, we need to come back later." Alara broke her gaze from the scarecrow, her mind trying to remember the bubbly personality that had once worn the clothes.

She looked instead to the broken ship that had been dragged to the centre of the city of Novalis. It was full of holes and had likely been stripped of anything notable. But Alara needed to get inside. She had to see what her mother's ship held. It was her only current lead. "We'll come back at nightfall," Alara ordered, stepping back and away. Wulf nodded, looking down at the plaque placed in front of the trophies: 'See the invaders that are coming.'

## **Chapter 176: Back Into The Dungeon**

Wicke let out a long yawn as she and Damian began the long walk towards the Dungeon. It wasn't particularly early in the morning: she had had enough time to buy potions, rations, water and everything else she had needed, but it still felt early enough. "Did you sleep at all last night?" Damian questioned, a new bucket-shaped helmet on his head and a pair of spiked gauntlets on his hands. "Some," she lied. She had been too excited to sleep, and too anxious. Instead she had read every material she had bought and planned their journey out as much as possible.

From what she had learnt: the length of time it took to clear every ten floors increased by an additional day the further you went in, with a boss fight of sorts at each tenth floor. She remembered from last time that the floors respawned, so crews had to be careful to reserve enough energy for the journey back. And with that all in check, and an assumption that there were around one-hundred floors, the journey to the bottom and back would take around one-hundred days. Given the current record was fifty-six floors, she expected their journey would take a little over a month to reach the sixtieth floor and back. And if they had enough energy to go further then they would press on to the seventieth floor and onwards.

Damian did not like the sound of it at all. A month of fighting sounded fun and all, but a month trapped in a magical hellscape sounded anything but – no matter the rewards. "I hate you, Jayce," he muttered for the hundredth time, as they made their final climb – his heart pounding in his chest. "Last time - are you sure about this?" Wicke questioned, offering him an out as they neared the gates leading to the Dungeon. He sighed and nodded. "I said I would, and when else would I get a chance for an adventure like this?" She stopped and looked at him, meeting his eyes with hers. She cautiously placed a hand on his arm. "Thank you," she said earnestly. His arm tingled and he pulled away, not sure of how to respond. "Yeah, sure. I just hope we can count on this team you picked."

The group was waiting for them. Wicke had hired seven explorers, bringing their team up to nine in total. Sabine stood alone to the side: she looked distinctly on edge and nervous but the second she spotted Wicke her purple eyes seemed to brighten. She wore a simple breastplate, that didn't protect her particularly well and seemed a bit too tight for her, along with greaves over her shins and her small metal shield. She also had a small round helmet that left her chin and mouth exposed.

There were two other women amongst the group: a short rogue, wearing leather armour and using a rifle and a long dagger, and a taller, silver-haired girl in her late teens. Damian frowned as he laid eyes on her. She wore chainmail, gauntlets, and had metal armour over her legs. Her eyes were golden and across her back was a huge greatsword. "That's Lisa, and that's Morgause," Wicke stated on approach. "Everyone, this is Victor," she called out, creating an alias for Damian.

He glanced towards the four men stood to the side. They ranged in ages, but all of them were far older than him. They almost all held swords or hammers, other than one member who had a large staff. "Gareth, Aaron, Gilbert, and Marcos," Wicke identified, concluding on the lone Mage. Damian greeted them all before slowly looking towards Wicke. These were fighters, sure, but only one of them held any decent level of skill. If the Rising Aces had struggled in the Dungeon then this was likely going to be a massacre. "Almost all of them have gone to floor forty and above," Wicke stated naively. Damian shrugged and turned back. "Okay, great. Let's get going."

The group grabbed their things before turning towards the giant tower. It looked exactly as Wicke remembered: a giant pillar made entirely of white stone, that on closer inspection was marked with tiny runes. A colossal set of black metal doors lay before them, each door several metres in height, but they were both chained open. The scout of the group, Gareth, strode forwards, his rapier sheathed by his belt. He disappeared into the darkness. "Come on," his voice echoed, his accent strange and unfamiliar. Damian nodded, moving forwards and stepping onto a landing. A staircase led down.

"Wi- uh, Lillith is it meant to go down?" Damian questioned as she stepped next to him. "Yeah, the tower is an illusion, or an inversion – it's hard to tell," she answered, stepping forwards with Sabine by her side. "Okay... why not?" Damian muttered, walking forwards until he came to a metal gate. Letters glowed on the surface, the translation enchantment in his communicator activating for him. 'Salvation Doomed. World we lived,' it read. The others walked up to the gate and touched it, a swirling green portal emerging. One by one they stepped through until only Wicke, Damian and Sabine remained. "So that's what it says..." Wicke muttered, taking a proper glance at the writing for the first time in three years. "What does it say?" Sabine asked, glancing from Wicke to Damian. "Salvation lies here, a home for a future in a world we doomed. Remember those who lived, forget those we lost."

“What took you so long?” questioned Aaron, a short and beefy man not too dissimilar to Damian – only bald and with a beard. “Just reading,” Damian stated. “We’ve got a long walk, let’s not spend the whole journey stopping and reading everything we see,” Aaron grumbled, stepping forwards and drawing his hammer. “This way!” he declared, pointing at the signs that other groups had left behind.

They marched quickly, following the signs and almost immediately encountering a group of Marines fighting dog-sized ants. “Need a hand?” Damian called out. “Carry on civilians, this isn’t your business,” returned the Marine in charge. Damian glanced at Wicke and shrugged. They carried onwards through the tunnels, eventually coming to an alcove with a curved path leading down. The second floor was similarly designed to the first, with brown stone walls, an inexplicable light source providing vision where there should have only been darkness, and numerous tunnels leading in various directions.

There were more signs, but far less of them and it seemed on closer inspection they had been damaged. Wicke pulled out her guide, but the more experienced dungeoneers carried on without concern. Again there were other groups: Marines and Navy fought against the local giant bats, collecting the magic stones they dropped on death. The next floor held two-headed snakes, easily dealt with thanks to their small numbers due to farming.

Sabine squirmed as they encountered large spiders, the webs they sprayed the biggest trouble. But Wicke burned them away with a simple spell. The fifth floor marked the first major change. The environment grew larger, the ceiling nearing four metres, and the environmental glow disappeared, replaced by large white crystals embedded in the walls. Instead of constant light, the group now found themselves surrounded by shadows and an unusual rattling sound. “Group up,” commanded Morgause, the group following her suggestion and pushing forwards as they encountered a graveyard of skeletons wielding rusty weapons.

The hours passed quickly and Wicke spent the journey remembering the last time. They had struggled then, with the group obtaining multiple injuries by this point, but this time around there had not been a single injury. The following two floors had been cleared by a previous group: the fiery wisps blown out already and the cube-like slimes likely splattered across the walls. Wicke glanced at her group, they were making good time for the first day, but fatigue was beginning to show. “We’ll take a rest on the next floor,” Wicke stated, a few sighs of relief emerging.

"Is it meant to be this easy?" Damian questioned quietly, as they rested on the ninth floor. Wicke glanced towards the others as they chatted, before shaking her head. "It's been commercialised, once the groups start thinning out it'll get a lot harder. The next room has a minotaur, it nearly killed us last time." Damian's eyes widened and he nodded. "Okay, I guess we'll attack it together – take it down as a group." A dagger flew past them, impaling a shadowy creature holding a large scythe that had been floating towards them. "Careful," warned Gareth. Damian and Wicke glanced at each other before smirking.

Wicke calmed her beating heart as they emerged into a familiar giant, white cavern. The walls and floor were made of stone, almost identical in design to the stone that made up the Dungeon tower. And, as expected, a minotaur stood waiting in the centre of the room. It was a huge, shaggy beast, with a humanoid body and a bull's head. Dark brown fur covered its body and its eyes glowed a deep red. It held a huge single-bladed greataxe in its arms. "Get ready!" Wicke called out, taking a defensive stance. A few others glanced at her with curiosity, but Sabine mirrored her stance.

Lisa, however, simply stepped forwards with her rifle in her arms. She crouched and aimed as the minotaur charged, firing a single shot. The creature jerked and toppled to the floor, sliding across the stone before exploding in a flash of white light. A fist-sized purple stone clattered on the floor. "Any issues with me taking it?" she questioned, stepping forwards and picking it up. Nobody spoke up and she put it in her bag. "The alcove is there, we can rest for tonight," she stated, striding across the room. "Well... that was anti-climactic," Damian muttered, following after the group as Wicke stood stunned.

They stepped into a green and grassy alcove, a small altar sat in the middle and, from the look of the others around, it appeared that something should have been upon it. "We've timed it poorly, another group has snatched the items first," stated Marcos, scratching his beard and sitting down. "Items?" Damian questioned. The others looked towards him. "This is your first time?" asked Aaron. Damian nodded and there were a few sighs and groans. "So much for a big payout," muttered Gareth. Damian scowled and took off his helmet. "Just answer the question."

"Whoever designed the Dungeons did so with the intention of helping people through it. There are floors where you can find fresh water, altars after boss rooms with magical items and potions. Stuff that helps you live. They respawn: the further in you are, the better. This entire place reacts to magic – the monsters

are weaker to enchanted weapons than normal blades and guns,” Lisa stated, pulling out a clip of ammo and showing off the enchanted bullets within. “The potions are what matter most. We’re fresh now – today has been good, but give it a week or two and we’ll be exhausted,” she explained. Damian nodded, glancing across to Wicke.

She sat staring at the altar with a lost expression on her face. She looked child-like and saddened, lost in thought. A hand clasped her shoulder and she snapped out of it. “Are you okay?” Morgause questioned, sitting next to her. Wicke nodded, looking at the golden-eyed girl with a false smile. “I don’t believe you,” Morgause reinforced. She had a large triangular nose with flat features. Her eyebrows matched her silver hair, which in turn was similar to the grey metal of her chainmail.

“I’m just thinking of my sisters,” Wicke answered honestly, noticing Damian staring at her. “It’s been some time since I’ve seen them. The last time I spoke to them was in a place like this.” Morgause stared intently at her, before eventually she nodded, a soft smile escaping her otherwise hardened expression. She was slightly younger than Damian and Wicke, but Wicke felt like she talking to someone older. “I... get the feeling. I hope you see them again,” she stated, standing up. “I will take first watch, who will join me?” Morgause questioned. Gareth raised a hand and she nodded to him. She turned and looked down at Wicke. “Get some sleep. We have a long road ahead.”

Wicke slept well until it was her turn to take watch. It was hard to tell what time it actually was, there was no indication of day or night, but she felt it was some point in the early morning. The others had taken various positions across the alcove and she quickly noticed that her group was not the only group there. A stranger nodded to her before going back to reading. A gentle snoring drew her attention to the side, Morgause was sprawled across the group with her mouth wide open and drool on her chin. Wicke shook her head and tried not to laugh, instead settling her eyes on her partner for the shift: Aaron. He stared at her intently. “Be careful,” he warned, “not every group will be happy to share.”

Eventually sleep came to an end and the group began to pack up. They enjoyed a light breakfast consisting mostly of oats and a bit of jerky. Every bite reminded Wicke of just how much she missed Marisha’s cooking, but Marcos managed to produce fruit out of nothing more than seeds. He placed them on the floor, chanted and then full grown bushels appeared. It made the morning much better, and everyone seemed happier for it.

It took them less time than expected to reach floor fifteen, but still far longer than the previous ten. The five floors had consisted of a variety of predatory beasts: mostly pack animals, large monstrous wolves, baboons and carnivorous goats, and, with the journey having gone so smoothly, Wicke decided they should push on to the next floor. The Dungeon changed once again: this time the area was full of traps and humanoid creatures creating environmental hazards. It made it easy to rest and after a day of dodging projectiles, they did just that.

The next four floors were equally slow, but the pre-planned route made it far simpler than if they had gone in blind. "Okay, boss time," stated Gareth, glancing to the others as they came to an ajar door. "Let's make this a quick one too," he added. The others nodded and they rushed inside. This time they faced a huge stone golem. It had a large head with multiple faces and an otherwise humanoid body. "Stand back!" warned Gareth, rushing forwards across the large room. He stepped on a stone square that was slightly raised and almost immediately a large spike burst out from the ground. He darted to the side, leaping and stepping onto another before rolling. A pair of pillars surged out from either side of the room, crashing into each other with a huge bang. "Come at me you big hunk of rock!" Gareth yelled, drawing the stone golem towards him. It charged and smashed the ground where he had been standing – triggering the trap and crushing the golem. The group cheered and he bowed. "Hang on," he called out, darting across the room and pulling a concealed lever. The floor evened out as the traps disengaged. "No objections, right?" he questioned, picking up the chunk of magic crystal from the floor. There were none.

Wicke couldn't help but feel uneasy as they entered floor twenty-one. By all accounts the journey so far had been... easy. It meant there was going to be a change soon, and one that would actually force her and Damian to get involved. But instead they found more groups - other adventurers on their return journey, or otherwise farming the region for larger magic stones than the earlier floors. Wicke shook her head as they neared floor twenty-five - perhaps she had been worrying for nothing.

And then they found their first corpse, and it all changed. Wicke stood frozen as she looked at the torn-apart body. The woman had been thrown around, bits of her armour, her clothes and her flesh spread across the area. Her body was cold and had been dead at least a day. "By the Gods," muttered Morgause, closing the girl's glassy eyes. A rummaging drew her attention to the side and she scowled as the others in the group immediately began to scavenge the ownerless supplies. "Does she not deserve a moment of respect before you start looting?" Morgause

snapped. "She's dead, Morgause," returned Lisa. "Better that we live to use it than let it go to waste."

"Is that what you would want to happen to you?" Morgause questioned, approaching the scavengers and retrieving a blanket before wrapping the corpse in it. "I don't particularly care what happens – I'll be dead," Lisa said, pocketing a bracelet. "Noted," Morgause muttered, collecting anything she could and piling it on the blanket before she set the body alight with a match. The body burned fast and Morgause stood and watched until she was satisfied. "What was her name?" she asked the scavengers. "Ally Bereford," Aaron stated, stepping next to her and bowing his head. "May your soul escape this place and find peace," Morgause said in a quick prayer. "We should get moving, whatever killed her is probably not far away." Nobody needed to be told twice.

Ally's body was not the only they found over the three days it took to reach the thirtieth floor and Morgause insisted on burning each one and making note of their names. Wicke could only imagine the number of bodies that likely would never be found, lost for eternity in the Dungeon. Those that had gotten lost and run out of food, or others that had been lured or chased away by monsters. As the beasts they fought and killed got larger and deadlier, it only reminded Wicke more and more how far away rescue would be.

"Keep on your toes, this next monster is tricky," warned Gareth, as they arrived at the third boss room. They pushed open the door, and Wicke immediately noticed that this room was different. Unlike the others, this room was covered in large plants. "Careful, they're carnivorous." The plants were everywhere, almost all of them far larger than any member of the group. They ranged from having large bell-shaped bodies to large spirals of sticky orbs. "Normally it's best to go around," Gareth stated, pointing to the edge of the room. "But I've brought along something just for this."

He reached into his bag, pulling out three large jars full of a creamy oil. "Throw it and we'll burn them," he stated, handing one to Aaron and Gilbert. Marcos stepped forwards. "I-I really don't think we should do this. Nature is sacred, those monsters we've fought are conjurations but these are living plants," he stated, turning his back to the room and stepping in front of the trio. "Marcos, they're just plants, mate – get over it," stated Gilbert, stepping forwards. Marcos stepped in front of him and Gilbert shoved him. "You're getting in the way of my payday, friend – don't test me," Gilbert threatened. Marcos stood up and looked past Gilbert to Wicke. "Lillith, please, I implore you – these plants are nature's–"

A thorny vine lashed out and wrapped itself around Marcos' throat, his eyes widening in momentary shock. In an instant the vine yanked to the side, the thorns digging into his flesh and tearing it away. He staggered forwards, gripping his torn-open throat. Morgause surged forwards but three more vines lashed out, grabbing his legs and arms before dragging him into the mass of plants. "Marcos!" Morgause screamed.

"Throw it, he's dead!" yelled Gareth, opening his jar and throwing the oil. "He could still be alive!" yelled Morgause, swinging her sword as a vine lashed out and the entire jungle in front of them swelled and began to move. "Don't be a fool!" yelled Gareth. Wicke bit her tongue, shaking her head. They were right - Marcos was gone. "Stand back!" she yelled, pulling out her grimoire and beginning to chant.

Damian surged forwards, entering into Focus and grabbing the nearest vine with his gauntlets as it lashed out towards Wicke. He yanked, the vine straining against him before it tore open – revealing what looked like muscle beneath the green surface. "Hellfire!" Wicke yelled, stepping next to Damian and unleashing a plume of blue-black fire. "Echo!" she added, a circle of six more plumes emerging and incinerating everything before her. The plants screeched and wailed as she torched them before eventually only the sound of burning remained.

Wicke ended the spell – her hands steaming from the heat she had generated. "Holy... you should have led with that, Lillith," Gilbert stated, the group staring at the devastation. One by one, the plants burst into white light and the flames disappeared. Buried amongst a pile of purple crystals was a dark, charred corpse. "I guess no one gets his stuff," Lisa said cruelly.

### **Seize the Seas Tales: State of Affairs**

Snow had begun to fall by the time the rivers around the Stacked Hand fully opened up again and they returned to the ocean. They had left the Engines far behind, along with a lesson that Jayce could only hope the machines would learn from. If not, he was sure they would learn it the second time. As the snow fell around him, he found himself laying down on the main deck, feeling the rocking of the ocean beneath him as they continued their journey south.

His mind wandered, as it had done so consistently for the last week and a half, his thoughts resting on Mikhail and where he had ended up. He thought of Alara and where she was. Of Wicke and Damian. His parents. Kitty, Tim, Vexx, Tanare,

Dick Valentine... The Governor had been right, the world had changed and not necessarily for the better. Everything felt more dangerous, as if one single decision held the difference between life and death.

He heard the snow crunch by his head, prompting him to open his eyes and look up. Bjorn towered over him, dressed in a t-shirt and shorts. "Are you not cold?" Jayce questioned, pulling his hood tighter around his head. Bjorn scoffed. "Why do you think I'm in this form?" he returned, glancing around before stepping away and dragging over a sunbed to sit on. "Are you good?" Jayce questioned. "Are you?" Bjorn threw back.

Jayce shut his eyes and didn't answer. "I thought not," Bjorn muttered. "You spoken to Doc?" Jayce shook his head. "You probably should. Those boys messed me up too. I keep wondering whether we did the right thing – whether we made the right difference?" Bjorn said softly, looking out to the open ocean as he massaged his palms. "I don't think we'll ever know... but it's what they wanted and we can't change things. I've sent an anonymous tip to the Guild on the Governor. Governess Steele deserves to know about her uncle and the world should be warned about the Engines," Jayce stated.

Bjorn nodded. "Probably for the best," he stated, glancing along the deck to Thalia as she sat on the bowsprit with her legs dangling over the side. "I take it Thalia's been told of our destination?" Bjorn questioned. Jayce nodded. "Did you tell Marisha?" he asked in turn. Bjorn nodded, looking down at his Captain. "Do you think we'll get a warm welcome?" he asked somewhat nervously. Jayce chuckled. "From your family? I would hope so. They'll want to see your sons."

"They're not my sons," Bjorn said quickly. Jayce raised an eyebrow, opening his eyes and meeting Bjorn's gaze. "They're one compliment away from calling you 'Dad', Bjorn. Wam, Fenn and Ohno are your boys, whether you like it or not." "I'm too young for teenagers, and I've never wanted kids. They deserve better than me..." Jayce maintained his gaze on Bjorn and Bjorn quickly looked away. "Shut up Bjorn. You're the best guy I know."

"Anyway..." Bjorn distracted, looking back to Thalia as she wiped her face and stood up. "Will Crach take her back? Take her from us? What did the letter say?" he questioned. "He told us to come to your home: the home of the therians, and to bring his granddaughter to him. If it comes down to it, she can go," Jayce said softly. "And if she doesn't want to?" Bjorn questioned, looking to Thalia as she

approached. "Then she stays and we fight like no tomorrow to make it happen."  
"So be it."

### **Chapter 177: Poor Choices**

Marcos' death hit some members of the group harder than others: Wicke was surprised by how much she felt responsible. She wasn't used to it - used to losing people - she'd lost countless friends before finding Jayce, but after him it had all gone away, with Xander and Anne Muerte being the only real exceptions. But as she sat reading the ledger she had created, a growing list of casualties they had encountered on the road to the fiftieth floor, Marcos' name kept catching her eye. She flicked through the book to where she had stored the contracts - he had a next of kin: a daughter.

A soft whimper drew her attention across the sleeping group, her eyes settling on Sabine. She had been quiet over the last few days, reserved and stressed - and Wicke couldn't blame her. Everyone was suffering. They'd been in the Dungeon for two weeks now and progress was slow. It had gone from multiple floors per day to barely managing two. The monsters and dangers had grown, along with a heavy increase in injuries.

Sabine groaned and Wicke frowned, standing up and approaching her. She'd taken a knock earlier that day, but at the time had appeared fine. But as Wicke stood over her, she spotted blood - an unnerving amount pooled by her side. "Sabine - by the abyss - why didn't you say anything?" Wicke questioned quietly, crouching down next to her and pulling a healing potion from out of her bottomless bag. Sabine gasped, holding out a hand and shaking her head. "I'll be fine..." she said weakly.

"You're hurt, you'll bleed out if we don't stop it," Wicke told her firmly, reaching down and pushing aside her clothes. "No, I won't," Sabine muttered. "Watch." She kicked her legs, biting her lip to stop herself from screaming. The wound was deep, a large gash in her side that created immediate confusion as to how it had gone unnoticed. Slowly, but surely, Wicke watched as the wound started to knit itself together. "H-how?" she questioned.

Wicke had never seen anyone regenerate without magic before, other than those pacted with Demons, and Yuthura. "I don't know... I was born with it." Wicke splashed the wound with the potion and Sabine glared at her. "That was a waste," she told her. "Thanks," she added. Wicke placed a hand on Sabine's shoulder. "Try to sleep, we'll attempt the boss tomorrow." Wicke went back to her spot, her eyes remaining in Sabine's direction until she was assured that she was asleep.

Damian could feel the exhaustion his body was carrying. It wasn't so much the Dungeon and the fighting, as it was the rations and lack of proper nutrition. His muscles ached, his body was sore and his mind felt foggy. Corina had trained him to handle deprivation: he'd once gone nearly four days without sleep, but the others were not him. "Wicke, we can't do this for much longer. We should start thinking about heading back," he told her quietly, away from the others as they wandered through floor forty-nine. She shook her head. "We'll be fine. We can make it to sixty, at least. I'm certain."

"Found it!" called out Gareth, pointing ahead to an alcove. "The boss will be just beyond. Lillith, can you use your spells for this fight?" he questioned, the others turning and looking towards Wicke. "I'm spent – I've only got a few smaller spells left after those swarms," she admitted. The numerous faces fell, Wicke had been a heavy reason they had made it so far at such a fast pace. Truthfully, they'd been relying on her. All of them, Damian included. "We'll be fine, just follow my lead," he stated, stepping forwards and clanging his metal gauntlets together.

They pushed through the metal doors to enter the now familiar boss chamber of the fiftieth floor. Each one fit the same style: a large open space made of white stone walls and floors. This one was no different, but covering almost everything were giant spider webs. Hanging from the ceiling, suspended from a large and thick strand of silk was a furry, black, red and white spider that looked partially like a moth. It had tucked wings, a dress-like abdomen covered in petals of red and white fur, and a pair of mantis-like claws either side of its upright torso. "Lisa," Damian stated.

"On it," she stated, crouching and aiming before firing her rifle. It severed the strand, dropping the monster with a crash. It screeched as it thrashed on the ground before rolling to its feet, the sound agonisingly sharp - like nails on a blackboard. Wicke finished her chant, igniting the webbing in a beautiful wave of fire that spread out across the room in an instant. The monster ignited but it ignored the flames, charging towards the group. "Back out, now!" Gareth called out, their movement limited by the temporary flames.

But as the group pressed backwards, the giant spider shot out a strand of silk, grabbing onto the ajar door and pulling it inwards, sealing them in. "Forwards!" Morgause yelled, charging towards the spider with Damian and Sabine alongside. The others yelled and surged forwards, other than Wicke and Lisa who held back, shooting and flinging basic spells that had little effect. The spider reared up, its claws springing outwards.

Sabine pressed herself in front of Morgause, a claw smashing into her shield and then knocking her aside. Morgause took the opening and swung, cleaving her blade through the spider's arm. It screeched and recoiled, Gareth, Aaron and Gilbert stabbing and smashing its legs, before throwing aside their weapons and grabbing the creature's remaining legs. "Heave!" yelled Aaron, pulling outwards and causing the creature to crash to the ground in front of Damian.

Damian lifted his arms up, his breathing heavy as he smashed downwards onto the monster's head. It fought desperately to escape the ground, but Damian kept punching and slamming with his gauntlets. He kept hitting, green blood coating his gauntlets and body as he yelled. The head collapsed, crushed by his impacts, but he kept smashing the corpse. He grabbed and pulled, venting his frustration with each impact.

He only stopped as the creature disintegrated into white light, a hefty magic crystal dropping to the ground in its place. The rest of the group had all stepped back, all staring at him with a mixture of fear, horror, and awe. "I think you killed it," Lisa said sarcastically. Damian reached up and pulled his helmet off his head, tossing it to the side and storming off towards the alcove. The group looked towards Wicke and she nodded, picking up the helmet before placing the purple crystal inside it. "Get some rest," she ordered.

It didn't take long for the creature to respawn, but the group were safely inside the alcove as it begun to spin its webs across the area. Damian sat to the side, cleaning his body of the blood and trying to calm his anger, but eventually he returned to the group, just as they made an attempt at a decent meal - as a reward for the completion of the fiftieth floor. "It's not much," Gareth stated. "I have had some spices and dried stock in reserve, it's mostly flavoured water, but at least it's not dry." Wicke nodded in appreciation before glancing warily towards Damian. "I'm good," he told her, silently reading her expressions as he stood in the middle of alcove. "You won't have any soup?" Gareth questioned, intercepting their silent conversation. "Oh, no, I definitely will. Thank you, Gareth." The older man took his bowl and filled it up before passing it back.

As they sat drinking the broth, Wicke felt numerous eyes lay upon her. She glanced up, spotting silent mouthing between party members. Lisa glared at Aaron, who then sighed and turned to face Wicke. "Um, Lillith..." he said cautiously, whilst glancing from her to Damian. "Since we've made it to floor fifty, and the deal was payment for every ten floors, we were wondering if we could turn back?"

"No," Wicke said plainly. Aaron's eye twitched and he forced a nervous smile. "Sorry?" he questioned. Wicke met his gaze, shaking her head before looking across the group. "We have hired you, all of you, with the intention of going as far as we could. We had little issue with the fiftieth floor and our only casualty so far came about due to... negligence. We have enough rations to keep going for longer."

"Lilliana, we may have food, but people are exhausted. Not everyone will be able to keep up for much longer," Morgause stated, glancing towards Sabine and Gilbert – both of whom had dark rings around their eyes. "We will start to take casualties soon, ones we don't need to let happen. We've done well, it's respectable and we can come back, but we're so far in that we're probably alone, if we have a–"

The sound of fighting drew their attention towards the boss room. Damian stood up and immediately moved to watch. His eyes widened as the fighting almost immediately ended. "Incoming," he warned, cautiously stepping back as a large group approached. "Who is it?" Aaron asked, getting to his feet and grabbing his weapon. A long-haired man strode into the alcove. He was tall, towering over Damian by more than a foot, with a very skinny, curved frame. In his right hand dangled a long, serrated knife that dripped green blood. He wore a torn orange jumpsuit that had been opened and tied around his waist – his top half covered by a white tank top. "Prisoners," Damian stated, as five more entered the alcove.

"Huh?" stated the giant man, his face pale and gaunt – one eye scarred white and the other almost pupilless. He was missing several teeth, his long black hair messy and loose. "Boss!" he called back, stepping forwards and looking down at Damian with a sinister grin. "Get back!" ordered a voice, the metal bands around the prisoners hands locking together with a loud clang and buzzing. "Yeah, yeah," mumbled the giant, stepping away.

A trio stepped through the crowd of orange. They all wore Marine-like body armour, only a deep navy blue colour. They had visored helmets and held sabres, with rifles across their back and a pistol holstered by their sides. "Civilians, huh?" said one of the three men, lifting up his visor to reveal a grizzled face, with a stern pair of brown eyes. "Sergeant Saxon. This is Officer Dubois and Fidelle, and this is Correctional Squad Gamma. Say your greetings to the travellers, Gamma," ordered Saxon. A mixture of greetings emerged from the group, all of whom were male other than one woman wearing a sack hood – her eyes tinted green, with irises that were muddied red.

"May we rest with you? I assure you they will not cause any issues," questioned Saxon, looking across the group for any semblance of a leader. "Sure," Damian spoke up, the rest of the group all glancing towards Wicke with unease and alarm. "Are you headed further down?" Wicke asked, sitting back down. Saxon and Dubois both nodded, a few groans emerging from the prisoners as their hands automatically shackled. "That is correct. We are aiming to break the record, isn't that right people?" Dubois stated. The prisoners ignored him. Dubois scowled as he lifted up his visor and took off his helmet. He was younger than Saxon, early thirties or so, with similar dark skin to his superior. Fidelle had lighter skin, a thick, brown beard and appeared of similar age. "We are as well. Care to party together?" Wicke offered.

"What are you doing? Aren't we heading back?" Aaron questioned sharply. The three Wardens nodded. "Well, it should be an easy payday with another nine people, right?" Wicke argued to the group. Aaron sighed and shook his head. "Just great..." he mumbled. Wicke glanced towards Morgause looking for complaint. "I am happy regardless, my concern is of the others, that's all," she stated, sitting back and placing her sword across her lap as she stared at the prisoners.

"We'll aim to clear two floors today," Wicke stated, as the group woke up in what the Wardens stated was morning. "You heard her!" Saxon declared. "Gammas one-to-four, usual positions. We are not here to not work! Even with these folks, I expect your best. Let's move people, I want to stay on schedule!" he ordered. The prisoners sauntered through the group, the giant smirking as he towered over Wicke before following the path out of the alcove to the floor below. "Watch your backs," he threatened.

Dubois followed behind along with the two other prisoners, Saxon and Fidelle brought up the rear. Wicke decided to stay close to them, her group trailing behind. "Saxon, is there anything I should be aware of?" Wicke questioned. He shook his head. "Just be careful. These lot are malicious at best. If there's an opportunity for an accidental casualty they will take it. Most of them are Ex-Navy, they know how to scrap." Wicke simply nodded.

With a roar, Morgause cleaved the last monster in two. A dozen bodies lay around them: large gorillas with scorpion tails, and one by one they burst into white light, leaving magic stones behind. "They're yours," Fidelle repeated, "it's not our priority unless it's from a boss." Wicke nodded appreciatively, the group collecting the stones and placing them in Damian's bottomless bag. Once

everyone's bags had become heavy enough, the complaints about Wicke and Damian holding all the crystals had ceased amongst the party of adventurers. "We'll make camp here, this place is defensible and the next floor is just over there," Wicke stated, pointing a path leading down. The others nodded, collapsing one after another.

The day had passed quickly, the prisoners had been effective and brutal, and all complaints over their presence had ceased quickly. Wicke couldn't help but wonder if they could even help to take her and Damian further than the sixtieth floor. It was certainly beginning to feel possible, maybe even likely. She glanced up, feeling eyes on her once again. The giant and rough leader of the prisoners – Asdel – was watching her, as he had done repeatedly across the day. He stared at her with curiosity and confusion, as if trying to recognise her. Wicke looked away: given he had previously been a Navy Captain it was for the best that he didn't.

Instead, she found Sabine similarly looking at her. Sabine scooted closer, sitting next to Wicke and glancing nervously at each of the prisoners. "Um, so, uh, Lillith, I was wondering about something?" Sabine questioned. Wicke raised an eyebrow. "Uh, what's up?" Wicke returned, nibbling on rations whilst flicking through the notes she had on the next floor. "We've been together for more than two weeks now... so I was wondering – if it isn't rude, and since, you know... we're kind of like friends – if you could tell me more about yourself? Where are you from?" Sabine questioned, a few eyes glancing their way.

"Um... Sabine – I-I appreciate the idea - but I'm employing you, we shouldn't-" "Are you the sister of Wicke, of the Rising Aces?" Sabine cut through, causing both Wicke and Damian to flinch. The numerous prisoners immediately snapped their attention towards Wicke along with the majority of the camp. "No," Wicke said immediately. "It's just... you look a lot like her - you've got magic too. And, I mean... it's really cool if you are," Sabine pressed foolishly.

Wicke wanted to throttle her. "Fuck me!" exclaimed Asdel. "It's you," he stated, pointing a crooked finger at her. Wicke and Damian both stood up and so did the prisoners. "I knew I recognised that face and that hair. You're Exarga's little brat!" stated Scipio, another of the prisoners. "It's your fault I'm here!" Damian stepped forwards to stand in front of Wicke, Sabine's eyes widening as she realised what she had done. "Wicke, of the Rising Aces..." muttered Lisa.

"Black hair, same face – too short for Jayce, that makes you his brother, right?" questioned Asdel, grabbing his knife. "Try it, I'll make you eat it!" Damian threatened. A buzz reverberated and Asdel dropped the blade, his body seizing as his manacles glowed "Enough!" stated Saxon. "You want to die down here then keep it up! The only person whose fault it is that you're here is you. Get over it and get some sleep!" The prisoners grumbled as they retreated. "We split the watch," Wicke stated to Damian. He nodded in agreement, eager to keep his distance.

Fortunately, and surprisingly, the night passed without issue. The morning came with an array of dirty and curious looks towards both Damian and Wicke but, given they were paying their group it mattered little, and given the usefulness the prisoners provided there was little reason to separate. "Watch your backs, more than ever," warned Saxon, as they packed up and departed for the fifty-third floor. Wicke didn't need to be told twice.

"I'm so, so sorry," Sabine said over and over again, as they walked through the floor. Their surroundings had taken on a more medieval style. The walls and floors were made of grey brick, and flaming torches illuminated their otherwise dark surroundings. "It's fine," Wicke stated adamantly; the situation frustrated her but it was manageable. "Just be careful with questions, you don't always know who you're talking to and it can cause problems," she advised. Sabine nodded, continuing to walk with her eyes on the floor.

"Incoming!" warned Lisa, as they came to a crossroads. A loud creaking and a heavy rattle of boots surrounded them from all directions, and before long countless suits of metal armour staggered their way out of the darkness. Damian rushed forwards, throwing a heavy fist into the nearest helmet, knocking it off. The inside was hollow, and the suit of armour promptly raised a sword in retaliation. He caught the swung blade, kicking the suit and scattering its pieces, but the metal floated back together. "Wicke, problem!" he called out.

Wicke moved towards the centre of the group, her adventurers and the prisoners fighting around her. She flicked through her notes until she found the right page. Morgause stepped next to her, guiding her back and away towards a wall. "Watch your surroundings, Wicke!" she warned. Wicke ignored her, reading quickly. "Inside the armour are seals: circles with runes in them. Break them, whatever way you can!" Wicke yelled out.

Damian grabbed the nearest suit of armour, throwing its sword aside before wrenching open its chest piece. He slammed the body to the floor, stepping on

its flailing arms before he spotted a blood red circle inside. He erased it with his gauntlet and the armour fell still before breaking apart into a magic crystal. He immediately moved onto the next, and the next, and the next, until eventually the battlefield fell still.

"Are we all okay?" called out Gareth, looking across the group before his eyes fell upon a body on the floor. "Everyone back!" ordered Saxon, immediately chaining the prisoners before surging forwards. Fidelle lay face down on the floor, a widening pool of blood underneath him. "Fidelle! Fidelle! Goddammit, Ferron!" Saxon attempted, rolling him over and feeling for a pulse. The Warden didn't respond, his eyes open and unseeing. "Did anyone see what happened?" Saxon growled, showing off a hole in the side of Fidelle's armour. It was small and precise, in a difficult to hit area. Wicke glanced across the group, everyone shook their heads. Her eyes landed on Asdel, a smear of blood on his jumpsuit that looked new. However it was amongst countless others and Wicke couldn't tell if it was fresh or not, so she kept her mouth shut.

They stripped Fidelle of anything useful before giving him a quick cremation. "We carry on!" Saxon ordered, marching his prisoners forwards. But Wicke couldn't help but hesitate. With only two Wardens the prisoners would be harder to contain, and she could see in the faces of her group that another death had unsettled them. "You coming?" Damian questioned, stepping forwards and then looking back at the group. "Maybe we should head back?" Wicke questioned. The group looked to her and then Damian. "No. Jayce wouldn't give up now, and I won't either. We can make it to sixty. If you need incentive, that's an extra hundred thousand for each of you." One by one, the others began to step forwards. Wicke slowly followed behind.

The group eventually made camp after making it to the middle of the fifty-fifth floor. It had been a long day and everybody was exhausted. Wicke could still see the marks of their latest battle. They had fought a nearly endless swarm of giant humanoid bugs – four-legged insectoids with crab-like pinchers that were the size of an adult. Wicke didn't like the position where they had made camp, but the notes said it was - for the most part - safe, and they were too far away to make it to the next floor. She felt completely drained, and her magic reflected it, but they were so close to the new record – so close to the sixtieth floor. "Get some rest," Morgause told her, before heading off to arrange the night watch with Saxon.

Damian flinched as he felt Wicke slump into him. Her head lay on his shoulder, her mouth slightly. She'd fallen asleep before he had even noticed she was next to him. He smirked to himself, before turning his attention back to the prisoners. The six of them were up to something, he could tell. The death of Warden Fidelle had most likely not been an accident and, if he didn't know any better, most likely he and Wicke were next. "I'll keep watch," Damian whispered to Wicke. "I'll keep you safe."

Damian's eyes snapped open as he heard a scream. He couldn't remember when he had fallen asleep but that didn't matter anymore. A loud chittering echoed around him, their camp under siege from a swarm of the insectoids they had faced before. He leapt to his feet, dragging Wicke up with him and putting himself in front of her without thought. "What's happening?" she questioned, in panicked confusion.

A spray of blood splashed Damian's face. Lisa cried out in fear and panic as she desperately crawled towards him, before one of the creatures grabbed her legs and pulled her backwards into the swarm. Damian surged towards her, throwing a heavy fist through one of the creatures. Its head crunched under his gauntlet and he moved onto the next. He yelled out in frustration as he found her brutalised remains, turning his attention back as a chain reaction of lightning spread throughout the insectoids – their bodies cooking from the inside out.

Wicke scanned the area for her allies. Morgause stood next her, swinging at anything that got too close, whilst Sabine was huddled on the floor with her hands over her head. She could see Saxon fighting off in the distance with the prisoners and Gareth. The blood on the floor and the missing bodies gave little hope for the rest. "Wicke!" Morgause commanded. Wicke nodded, chanting quickly.

Damian pushed his way through the corpses, turning his attention to the few surviving monsters with a ferocious vengeance. Morgause pushed to his side, the pair of them clearing the path towards the prisoners, Gareth and Saxon. Gareth turned to look at them, relief on his face, but a hand reached around his chin, lifting it up before a blade carved open his throat. "No!" Morgause yelled, a prisoner smashing his club over Saxon's head, before Asdel finished him off with his dagger.

Damian stepped forwards, but Morgause grabbed his shoulder – pulling him back. "We need to regroup!" she told him, glancing back towards Wicke and Sabine – the only survivors – as the prisoners finished off the bugs. Reluctantly,

Damian agreed – the prisoners out-numbered them six-to-four, and without the Wardens there was no doubt in their intentions. Asdel grabbed one of the bugs, throwing it to the ground before kneeling upon it and burying his blade repeatedly into it in a brutal and savage assault.

He then stood up and pointed his blade at Wicke. She threw a ball of fire at him but he batted it aside, her magic spent. “It’s your fault that I’m here,” he stated, stepping over Gilbert’s corpse. “You ruined the Empire, you and your kind! You destroyed five-hundred years of peace and security, brought enemies across the Frontier, let us be conquered and reduced to this,” he began, gesturing at himself - the others following behind. “This for the Pope, for Lord Gamble, for my brothers and sisters that died in the war that you started. And when I’m done with you, I’m going for Exarga, and Vanathur – and every other bastard that-”

“My gods!” Damian groaned, Asdel’s face twitching. “Boo hoo - I followed a corrupt regime turning people into unthinking golems and I got punished for it. Can you just shut the fuck up and fight?” he snapped. Asdel growled, only to then flinch as the hooded female prisoner splashed a vial across his back and the backs of the other prisoners. He groaned, fighting the initial pain before reaching behind him and letting out an agonising scream as he erupted into flames, along with the four others. The screaming continued as they fell to floor and writhed, a silver flame continuing to spread across their bodies. They soon fell quiet, their bodies burning away.

The quartet stared in horror as the female prisoner stood amongst the burning corpses. She moved and both Damian and Morgause took defensive stances. But rather than taking an aggressive stance, she instead held her hands up before slowly reaching up to take her sack hood off her face. “Oh that’s better. You never quite know with animals like those – sometimes the allure of the unknown only makes you more attractive, other times a sack over your head helps temper their urges,” she stated, in a sophisticated and regal accent.

She was young, in her early-to-late twenties, with short and jagged jet black hair. She had fair skin, although her face was marked with innumerable tiny scars, as if she had taken a blast of shrapnel to the face. She analysed the group, the whites of her wide eyes dyed green and her irises a bloody and muddied red colour. She grinned, her teeth stained and dirty. “I hope you understand that my actions are not to scare you, especially you... um, I heard your names. Oh, what were they?”

“Damian.”

“Wicke.”

"Morgause."

"...Sabine?"

"Never mind, never heard of any of you. But that's okay. Since you've given me your names, I suppose it's only fair that I give you mine. Call me Synaesthesia Derlee. Although I prefer to go by Cin, with a 'C', Cinderlee, Cinderlee the Mad. I am an Alchemist by trade. I make things explode, and I make things melt, and sometimes I make things melt and then explode. I am very good at both," declared Cinderlee.

Damian and Morgause both glanced down at the still burning bodies, carefully taking a cautious step back. "Hmm? Oh, I see. Fret not, I've never accidentally exploded anyone I haven't intended to... oh, actually I have – there was this one time-" The group stared at her in horror. "Let me correct myself: I haven't accidentally exploded anyone I liked. And good news! I like you, specifically your slashing, punching, magic... crying and cowering. It's useful, not the last part so much, but the rest is great!" Sabine wiped her face and stood up.

"I helped you, I helped the Wardens when they were alive, so I hope very much that you will help me and provide testimony for my freedom. If not, I will be on my way. I have no need to explode or melt you, nor do I want to," she stated, sticking a thumb in the wrong direction. Damian glanced back towards Wicke, who stepped forwards and approached Cinderlee. "How can we trust you? How can I trust a murderer and an arsonist?"

"Arsonist? I take offence to that. I blew up buildings for my sweet voiceless Demon girl, I didn't set them on fire – I made them go boom!" she stated, spreading her arms in a big arc. "Caelie?" Wicke questioned, her eyes widening. Cinderlee looked directly at Wicke, raising a curious and singed eyebrow. "But of course, it was Jayce Exarga who put me here – fitting you bring me out, no?" "Okay," Wicke stated. "We'll get you out and testify that you didn't kill the Wardens, if it's required."

"I like your thinking," Cinderlee stated, glancing down and picking up Asdel's knife. "Now, since both parties are dead and supplies are dwindling, might I suggest we head up rather than down." Damian and Wicke both nodded, glancing towards Morgause and Sabine. "Let's scavenge what we can: names, identification, anything and everything. Then let's get out of here."

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Hurt Feelings**

Arthuria didn't know what to do with herself. There was very little to do. The ocean felt safe for the moment: the Engines hadn't followed, and it would still be some time before they arrived at the mainland. She had done her training, both alone, and with Zhurong, and she'd finished her chores. So she found herself pacing around the ship, looking for something – anything to occupy her impatient mind.

With a thunk, she bounced back through the doorway she had just entered. "Ow!" Arthuria complained, putting her hand to her chin as she looked down at who had just walked into her. Jeanne glared up at her, rubbing the top of her head. "Sorry," they both quickly said to each other, both attempting to walk through the same doorway once again. "Uh," Jeanne uttered, awkwardly stepping to the side and waiting for Arthuria to pass.

Instead Arthuria remained where she stood, half-waiting, half-hoping Jeanne would finally say something to her. Arthuria glanced inside the living quarters - there was no one else around. "Um, can I pass?" Jeanne asked timidly. "You can," Arthuria returned. "You could stay and talk as well?" she attempted. Jeanne looked down at the floor and nodded, giving up her attempt at escape and resigning herself to the sofa. Arthuria cautiously followed before sitting down opposite her. They hadn't truly spoken since Sonorous Reaches, and any relationship they had then had long fallen apart.

"How have you been?" Arthuria asked softly. Jeanne glanced up from her lap towards Arthuria, her green eyes sparkling and nervous. "I'm okay... you?" she asked back. Arthuria slowly nodded, looking away and then clearing her throat. "Uh, a bit worried about my sister, but... yeah, I'm okay." Jeanne tilted her head. "Which one?" she asked. Arthuria looked back and put on a brave smile. "Elaine... but Morgana is scaring me a little at the moment too. She seems a bit too driven in her preparations for our future, she's hiding her anxiety and it's controlling her."

"Oh, uh, you could talk to her about it? I'm sure she'd be willing to talk." "Yeah, I think need to..." An awkward silence crossed them and Jeanne glanced towards the door, preparing to escape. Arthuria sighed, accepting that Jeanne was feeling trapped and didn't want to be there, or to talk to her. "She made this for me," Jeanne offered instead, showing off the tattoo on her wrist. Arthuria's eyes widened, looking down at Jeanne's outreached hand. "What do you think?" "I like it... It suits you." Jeanne smiled at her and Arthuria smiled back.

### **Chapter 178: A New Crew / A Lost Crew**

Even after two weeks of travelling with her, Wicke still felt nervous around Cinderlee. She had abandoned the prisoner jumpsuit, replacing it with clothes she had liberated from Gareth and Lisa's corpses, but her entire demeanour still creeped her out. They were still trapped within the Dungeon, but they had not stayed to fight any unnecessary battles, and the closer they came to the surface the more groups they encountered. Finally, after thirty-two days, the group took their first breath of real fresh air. They had stepped in one year, and emerged in another.

"Sun! Snow!" cried Sabine, getting on her knees and burying her face in the snow – much to the amusement of the guards and other explorers around. Damian almost did the same, but the cruel reality that they didn't even make it as far as they had planned to settled in almost immediately. "This is going to take a while..." he muttered. Wicke glanced towards him before placing a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. "Yeah, welcome to my world."

"Excuse me," stated a guard, approaching them. Cinderlee cautiously pulled up the hood of her jacket, stepping behind Morgause – who quickly stepped away. "All items and crystals must be declared. Please follow me," she declared. Wicke let out a sigh, following after her. They stepped into a large building: a clear set of instructions were plastered onto the walls and there were rooms for explorers to be searched in. "Let me beat you to it," Wicke stated, stepping over to a table with a conveyer belt and rummaging inside her bottomless bag. She emptied out each and every magic stone, before glancing silently at Damian. He sighed and did the same. "Wow," muttered the Marine, staring at the huge pile of purple crystals as they were sorted automatically via a machine.

"We didn't find any magic items," Wicke lied. The Marine snapped her attention to her, raising an eyebrow. Wicke let out a sigh. "My name is Wicke, of the Rising Aces. If there's a problem, tell Fleet Admiral Truth he's welcome to come and collect them. I'm gonna leave now, okay?" The Marine opened her mouth and then shut it, glancing from Wicke to the others of her party. "You're free to go," she muttered. "The receipt will be with you in just a second." Wicke nodded and followed the arrows on the floor. "Before we go," Damian stated, looking towards Wicke before taking the receipt from the machine. She faltered and then reached into her pocket, pulling out a small notebook before tossing it to him. He in turn handed it to the Marine, along with the receipt. "These are the casualties we encountered - we cremated the bodies. Please inform their next of kin, and

give them a portion of the money from this haul," he stated. She looked down at it before nodding. "Thank you, I will ensure it's done."

"You have my gratitude," Cinderlee stated, as they began their descent down to the city. "You're welcome," Damian stated, relieved to finally be getting rid of her. "Shall we get a drink, and a hot meal?" Cinderlee suggested, looking towards the group. "Please," begged Sabine. "There's a place near here that's pretty good." She looked towards Morgause, who nodded in agreement, her eyes glancing between Wicke and Damian. "Fine, we can sort out payment there."

"Here's what is owed and a bonus equivalent to what would have been your share of the magic crystals – had mister soft-hearted not given it away," Wicke stated, handing over the money to Sabine and Morgause. "It was the noble thing to do," Morgause stated, taking her coins and pocketing it. Damian nodded appreciatively. Cinderlee cleared her throat, her hand held out. "No, you're free – that's your payment," Wicke said coldly.

Cinderlee let out a sigh and sat back in her chair, but Sabine flicked a black coin over to her and she immediately brightened up. Wicke shook her head. "I will sort out next of kin for the others - as was discussed - and then that should bring this all to a close," Wicke stated, her mouth hanging slightly open as several platters of hot food were brought to their table. "So what's next then for you two?" Sabine questioned, loading her plate up. Damian and Wicke glanced at each other. "I don't know, I guess we go back in?" Damian questioned to Wicke.

Wicke folded her arms and pondered to herself. It made sense to stay in the Capital and try again, but they'd need a whole new crew – a stronger crew, a more experienced crew. It was unlikely they'd find one here. She shook her head. "I think we'll head west, to Caedom. There's a Dungeon there and the Guild is operating in it. I'd say it's likely they have explorers of their own, potentially ones who are better than here. They may be able to get us further and faster. Yeah, I think that's our best move," Wicke rationalised.

"I see..." Sabine said quietly, prodding her food as she thought to herself. A few moments of quiet eating passed before Morgause looked up from her plate, staring intently at Wicke. "Do you know my sisters?" Morgause questioned plainly. "Sisters?" Wicke returned, trying to read Morgause's face. She'd mentioned siblings briefly, but not gone into any depth during their travels together.

"Arthuria Pendragon? Morgana Le Fey?" she asked somewhat pleadingly. Wicke faltered, reaching into her pocket and pulling out Morgause's contract. It didn't say a surname, or any next of kin. "I... yeah, I've met them both. They're in the Old World, sailing with my Captain – Jayce Exarga," she answered, somewhat stunned. "Can you put me in contact with them? Get me to them?" Morgause pressed, sliding her plate to the side and leaning across the table. Wicke shook her head. "I'm sorry, I wish I could, but they're going to be in the Old World for quite some time." Morgause slumped back into her chair, her head drooping as she looked down at her lap. "Right..." she said defeatedly.

"Although, once Damian and I have cleared the Dungeons, we are due to meet up with Rising Aces again - so we could take you to them then," Wicke offered. Morgause looked up, desperately reading Wicke's face. "Clear the Dungeons?" she questioned. Wicke smiled before nodding. "Yeah, long story, but my sisters asked me to do it before they went to the Old World. It's my quest, I suppose - there's got to be an end to it at some point, right?"

Morgause nodded. "Then I offer my sword to you. I have no one else, and if you're meeting my sisters at some point then I want to be there when you do. So, you have my services as a sword for hire, in exchange for livelihood, fair treatment and to help me in return. Deal?" Morgause questioned, extending her hand across the table to Wicke. Damian shook it before Wicke could respond. "Welcome aboard, Morgause," he stated. Wicke smiled and shook it too.

"Me too!" Sabine squeaked, her mouth smeared in gravy. The trio looked towards her. "I don't have anyone else. You're my first friends in a long time, and I get the feeling that things will work out if I stay with you. Can I join as well?" she questioned. Wicke and Damian glanced towards each other. Sabine had survived through her regeneration and luck, she wasn't a very good fighter, she wasn't particularly athletic, or clever, or...

"Okay," they both said in agreement. Sabine pumped her fist and squealed with excitement. "Thank you, thank you, I can't believe I'm a Rising Ace!" she said excitedly. "I don't think we can-" Damian began, attempting to still her energy. "You know what, why not?" Wicke questioned. "I'm a member, I say we are. We're the Rising Aces second crew!" she declared, meeting Damian's eye. He shook his head but grinned anyway.

The excitement began to settle, the group returning back to their meal until one by one each set of eyes found their way towards Cinderlee, who had otherwise ignored the conversations and simply gotten on with eating. Slowly, she looked

up from her food, spotting each silent gaze upon her. "What is it?" she questioned. "Are you coming with us?" Sabine asked. Cinderlee frowned, a look of confusion on her face. "I thought that was implied."

Much further south, Alara sat waiting with her personal squad. Night was falling fast and, slowly but surely, the capital city of Diasta, known as Novalis, was beginning its slumber. She sat on a red slate rooftop, watching the sun set, as her mind steamrolled through countless theories and ideas. She needed answers, and fast – if her parents were still alive, they were down to one ship and half a crew at best. Darkness shrouded her face. "Let's go!" she ordered.

"Guards on a steady patrol, we have only a few minutes before they arrive at the square," warned Riley. Alara nodded, thinking as they approached the wreck of her mother's ship: the Dauntless. "Wulf, take your squad and wait for the last moment, then disable them before an alarm can be raised," she ordered brutally. "Lethal?" he questioned. She shook her head. There was no need for unnecessary bloodshed. "Make it look like a robbery." He nodded and his therian squad headed off.

They clambered aboard the wreck. The ship was sizeable – a fitting warship for an Admiral – but it was clear to immediate eyes that it had stripped from the inside out. "Look for anything left behind, tear it apart if needs be," she commanded, her two dozen Marines spreading out to search. Alara gazed at her watch, counting each passing minute. "Captain, we're about to engage," warned Boot. Alara bit her lip, it drastically narrowed the time window she had for any secondary objectives they would need to commit to if this search yielded nothing. "Captain," Ashton Braze called out, drawing her to him.

Alara approached swiftly. He showed off a crate that had been left behind. It was empty but a stamp on the outside identified who it belonged to: 'Novalis Ministry of Defence'. "Good work," Alara told him, reaching for her communicator. "Wulf, pull out if you can," she ordered. "Everyone out!" she commanded, her Marines moving quickly and quietly to exit the ship. "Sorry Captain, too late," Wulf returned. Alara sighed and shook her head. "Regroup with us."

Alara then turned to Riley, the only remaining crew member on board the Dauntless. "That's everyone," Riley told her, reaching into her bottomless bag and pulling out a small metal object. "Plant the charge, set it for an hour," Alara ordered, stepping away and climbing out of the ship. Riley landed a moment later and they stepped away, leaving a row of naked scarecrows behind as they erased the memorial.

“Wulf, Channing, Boot, Brett, Riley and Artemis,” Alara stated quietly, picking her team. Excluding Witchford and the Weapon, the six she had chosen were by far the best amongst her crew – and she needed efficiency more than anything. “Everyone else back to the ship and be prepared for a quick getaway. Braze, inform Commander Volker I need a fast and efficient way through those walking islands. Let’s go people, get moving!”

The seven of them raced through the city as quickly as they could, using the rooftops to avoid the patrols moving throughout the streets. “This way,” Artemis stated, taking the lead and using the map she and Riley had created during the day to guide them to their destination. Even without a map their destination would have been clear: the governmental structures were all massive and heavily fortified.

They paused on a suitable rooftop, using the darkness and their height to analyse their target. The Ministry of Defence sat within an expansive compound of large buildings, all of a similar temple-like design with colossal, decorated marble columns supporting a red-slate slanted roof. Each building was massive, enough to house several floors – even though the outside implied a singular central chamber. “Deceptive,” muttered Alara, quickly realising that without their keen eyes seeing beyond the large stone walls it would be nearly impossible to scout the location from the ground.

A searchlight illuminated part of the rooftop nearby, slowly panning towards them. They dropped to their stomachs, tucking behind the natural edge of the rooftop to obscure themselves, waiting until the light passed over them. “Captain, it might best if I head in alone – this is... tight,” Artemis suggested. Alara glanced towards the Ex-Emperor’s Fist: she knew her stuff and in other times Alara would view her advice as second-to-none. “No,” Alara stated, glancing down towards the overlapping patrols and the group of heavily-armed guards located at the main entrance. Large cannon emplacements overlooked the zone, and two of the guards were stood behind mounted flame-throwers. “If something goes wrong, you’ll need assistance. It’ll be faster together, and safer,” Alara declared. “We wait for the light, and then we jump,” Alara stated.

“That’s the building,” Riley stated, spotting the markings identifying their target using her rifle. Part of the rooftop illuminated once again and they ducked down, waiting for it to pass. “Okay,” Alara stated, stepping back. “Gentlemen,” she said with a smile, facing Wulf as Brett faced Channing and Riley faced Boot. “My

lady," he mocked back, locking his fingers together and bracing. Alara ran at him, placing her foot onto his hands and launching off as he threw her up and high.

Silently she leapt through the air, falling quickly and hard before using her Focus to give herself an extra leap of distance. She landed as quietly as she could on the other side of the compound wall, both Riley and Brett landing a moment later. The three of them immediately stepped into the shadow of the nearest building, the moonlight bright but patchy thanks to an abundance of clouds. Alara glanced back, looking up as the remaining four leapt on their own without assistance – the quartet easily clearing the distance on their own. Artemis landed as softly as a falling leaf, but the three therians all aimed for the stone pillars, digging their claws into the marble and sliding down. "That's going to be noticed in the morning," Riley whispered, staring up at the three sets of giant claw marks. "We'll be long gone by then," Alara told her, pushing forwards from the darkness with purpose.

Alara gestured upwards, Wulf immediately flinging Riley up towards an overlooking rooftop. She got in position. "You're clear for forty metres," Riley said quietly through her communicator, guiding the group onwards. "Stop," she instructed. "Take cover." The group ducked into the darkness, concealing themselves as much as they could whilst preparing for an emergency fight. The patrol passed by. "You're clear," Riley reinforced.

Carefully they crossed the compound, arriving at their destination with no issue. "We were lucky," Artemis stated, picking the lock to the front door. Alara nodded in agreement, for one reason or another there had been no Null Legionnaires, which would have made their approach far more difficult, thanks to their Focus. "Repositioning," Riley warned, switching rooftop to get a better view. The lock clicked open and Artemis stepped through. "Clear," she told them a moment later, after ensuring there were no traps.

They pushed inside, shutting the door behind them. "Trap it," Alara ordered, moving onwards. Boot reached into his backpack, pulling out an explosive device before mounting it behind the door and setting a string to the door. It would be loud and would give them plenty of warning. Cautiously he stepped back, glancing to Wulf and nodding. "Done. Commander, the front door is trapped," Boot warned into his communicator. "Thank you," Riley returned, with gentle and soft mocking tone. "You're all clear, but probably not for long," she warned. "You heard her," Alara stated, "find anything and everything!"

The area on the bottom floor had been separated into numerous corridors and offices. With time running out, Alara's crew wasted no time picking locks – they smashed and tore open anything and everything, but they found nothing they needed. "Wulf, Boot, Channing - take upstairs," Alara ordered, stepping back to think as they rushed off. "There's got to be something more," Alara muttered. "Perhaps this is the wrong building?" suggested Artemis. Alara turned and faced her. "I just mean, that for a building like this, it's surprising that it's unmanned. Do they not have any operations going on that they should be monitoring or involved in?"

Alara frowned: it was a fair point, and she had been expecting at least someone. "The Sovereign obliterated the military forces of most nations," Alara stated. "Given what Brunxchume command told us, Diasta's leadership is probably afraid to do anything without her command. At least... they wouldn't do it publicly." Alara and Artemis looked at each other, their own thoughts formulating before they came to the same conclusion. "If they were to do secret operations, they couldn't afford to hide it – Scáthach would know. They'd hide it in plain sight," Alara stated. They both looked down, using their Focus to the scan the floor. "I see nothing," Artemis stated with a curious smirk. "Yeah, me neither," Alara said with disappointment. Artemis shook her head. "No, I see nothing, Captain." Alara frowned and then looked back down. "Oh," she realised. "Sneaky."

"Plan?" Wulf questioned, as he returned to the ground floor with Boot and Channing. Alara assembled her glaive and aimed at the floor. "Breach," she commanded, activating the runes on her glaive's staff and unleashing a trio of fiery blasts into the floor. A large hole emerged in the ground and she immediately leapt inside. "Hands up!" Alara ordered, the others landing behind her with their own weapons drawn.

There was immediate movement, a brave and foolish guard drawing their weapon. Alara aimed her glaive and fired, blowing a hole through his golden armour. She aimed at the next nearest guard. "Drop your weapons to the ground! Now!" she commanded. Slowly and cautiously, her orders were obeyed. "Good. Everyone, to that wall and on the floor!" There were a dozen workers placed across the open room, scattered amongst numerous desks, but Alara could tell they weren't of any particular seniority. They were grunts, put on the night shift to ensure nothing went wrong.

They moved quickly, a few bawling their eyes out and others pleading for mercy. Alara ignored them, instead taking in her surroundings – her eyes naturally falling on a large vault door. “Who has clearance to open that door?” Alara questioned, glancing across the prisoners all now kneeling in front of her. No one spoke up. Artemis stepped forwards, grabbing a young woman by her shirt and standing her up. “The others looked to you, are you in command?” Artemis questioned, catching what Alara had missed. “No, I-I am nothing – no one of importance,” she quickly stammered.

Alara looked the woman up and down: she seemed ordinary, she had no Focus, but she did have a golden metal hand. Alara approached her and grabbed her wrist, flexing the hand back. A key of sorts popped out of her palm and she immediately turned a ghostly white. “Open that door,” Alara ordered softly, with as much cold fury as she could muster. “No, I cannot,” said the woman with a quiet whimper. “Get that door open, now!” Alara ordered. Artemis nodded, pressing the woman forwards and forcing her towards the vault door. “Please, they will kill me,” she pleaded to Artemis, as she fought against her unbreakable grip.

Alara maintained her gaze on the other prisoners. A cry rang out and the vault door rolled open moments later. “It’s open!” Artemis called out, dragging the woman back and throwing her to the other prisoners. She immediately turned and moved towards the vault. “Need a hand?” Alara called out, glancing towards Artemis. Artemis turned on her heels, waving a golden hand towards Alara. “I’ve got one, but please.” Alara rolled her eyes and followed. “Watch them,” she commanded to the trio of therians.

She stepped into the vault, her eyes widening as she looked at the large towers full of boxes, each one filled with files upon files of information. “Damn,” she muttered. “They’re dated,” Artemis pointed out. Alara immediately turned her attention to the files within the last two to three years: still a daunting amount to go through. “Captain,” Riley warned through her communicator, “you have incoming!”

“Shit!” Alara growled, grabbing her bottomless bag. “We’ll take them all,” she commanded, grabbing and stacking boxes. Artemis rushed to do the same before they both stepped back and Alara aimed and then pulled them into her bottomless bag. “Problem for later,” she muttered, quickly stepping away towards Wulf and the others with Artemis in tow. “We’re moving!” she commanded, crouching and then leaping up through the hole in the roof.

A loud bang alerted them to the trap they had laid going off. "Rear exit!" Wulf commanded, taking lead and rushing forwards. They came to the locked rear door, but Wulf didn't stop, smashing straight into, and through, it. The heavy metal door slammed into something on the other side. "Intrud-!" began a guard, only for his golden helmet to explode. "I've got you, but not for long. West wall!" Riley stated. Alara lunged with her glaive, cutting down another guard as Artemis, Boot and Channing dealt with the remainders.

They darted forwards on Riley's guidance, a heavy stomping and a loud creaking drawing their attention to the side as a large, golden automaton burst out of an alleyway. The thing was massive, spewing smoke into the night from the glowing furnace in its torso. In someways it looked humanoid: it had two arms and two legs - but it had no head, only a skull-like visage cast into its round torso with a trio of orange eyes. One arm was a large curved pipe, connecting directly to its furnace, the other was a large mace. The creature bellowed a long war cry from a horrifically loud horn somewhere inside its skull visage.

"There goes any chance people don't know we're here!" Boot yelled, stopping and firing a desperate shot from his rifle at the machine. Wulf grabbed Boot's uniform, dragging him forwards as the others didn't stop. A loud pumping action echoed from behind them as they ran. "To the sides!" Alara yelled, diving to the edge of the street they were running down. The others mimicked her, just as a long spew of glowing molten lava sprayed the path they had been running down. A heavy clanking thundered across the ground, the metal creature stepping forwards. "Move!"

They ran for the walls, Boot rummaging inside his backpack as they ran before retrieving a heavy metal orb. He slid open a cover before pressing a rune underneath. "Going loud!" he yelled, throwing it ahead of them. It rolled across the floor, coming to a stop beneath the wall before detonating in a quick and flameless blast. The wall was blown open and they darted through. "Riley, are you clear?" Alara called into her communicator, the group continuing to run.

The heavy steps had faded as they ran along the edge of the wall, waiting for Riley's confirmation. A cold feeling spread across Alara's back. "Down!" she yelled, the wall next to them exploding outwards as the automaton launched itself through. The hulking metal behemoth towered over them, its face glaring down at them as they backed away. The creature let out its war horn once more, deafening the group as they clutched their ears. It raised its mace but it faltered.

The face couldn't move, but Alara could have sworn she saw panic in its orange eyes. "Don't worry, I'm here," Riley stated, a rattling echoing from inside the machine as she walked between its legs. She hefted her rifle over her shoulder, placing the barrel to the automaton's face before firing. The back of the round body exploded outwards like a sunflower, before the machine toppled over and lay still. "Let's get out of here."

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Family**

Marisha let out a brief sigh as she looked at herself in her bathroom mirror. Her burns ached: a symptom of the cold weather, and one she was unfortunately long familiar with. She reached up to touch the marks across the left side of her face; the scars had always felt smooth and she'd slowly grown to like the tingling sensation it created. It made her feel alive, but equally reminded her of how it had occurred.

Movement drew her attention away from the mirror as a hand touched her waist before a pair of large, dark arms tightened around her. "Morning," Bjorn said softly, placing his head on her shoulder. She leant her head against his, lowering her hands to place over his. "Your snoring is getting worse, you should probably talk to Yuthura – something could be wrong," she returned somewhat absently. Bjorn rolled his large brown eyes. "I'm not joking, I think you vibrated my glass off the table."

"Yeah, yeah," he stated, kissing her cheek before releasing her. She smiled as he stepped away, his dreadlocks long and loose – the dark brown had slowly begun to show patches of grey, a somewhat worrying sign for a man in his early thirties. He was hunched, his entire body deflated. "Posture!" she corrected, turning on the tap and splashing her face. He straightened up before transforming into his therian form. "You're beginning to sound like your mother," he warned, looking back at her. She sighed. "Sorry, I just... no, never mind," she stated, patting her face with a towel before walking into their bedroom and grabbing her preplanned outfit: a large wool jumper and baggy trousers, with a pair of fur-lined brown boots.

Bjorn picked his clothes up off the floor and threw them on, before sitting down on his bed and watching her. "Go on, say it," he pressed, his bear form failing to hide his cautious intrigue. He often claimed his therian form made him harder to read, Marisha – and Jayce – argued the opposite. "I... I love you, and you know that, I'm just nervous about seeing our people again. There will be expectations, now that we are... you know," she said uneasily, grabbing some plain amber

jewellery. "Together?" he questioned. She nodded before then shaking her head. "Are you worried that we're going to be encouraged to soul-bond?" he guessed, grinning widely.

"Yes! Are you not? I mean, we've known each other for... I don't even know anymore – forever, practically. Thalia may be leaving us, and Magnus and Inger are old... They may... ask us to take over. My mother-" Bjorn pulled a face. "What?" questioned Marisha, folding her arms and glaring at him with both eyes. "What did she say?" Bjorn asked gently, watching his wording as closely as possible.

"She wished us the best, provided me with contacts, and information that Corina has infiltrated the Guild – Jayce knows already, and we all knew it was coming," Marisha answered. "And...?" Bjorn eased, sensing more. Marisha sighed and sat down next to him. "She asked about our future. Our plans: this crew, the Frostbear tribe... kids, and whatever comes next once this is over." Bjorn nodded. "Kids... is not what I really want, at least not any time soon – not with Scáthach, Vexx, and everything else," he stated.

Marisha looked down and rubbed her thumbs, her curiosity piqued over Bjorn's first response being on children. "I can't..." she said softly. "My mother messed me up, it's a vicious cycle – and if we follow our tribe's style then they're not ours anyway. I don't want either of those outcomes... do you?" He shook his head, and she breathed a sigh of relief. "According to Jayce I already have three sons," he half-joked. She smiled – Jayce wasn't wrong. "Then I guess we better become more strict on those three," she said with surprising sincerity. Bjorn nodded, cracking his knuckles. "They won't know what hit them."

Marisha shook her head and stood up, her eyes level with his. "Do you... do you want to be my soul-bond?" she questioned. He stood up, picking her with ease. "Did you ever think we weren't?" he questioned, placing his forehead to hers. She wrapped her arms around his giant neck. "No, I guess not, my husband."

**Chapter 179: A Necessary Evil**

"Eighteen degrees starboard!" ordered Commander Volker, the Helm of the Courier immediately angling the ship as the ocean swelled in front of them. "Brace!" he warned across the communicators, the bow of Alara's ship crashing into, and then through the gigantic wave. "I'm getting really tired of this Commander!" yelled out Wulf from the main deck. He was sodden - as were the rest of his team - as they desperately secured the lines to cargo and wrangled washed away crew members.

Volker glanced towards the west: an island sat on the horizon. An island that walked, lifting up a colossal leg – or paw – far larger than the Courier, before dragging it across the ocean and sending another tidal wave their way. Another marched towards the north. And a further two towards the southwest, both heading towards each other. "Trust the path, Wulf! A false move and we will find ourselves caught between the waves," Volker stated, counting the seconds on his stopwatch as he waited for the next wave. He glanced up, watching the movements of the nearest wave before pointing towards it. "Twelve degrees port!" he commanded, angling the ship once more into the wave from the closest rokken.

Alara glanced towards the window as the floor of her ship shook, a heavy wave hitting the bow. A rush of water flowed down the glass and she let out a sigh. "We need a heading," she stated, the seven others cramped into her room all glancing up from their own stacks of documents. "Hurrying won't solve the task accurately or sufficiently," Witchford stated, reading every letter on his page thrice over before setting it aside. "Our ship won't take much more of these waves," Alara returned, standing up and stretching. A huge boom rattled her windows, the others all immediately standing up. "The hell was that?" questioned Brett.

Alara opened her door, another crash shaking her body. "Captain," Volker greeted, pointing off towards the horizon. "Come to watch the show?" he questioned. Alara shook her head, letting out a long puff of air in disbelief. One rokken threw itself at the other, the collision unleashing a cloud of dust and dirt several hundred metres high. Alara couldn't help but think of Jayce's own rokken: RK-227. Could it possibly reach that size someday? How long would it take? Just how old were these creatures around her? "Keep us far away from them," she ordered, more for her own assurity than anything else. Volker glanced

towards her with bemusement. "It would be our last and final stupid decision, Captain." She smiled and nodded in agreement.

Her smile dropped as she heard something between the collisions: something rumbled on the winds, something in the air. "Captain!" yelled a Marine from the crow's nest. "Flyers, starboard!" she followed up with, ringing the alarm bell. "Battle stations!" Alara commanded into her communicator, assembling her glaive in a singular, smooth and well-practiced movement. Riley rushed out of Alara's quarters, her rifle in her arms. "Riley, assessment?" Alara questioned, entering into Focus and trying to spot markings to identify the flying vessels.

Riley stared through her scope, each metal flyer she'd seen so far had been the same: a mosquito-like vehicle with a bulbous cockpit and a cuboid storage compartment behind for passengers or cargo. The wings were canvas and metal, flapping in the wind as the vehicle was thrust forwards by the roaring and smoke-spewing engine on top. Four to six legs sat tucked underneath, each of them curved so as to allow landing on water, but also capable of standing firm in order to land standing up, through thrusters that pushed downwards to both lower the vessel safely and allow it to leap upwards into the air.

Thrown in the mix were larger vehicles, these had bigger, wider and more firm metal and wood wings. The storage compartment was larger, and featured hatches that could be opened for the crews to deploy explosives. Like the smaller flyers, they had weapons that spewed bullets at terrifying speed – easily capable of tearing apart other flyers, or ships in their sights. They all were painted a rusty orange, and all bore an identical symbol: a silver skull surrounded by fire.

Her eyes pushed past the - now commonly recognised - Mosquitos and larger Dragonflies. Four sailing ships were flying in the air behind, each as large as the Courier and held aloft by giant metallic balloons. Each ship had a far larger and flatter deck, with an array of cannons aiming down. They too spewed smoke behind them, and Riley watched as an additional Mosquito launched off the deck of one of the ships. They also displayed the flaming silver skull. "Captain, it's the Machinist!" Riley stated.

Alara swore loudly and viciously: the Guild would have ignored them - a Pirate armada seeing a lone ship... not a chance. "Captain, we're receiving communications!" called out Lieutenant Greaves, emerging from the room below. "They're demanding we prepare for boarding and to turn over all cargo." "Not a chance. Snipers, engage! Anti-air, bring them down! Show them the bite of the Wolfpack!" Alara yelled.

Riley aimed and fired. The distance to the flyers and airships was still vast, and measured in kilometres. She channelled her Focus into her weapon, the bullet unleashed leaving a trail of a cyan flame, invisible to the untrained eye. It flew like a shooting star, curving across the sky before finding its mark in a securing bracket on one of the airships. The front suspension cable of the foremost airship tore loose, the front deck dropping drastically as multiple cables were rendered useless.

A second shot landed moments later, the arc originating from Artemis, further along the main deck. Another bracket shattered, and the entire deck of the airship toppled, the left side falling loose as half of the ship became unsecured, sending the crew, and remaining flyers on the deck, tumbling towards a large and fatal fall. "Last shot is yours," Riley told her Lieutenant Commander, aiming for the next airship, the entire armada quickly and desperately spreading outwards. They both fired, Riley on a new target, Artemis destroying one of the two remaining brackets left on the crippled airship. It hung there in the sky, disabled and in a position that would be near impossible for the remaining crew to recover from.

Alara couldn't help but smile. There were a handful of snipers across the world with the skill to land shots like that, and she was grateful to have two of them. "Witchford, the guns are yours," Alara commanded, her giant, stoic Commander rushing to the main deck as the armada recovered from the surprise assault. The flyers looped back into combat positions, the Mosquitos diving before surging forwards, low and fast.

"Ten degrees port!" Volker commanded to the Helm, another wave incoming. A heavy boom rumbled in the distance, the two rokken continuing to fight. A crossing wave swept across the incoming Mosquitos, the group desperately pulling up to avoid the colossal wave. One wasn't quite so lucky, crashing into the water and vanishing completely. Alara's eyes widened: the Mosquitos had to fly low in order to target ships, and they weren't particularly good at pulling up from dive bomb attacks. It wasn't the intention of their design.

"Commander, bring us closer to those two rokken!" Alara ordered. Volker and the Helm both looked at her as if she had said something insane – which she had. "Right. Helm!" he commanded without question. Alara's Helm – Lieutenant Commander Barok – span the wheel to the left, her eyes mapping out a route that allowed her to use the gaps between the eastbound waves to sail southwest

towards the roken pair. "Captain, I don't know how much we can take if we get too close," she warned.

Alara nodded; Lieutenant Commander Barok was a veteran amongst her crew and had been with her since the Lone Wanderer. "She'll hold," Alara reassured. "Do what you do best, we'll handle the rest." Barok smiled, before looking to Commander Volker. "You heard the Captain. All crew, hold onto your lunch!" Volker declared, nodding to Alara and confirming that she was free to leave the station.

Alara glanced towards Riley as she reloaded her rifle. The airships had all descended, other than the one stuck helplessly in the sky. Two remained floating, keeping a hundred metres over the ocean, but one had fully descended and appeared in the process of deflating its balloon. "I'm limited Alara, from this distance and this angle there's not much more I can do. The plating on the balloons is too thick," Riley warned. Alara nodded, even a single airship less was a big deal. "Take care of the bombers," she commanded.

"Open fire!" commanded Witchford through his communicator, his voice calm and dispassionate. The heavy guns scattered across the main deck roared to life, spewing fire and death in the direction of the Mosquitos. The specialised shells twirled through the air, each one conical and covered in glowing runes. Astris had warned of the dangers of air superiority and Alara had taken the warning personally when she had been given command of the Courier. She didn't have a vampire, or Demons that could teleport, or Dragons. She had big guns and an onboard forge to keep them loaded.

The first volley came close to the flyers, with only one or two actually hitting their mark. "Boom," Brett stated, from Alara's side, a wall of fire erupting as the shells detonated, igniting any flyers caught in the large radius. The swarm dispersed, those on fire crashing quickly, the rest separating into chaos. The Courier fired again, the Navy gunners picking targets and calling out positions to each other in order to maximise their volleys.

Another duo of cyan trails split the sky, followed immediately by a dozen blue bolts from the rest of the snipers. Most missed, but Artemis and Riley did not. Riley aimed for the engines, sending the Dragonflies downwards in bursts of blue flame. Artemis aimed for the pilots, painting each cockpit red before dooming the pilotless crew. A runner emerged from the deck below, dropping off a crate of ammunition for Riley before loading her backup rifle. A loud ping rang out as her rifle ejected its clip. She passed the rifle over, taking the loaded weapon

before immediately beginning to fire again as the runner began to reload. Alara glanced further along the deck: other Marines were doing the same with the rest of the snipers.

The flyers rained from the sky, dropping one after another from the Courier's anti-air strategy, but they kept coming. Alara frowned, a spray of bullets peppering the waters around them. At least one of the ships should have come closer than they had. They had broken formation long ago and were chaotically dancing through the skies, but the flyers hadn't truly braved an assault. They were holding back, keeping distance.

Alara pondered for a moment, glancing towards Witchford. He was pointing out areas for the gunners, his mind occupied. She glanced towards the Weapon and Wulf, both watching the skies, but she could read their bodies like a book. They too were thinking something was off. Alara glanced towards the stranded airship, something dropped off it - something large and metallic - crashing into the waters before disappearing. Alara turned her attention to the other airships - peering through the wall of smoke and rain of debris - they had all removed their balloons and were sailing towards the Courier for a ship-to-ship assault, but the waves from the rokken were delaying them.

A heavy crack and crumbling drew Alara's attention to the warring islands. One was looking worse for wear than the other, huge cracks across its colossal body. Another pair of waves emerged from their movements, colliding before creating a narrow furrow as the ocean folded towards the Courier. The waters swelled either side of Alara's ship, a pair of walls threatening to consume them all, but Lieutenant Commander Barok pushed them forwards, balancing both walls to push them through and over the collision point.

The entire crew breathed a sigh of relief, but another was on its way as they drew closer to the rokken. Alara glanced to her Helm, the middle-aged, grey-haired woman sweating profusely as she strained against the wheel. Volker stepped behind her, grabbing the wheel over her hands to grant her a moment's break. Her grip eased but she kept her hands on the wheel, panting heavily before squeezing the wheel once again.

The walls swelled around the Courier, the enemy flyers using the cover to surge towards the Courier from all angles. "Wolves!" Alara yelled, Boot and Channing rushing to her and Riley's sides before crouching and bracing. Wulf ran on all fours along the main deck to Artemis, as other members of his therian squad

moved to the other snipers. Riley and Alara stepped onto the locked hands of Boot and Channing, the therians launching them high into the air.

Alara focused on the air beneath her, commanding a surface to form before pushing off it and aiming her glaive. She ran her fingers along the runes on her glaive, a bolt of orange energy launching forwards towards a closing flyer. It caught the wing, tearing through it and sending the Mosquito crashing into the ocean. Gravity then took her, pulling her back down, but as Alara fell towards the Courier a glimmer drew her attention to the waters.

Alara fell fast but Boot caught her, not that he needed to. "Thanks," she said anyway. He grinned wolfishly at her before darting back to the main deck. The Courier thread the needle once more, the waters crashing down behind them. Alara raced to the side of the ship, looking over the edge and scanning the ocean with her Focus. It was hard to tell, but something was there – moving towards them. A beam of light illuminated the water beneath her and her eyes widened in realisation.

"Submersibles!" Alara yelled. "Sonic disruptors, max power, now!" she ordered, Volker slamming a button on the console next to the wheel. It was silent, but Alara saw the waters shake for a moment. A few seconds later there was an explosion twenty-metres off the starboard side as the nearest submersible detonated, its crew torn apart from the sonic attack. Alara could only hope it would warn the others to disengage: immediate and unstoppable death would terrify anyone. "Cycling!" Volker stated, the underwater defences recharging.

A final and cataclysmic collision drew Alara's eyes forwards to the rokken. With a long and mournful grumble, the losing rokken broke apart, exposing a glowing magma core that the victor reached for. The victor consumed the loser, hefting pieces towards the volcano-like opening on the survivor's back. The rokken had no interest in abandoning its spoils, its movement slowing and no longer creating large wakes.

But the strategy had worked, the air was – for the most part – clear. Three remaining warships and an unknown number of submersibles were all that remained, and Alara had no plans not to finish the fight. "Wolves, prepare for boarding!" Alara called out through her communicator. "Commander, bring us closer. Gunners, I want those ships crippled. Snipers, I want all threats eliminated – take out the cannoneers."

Alara's Marines reloaded and resupplied, filtering out across the deck into squads. Volker's Navy took over any and all stations the Marines had been at, before unleashing long-range precision shots at the approaching enemy. "Dire Wolves, prepare for assault!" Alara called out, replacing the magic stone in her glaive with a fresh one, whilst Wulf, Weapon, Brett, Witchford, Riley and Artemis made their way to the edge of the ship. Alara stepped forwards, glancing back towards Volker. "Happy hunting, Captain," he stated. She nodded and leapt off the side. "Engage!"

Wulf transformed out of his therian form, utilising his Focus to chase after Alara across the surface of the ocean alongside the others. "Captain, which ship first?" Witchford questioned, charging alongside her. Alara looked at the three ships: they were practically all identical. "We'll hop them, closest first," Alara returned, a barrage of cannon fire peppering the ocean around them in an attempt to stop their assault.

A heavy ball glimmered in the daylight, on a direct path towards Alara. In a blur, the Weapon darted forwards and threw his metal fist into it – the surface bending and warping like rubber before launched away from her. He darted towards another, punching directly into it and shattering the metal into a blast of shrapnel sent towards its originator. He grabbed another, catching it in a shower of sparks as it span in his metal arms, before throwing it like a ball.

Riley and Artemis had substituted their main rifles for closer range weapons, still high-powered, but easier to fire point-blank. They took shots at the incoming cannonballs, breaking them apart before impact whilst also sniping the gunners. A periodic blue bolt would sail past Alara, Riley's squad doing their job in her absence, picking off exposed enemy crew members one after another. The enemy rushed to the edges of their ships with rifles, but it was too late.

Wulf roared as he and the Weapon leapt, transforming back into his wolf form and swinging with his greatsword, cleaving a row of Pirates in two. Weapon grabbed another, swinging and tossing the Pirate towards the mast. They screamed as they flew across the deck before immediately falling silent as they cracked against the wooden beam. Brett darted across the deck - a sabre in one hand, a pistol in the other – taking pot-shots and hunting foes attacking from Wulf and Weapon's blindsides.

Alara leapt aboard. A heavily armoured, giant man was darting across the deck with a heavy weapon in his hands, a fuel tank across his back. Alara aimed her glaive and fired, igniting the cannister in a lethal and large explosion. The deck

erupted into flame, and Alara aimed her glaive at the next most dangerous target. But a duo of cyan shots executed the Captain before he could even react. "Next ship!" Alara commanded, her Dire Wolves abandoning their fights to charge towards the next ship.

As Alara cut down the Captain of the next ship, she glanced back towards the flaming vessel they had abandoned. Her Marines had boarded and were securing the survivors whilst the Courier progressed towards the ship Alara was currently on. "Next!" she declared, flicking the blood off her glaive and vaulting back towards the ocean, the others following her lead. They surged towards their final target, the crew terrified as the Wolfpack hunted and devoured them. The battle swiftly came to a close, but Alara left the Captain of the final ship alive.

"I want their ships scavenged, take anything of use and put all prisoners on the least damaged ship," Alara commanded, her commands receiving no audible acknowledgement, as her crew followed their deep cover protocols to protect their identity. She couldn't afford her crew to be recognised. She couldn't afford to be recognised. The three enemy ships were dragged and sailed next to each other, the fires having been extinguished and the crew disarmed.

"Why did you attack us?" Alara questioned, the Weapon and Wulf by her side. The Captain looked up at her. He was a grizzled man with a metal prosthetic jaw. He had lost an eye some time ago, and hadn't bother to wear a patch. He growled at her but glanced towards Wulf and then Weapon before letting out a tinny sigh. "You looked ripe for plunder, nothing more," he stated. Alara folded her arms. "Why has the Machinist sent you so far out? Where were you headed? Answer truthfully and you'll live to return home, I swear."

The Captain glanced past Alara to the hundred-or-so prisoners placed along the main deck. The Captain then looked at her. "Who are you?" he questioned. "No, I'm asking the questions!" she snapped. He laughed, looking away from her. Alara reached forwards and grabbed his metal jaw, pulling hard. He gasped in pain and she stared into his good eye. "Answer me," she growled, letting go. "We're hunting. The Revelry is coming and the boss is getting antsy. A Pirate Lord is nearby: Kitty Deliver. We want her head, that's all. You were... an easy target."

"Yeah, a foolish error," she stated, turning and looking towards Witchford on the main deck. A soft flutter of excitement crossed her chest as she thought about the possibility of encountering Kitty. The Captain tried to stand from his kneeling position, but Wulf and the Weapon pressed him back down. "Your accents, your

clothing... you're from the New World, aren't you? From the... Empire?" he growled. Alara twitched, turning to look at her captive. He grinned, as much as he could with a metal jaw. "Van-a-thur," he chided, before laughing. "You're the one the Sovereign toyed with. Ha-ha-ha, the boss will love to hear of this. An invasion on our doorstep. Just as the Sovereign--"

Alara grabbed the halves of her glaive, assembling it and swinging it. His eye widened as his head rolled across the deck. Alara glanced towards Wulf, who stared at her in surprised shock. She could only hope his crew hadn't heard it. "The Empire? The Empire is here!" called out a sailor, the rest of the prisoners stirring and fidgeting as they stared in confusion and curiosity at their captors. "Captain..." Weapon said softly, Alara nodding in frustrated agreement. She lowered her head. "For the Republic," she told herself, before steeling herself and looking at the hundred doomed souls. "Dispose of the witnesses!" Alara ordered.

Her Marines didn't hesitate – they too all knew the consequences of their presence being spread. The information would doom the others of the Vanguard Fleet, and likely Alara's parents as well – if they were still alive. Screams filled the air along with gunshots – the captives desperately getting to their feet and racing towards the edge of the ship, even with their hands bound. Most didn't make it, instead getting cut down with swords. Some tried to fight, but they never stood a chance. Those that made it to the water quickly sank, the rest getting shot from above. Wulf stared at Alara in horror, the deck of the ship painted and dripping blood. "Get rid of the bodies, then strip the ships for anything of use," she ordered, cleaning her glaive before departing back for the Courier.

Alara kept her jaw clamped shut all the way to her quarters – she then promptly evacuated her stomach in her bathroom, her body shaking with anger and disgust at what she had just done. Tilly rushed to her side, brushing her body against Alara's legs before retreating, her fur sticky with blood. The door to Alara's quarters slammed open and Wulf stormed inside. Alara glanced towards him, her eyes hollow and face expressionless. "What the hell was that?" he questioned.

She shook her head and began to take off her boots, before grabbing a cloth and wiping her uniform. "It had to be done," she stated quietly, surprised that it was Wulf of all people who had come to her with issues. However, he was likely to be only the first in line. "As if - there was an array of other options. They didn't need to all die," he complained. "We could have taken them captive, locked them away somewhere. Anything would have been better than that!"

The door opened behind them and Brett glanced from Wulf to Alara. "Bad moment?" he questioned, his scarred face splattered with blood that wasn't his. Alara and Wulf both said the opposite to each other, and Brett looked directly towards Alara for an actual answer. "No," she reinforced. "Let me have it," she stated, folding her arms. "Uh, are you okay?" he questioned, surprising the pair of them. Alara glanced towards Wulf. He shook his head in disapproval. "No," she answered honestly. "Right, uh, yeah. You did the right thing," Brett stated.

"What?" they both questioned. Brett met Wulf's glare before looking back at Alara. "The mission comes first," he stated earnestly. "It's not just us we're putting at risk, it's everyone: Commodore and Captain Kai, the other fleets... everyone. Even Astris. We're in enemy territory, on our own, doing anything we can so that our home isn't set on fire again. They were Pirates, if the situation had been reversed, they would have done far worse to us. It wasn't a good thing, but it was the necessary thing to do. The mission supersedes everything else," he clarified.

Alara turned to face Wulf, waiting for his response. He lowered his head and shook it. "We need to be better than this. The Republic shouldn't be like the Empire was. We can't kill – we shouldn't kill – just because it makes things easier, or how long will it be before we're rounding people up and we're building another Necropolis. We need to be better than the Sea Sovereign if we want a chance of defeating her," Wulf argued. Alara looked between the two of them. "You're both right. I–"

A knock drew their attention towards the door. "Come in!" Alara called out. Ashton Braze opened the door and stood in the doorway. "Captain, Witchford wanted me to tell you that we've found what we're looking for. Admiral Vanathur's ship was in Brunxchume. It lines up with what we knew, but they had a location. One of their latest reports states that the Betrayer – Khalid – went to investigate. The ship was captured, it's somewhere near Brun. We're still looking for more information," he reported.

Alara nodded and he stepped out. "We're so far south," Wulf stated. "We're not going to be able to react any time soon." Alara hated to hear it, but she was thinking the same thing. "Kitty is nearby. We'll meet up with her and I'll send a message to Captain Kai. It's all we can do..." she stated quietly. Brett and Wulf both looked at her with sympathy. "Go on, get out. I need to wash this day off of me." They nodded and departed.

"Just... great," she muttered.

**Seize the Seas Tales: Allies and Enemies**

It took far longer than Alara would have liked to track down Kitty Deliver: it was time she could have spent sailing towards Brunxchume, but, once the offer of a meetup had been extended, Kitty had been most insistent on seeing her. Alara and her crew found Kitty and her Delivery Kats waiting in the shadow of a crescent-shaped island – the three ships hidden within a cave within the island's cove. "Should we prepare for a potential battle?" questioned Commander Volker, clearly uneasy to be meeting a Pirate Lord. "No," Alara stated. "If Kitty wanted to fight then the battle would already be over and we'd be sunk."

A flashing dazzled Alara's eyes, an invitation beckoning her to the cave. "Wait here," she commanded to Volker. "Wulf, Riley, Witchford, Brett, Weapon, Boot Channing and Artemis – with me," Alara ordered, choosing her best – and the ones most familiar with her unusual connections to the world of piracy. "Weapons?" Boot questioned, not exactly certain of what to expect. Alara shook her head.

"Welcome," Kitty greeted, emerging from the cave in a pair of very small grey shorts with the top button open, as well as a red bikini top, a choker, large sunglasses and a wide straw-hat. She strode down the sands towards them with a big grin on her face. Artemis, Weapon, Boot and Channing all looked at each other uneasily. She stepped towards Alara, standing on the slope to maintain eye-level whilst folding her arms and glancing across Alara's squad. "I see you've got some new blood, Captain Vanathur," she stated, before giving a small wave to the group. "Hi, I'm Kitty. Pirate Lord, Republic saviour, all-round wonder," she introduced for herself.

She looked the same as Alara remembered: shoulder-length, grey, black and brown tabby-coloured hair, green eyes with a glowing yellow core, a petite face and nose, with freckles across the bridge. She had pointy canines and a prideful, yet mischievous smile that was disarming yet unnerving at the same time. She oozed danger, and her reputation was legendary. Alara glanced past Kitty, looking towards her two Captains: Somme Ankor and Rebel Red.

Rebel had shaved his head, his auburn hair nothing but a short fuzz on his scalp and a large bushy beard. He seemed skinnier than Alara remembered, a white shirt loose on his body and his face gaunt with dark circles around his eyes. He had new tattoos visible on his chest and arms: dark outlines of his bones in a fashion reminiscent of what Anne Muerte used to have. He nodded to her before sitting down and lighting a cigarette.

Somme Ankor on the other hand seemed bigger than Alara remembered. The broad man had lost a lot of his muscle definition: his light-brown skin still rippled with muscle but under a visceral layer of fat. His bald head was still clean-shaven, and he still wore a black eyepatch over his left eye. His metal left arm also looked different: it looked upgraded: even larger than before whilst glowing with purple energy. "Come on then, let's go chat," Kitty stated, leading the way towards the cave.

Alara tried not to grin as she observed the varying levels of discomfort from her squad as they sat surrounded by Pirates in the middle of the campsite of the Delivery Kats. "Something to drink?" Kitty offered, handing Alara a glass of some amber-coloured liquid. "Uh, sure," Alara answered, not that she had been given a choice in the matter. She sniffed it first before recoiling. Somme and Kitty both laughed, but Red simply stared into the fire in the middle of them. Alara passed the glass over to Witchford, who drank it without issue. Kitty then glanced towards Wulf, Brett and Riley, offering them a drink of their own – which they all refused.

A jeering from further in brought a moment of worry to Alara. "Brett, can you keep the others out of trouble," she requested. He sighed and sauntered off, leaving only the Commanders and their Captain. "So," Alara started. Kitty nodded, leaning back in her beach chair. "How have you been?" Kitty questioned plainly. "Uh, fine," Alara answered. "Are you not surprised to see us?" she questioned.

"Not really, it was inevitable that you guys would try something at some point in the Old World. And a deep cover mission makes a lot of sense. So, what is your mission?" Kitty questioned plainly. Alara glanced from Kitty to Somme and Red. "Oh, don't mind them – the Sea Sovereign came and visited us a few weeks back. A sobering experience to say the least." Alara nodded – it was the biggest understatement there was. "I can imagine. We're trying to track down my parents."

"Ah, makes sense. I personally wouldn't have put you on it – bit too personal – but oh well. Any leads?" she questioned. Alara nodded, reaching into her bag to pull out her personal notes. "Captain," Witchford interrupted, giving her a look of caution. "It's fine, Kitty probably knows more than we do anyway," Alara returned, passing it over. Kitty flicked through the notebook before handing it back.

“There was a battle up north, a big one, not long ago. I don’t know the full details, but I know Khalid was involved. It could be one of your parents,” Kitty suggested. Alara nodded. “Makes sense,” she said dejectedly. Kitty stood up and placed her hand on Alara’s shoulder. “It’ll be okay - if they were dead it would be publicly declared. I’ll send you what I can find out, okay?” Alara nodded appreciatively. “It’s good to see you, Alara. And the rest of you.”

They stayed a little longer, simply chatting like old friends, before beginning the walk back to their ship, but - as Alara left the cave - Kitty stopped her. “Before you go, I have a warning for you. You’re drawing too much attention - not just you – all of you. If Scáthach gets wind of your presence, she will stomp you out. Rumours are saying you’re here. I know your parents are important to you, but you need to lay low – at least for a while, okay?” she said earnestly. Alara looked down at her, Kitty’s eyes were full of genuine concern. “Okay, I will.”

“Everything okay? You were gone a while,” Volker asked, as Alara climbed back on board her ship. Alara nodded. “Set a heading north, we’re heading to Brunxchume as quickly as possible.”

**Chapter 180: Mentors**

"You have two days until we depart," Wicke informed her little group, returning from her journey to the docks. "Do we have a ship?" questioned Sabine, somewhat excitably. "No," Wicke returned, holding up a handful of travel passes. "I've got bigger things to worry about than navigating. We're on a passenger ship, passing through the Storm. Two-or-so months. Enjoy your two days, and leave me out of whatever you get up to," Wicke stated, handing out each pass before beginning to walk away. "You especially," she stated, glancing back and pointing at Damian. "I'll, uh, see you guys around. I've also got some things I need to do," Sabine stated almost immediately, walking briskly away.

"Is Wicke always like that?" Morgause questioned, as she and Damian began a slow and long walk towards the Isle of Sanctity, with Cinderlee silently following behind them. "Yeah, pretty much. But don't take it personally, she's just a defensive person – and we have all just spent a lot of time together," Damian answered. Morgause nodded, walking silently with him. "Do you want space too?" she eventually questioned, herself more than used to long periods of time with others. Damian glanced backwards towards Cinderlee. She crept him out, but she was undoubtedly going to be useful in the future. And Morgause was anything but offensive. "No. Come on – let's go shopping."

Damian had been hoping to avoid copious amounts of clothes shopping – and he was greatly relieved that neither of his two companions had any interest in anything other than practicality. They moved from one shop to another with purpose and decisiveness, but soon a divergence became inevitable. "I require more funds if you want me at my best," Cinderlee stated, holding out her hand towards Damian. He looked down at the scarred and calloused hand before sighing and reaching into his coin pouch. "What do you need?" he asked.

She pointed at his bottomless bag. "I am an Alchemist, I need equipment and materials and a means of transporting them – or otherwise my explosive capabilities will be greatly diminished," Cinderlee stated. He sighed, handing over an uncomfortable sum of money before turning to Morgause for their next steps. "I know somewhere we could get more of those magic bags," she suggested.

Damian was quite surprised to see that the Church hadn't been entirely wiped out. Morgause led them to a small district on the Isle of Duty, a convent of sorts, that looked relatively new. Inside the huge building at the centre was a large courtyard, an open area full of numerous forges, an artificial river and a central

grass mound with a cherry blossom tree that lay bare. They passed numerous Sisters, still wearing their habits – but with a bit more exposure and clearly a more relaxed clothing policy. They all had stained hands, identifying them as once being the Emperor's Fists.

But it was not the assassins that Morgause guided Damian and Cinderlee towards, instead she took them to the forges. "Morgause, you're back! Thank the Gods," stated an old man, setting down his hammer and waddling over towards them. Damian recognised him: he'd seen him before, but he couldn't remember where. "Gujin," greeted Morgause, hugging the gorilla-like, elderly smith. "How was the dive?" he questioned, immediately taking her sword from her before wincing as he looked at the state of it.

"A challenge, but the beginning of something new. This is Damian Exarga and... uh, Cinderlee," Morgause stated, gesturing to her two companions as Gujin hobbled away with her sword. He waved backwards over his shoulder, paying little attention to Damian and Cinderlee. "Did you use those oils I gave you?" he questioned. "Yes, I maintained the blade as much as I normally do," she answered.

Gujin lifted the orange welding goggles off his eyes, glaring suspiciously at her. "Your normal is lacklustre, young one," he stated, finally looking towards Damian and Cinderlee. "Exarga, huh? How is your brother?" he questioned gruffly. "I don't know, he's on the other side of the world," Damian returned. Gujin nodded simply, glancing towards Morgause. "I presume you're leaving then?" he asked her. Morgause nodded and Gujin let out a long sigh. "Are you pursuing Arthuria?" She shook her head.

"We're heading west to challenge the Dungeon there. I've been hired and in exchange they will take me to her," Morgause clarified. Gujin nodded, taking her damaged sword and setting it aside. He stepped away towards a large sack on the floor, opening it before reaching inside. He grunted before hefting out a huge greatsword, that couldn't have possibly fit inside. The weapon was taller than Morgause, with a thick blade and a large handle. It looked like a longsword, only sized up. The blade shimmered slightly, its metal bright like silver, or even platinum, and the handle was a dark grey metal with a black leather grip. "Here. I had been hoping to give this to you once you'd succeeded in becoming a Paladin, but now seems like the best opportunity," Gujin stated, passing it to her.

"Gujin, I couldn't possibly afford this," she stated, sensing magical enchantments laden throughout the blade and spotting the dark arcane runes lining the handle.

"It's already paid for, I set aside some of my own salary, as did Meredea and Athena. It's yours. The armour you'll have to earn yourself, I'm not giving you that until you forge your own oath – and you're fully grown, young lady," he stated with a proud grin. He pressed a rune on the pommel, sliding it upwards, the blade then melted away in a stream of silver particles, shrinking into a metal gauntlet. Gujin presented it to her and she took it from him, only to drop it almost immediately.

"That's so heavy!" she complained, the metal gauntlet like an anvil in her hands. "The blade is not much lighter, only more dispersed. You chose this style for yourself. You'll grow into it," he told her, showing her where to touch in order to transform it back into a blade. He then handed her a back scabbard to carry it in either form. "Thank you," she stated, before faltering. "How can I forge an oath without the Tree of Oaths?"

He smiled. "The Tree of Oaths was just that: a tree. Elder d'Arc forged her oath before that tree, and others have forged their oaths after it's destruction. A Paladin's oath is their own, a binding of themselves to their blade. No tree can do that for you. It is all you. You'll find a way, I know you will. Follow your own path and your oath will come to you. Now, was there anything else I can do for you and your party?" Gujin questioned, looking towards Damian.

With enough bottomless bags to ensure that any other members that joined them later on would be provided for, the trio departed the Holy Sanctuary. Damian couldn't help but unload a barrage of questions towards Morgause about her time in the Church. But she simply shook her head. "Sorry, I'm not answering. It's not your business to know," she stated, trying to get used to the new sword across her back, before ultimately settling on putting the weapon away in her bottomless bag. "Uh, okay," Damian said somewhat awkwardly, not quite sure as to whether or not he had offended her with his questions. "There should be shops here, military gear we can buy, let's have a look around," he suggested, in a peace-making move. Morgause nodded and led the way.

Cinderlee frowned as she looked at the pair ahead of her. They were very similar - different, but quite the same in a lot of ways: wound tight... disciplined, but lazy... violent. The two bruisers lived and breathed with their weapons, it was a part of them: their religion, their doctrine. Cinderlee couldn't help but be curious as to how two so young had become this way. She was the eldest in the group by almost a decade, but Sabine was the only one of the four teens that still seemed like a child. And Wicke... Wicke was a killer, a living force of destruction.

Cinderlee couldn't help but smile, her heart aflutter with excitement. The group would go far together – she was certain of it.

Damian glanced back towards Cinderlee: she looked suspicious, as normal, but she was concocting something - formulating a plan of some kind. She grinned at him before giving a small, childish wave. He rolled his eyes and looked forwards, only to falter as he spotted someone observing him from a café window. The figure beckoned Damian. "Uh, go on without me – I'll be back," Damian stated. "Okay..." Morgause stated, as he walked away.

For the middle of the afternoon, the café was practically empty. Only two of a dozen tables had anyone sat at them, and at one of them sat a Killer – her demeanour recognisable almost instantaneously. She wore her uniform: simple, lightweight, skin-tight, cloth clothes with a black veil over her head, but she had replaced her dancer's shoes with black boots and a large fur coat lay over the back of her chair. She observed Damian casually, but with a distinct look of warning and caution. She nodded to him, gesturing for him to enter.

But it wasn't the Killer that had beckoned for Damian. Sat on his own table was Evandril Xarga. Damian grimaced as he saw him. Xarga had been heavily wounded during the war and the gigantic man was barely recognisable. He still had his huge mane of white hair, leading all the way down his back, but he no longer had a beard. His face was scarred and malformed: the flesh melted and torn, his left eye was a milky white – the other still a firm blue. He had lost his left arm, a stump now sitting just below his shoulder. He had dressed himself in a black and gold suit, a bowler hat sat on his table. "Damian," he greeted, standing up and towering over him before extending a hand to shake.

Damian was almost a foot shorter than him. Xarga had always towered over him, but the man - who was the closest thing to his grandfather - had never felt intimidating in the slightest. "Old man," Damian returned, taking the firm handshake before being pulled into a one-armed hug. "It is good to see you, my boy," Xarga stated, before releasing him and sitting back down. He gestured for Damian to sit, but Damian glanced around before looking back towards the Killer. "Adeline will not harm you, she is my... protector," Xarga explained. Damian sat down and a waiter approached. "Since when do you need a protector? Coffee, please – black."

The waiter nodded and walked away. "Your mother's choice, not mine," Xarga stated. He seemed out of breath just from speaking and Damian couldn't help but feel worried. Xarga noticed his change in expression, his cheery smile falling.

"I am okay, Damian – you don't need to worry about me," he stated. Damian leant back in his seat and crossed his arms. "So, why did you want to speak to me? I'm guessing it isn't a coincidence that we crossed paths."

Xarga nodded, looking out of the large window before drinking from his cup. "I heard that you entered the Dungeon. Is this true?" he asked. Damian followed Xarga's gaze, his eyes resting upon Cinderlee and Morgause as they sat on a bench eating pastries whilst they waited for him. "Yeah – uh – yes, we did." "May I ask why?" Xarga pressed, looking back at Damian before handing over payment to the waiter as they set down Damian's coffee.

"Jayce ordered Wicke to explore them, something about her sisters requesting her to do it a few years ago. Jayce told me to go with her, to keep her safe and vice versa," Damian answered honestly. Xarga nodded, looking back at Damian's companions. "So this is all on Jayce's request?" he asked. Damian's face twitched, a fast feeling of frustration bubbling within him. "No, it's for Wicke. I'm helping Wicke, not because Jayce told me to," Damian said somewhat forcefully. "I see..."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Damian questioned, clenching his fists. Xarga shook his head. "Nothing. I'm simply curious as to where you see yourself at the end of it. Once you've explored the Dungeons – however long that may take." Damian looked down. "I... I don't really know. A crew of my own, Pirate Lord, maybe?" Damian said quietly. Xarga raised an eyebrow, looking at Damian with sympathy. "You can do better than that," Xarga stated. "That's a lazy decision, and one you're only choosing because of your brother."

"That's not true! I'm not copying Jayce," Damian snapped. Xarga rested a hand on the table. "It is not an attack, Damian," he said calmly. "Your path is your own to choose. The Dungeons are for your friend, but you are at a point, young man, where you need to start choosing for yourself. Not out of loyalty to your friends and family, but for yourself. Will you choose order and discipline, or freedom and chaos? Alara or Jayce. Both have picked divergent paths – both are good, but only because of the way they walk those paths," Xarga stated, reading Damian's face. "I'm not Jayce," Damian growled.

"No, you most certainly are not. And you never will be," Xarga stated coldly. Damian stood up. "What's that supposed to mean?" he questioned, his face flashing red and fists balled. "Are you going to hit me?" Xarga pressed, out of both bemused curiosity and concern. "You are not your brother, copying him will only bring you ruin. He has put you on an impossible task, one that is

dangerous and foolish and not worth risking your life for. It is okay to be different from him, you do not have to follow his whims. The military would do you good, otherwise get into merchantry – it would help you explore this world and grow as a person. You are unique, Damian – with gifts from your family that you are wasting. Corina used you – get over it.”

Damian looked down at Xarga, his face red. “I’ve chosen this - no one’s made me.” “Then stop following, and start leading. Start making your own decisions,” Xarga concluded. Damian grabbed his coffee, drinking the scalding fluid before glaring at Xarga. “Are you okay? That hadn’t cooled yet,” Xarga asked with genuine. “Yes. Goodbye,” Damian grunted, his mouth burning, before storming towards the door. Xarga laughed as he stormed out, his escort standing up and sitting down at his table. “Was that what you were hoping for?” the Killer asked. Xarga watched Damian approach his companions, then bark something at them before they all stood up and left. “No - but I’m less worried than I was.”

The slamming of doors alerted Wicke to Damian’s return to their accommodation. She looked up from her grimoire, a scattered array of documents and arcane powder lining the floor. She thought for a moment as to whether it was worth asking him what was wrong, before she quickly decided that she didn’t particularly care. It was only as the door to her bedroom slowly creaked open that she bothered to say anything. “So what happened?” she asked, out of begrudging duty.

Damian looked across the mess she had created, his arms folded as he stood in the doorway. “Nothing,” he grumbled. Wicke sighed and glanced towards him. “Okay, fine. I don’t care. I’m busy,” she stated, picking up a paintbrush and dipping it into an iridescent ink before drawing several glyphs on a sheet of paper. He remained silent for a few moments. “Am I similar to Jayce?” he asked cautiously. Wicke shook her head. “You’re nothing like him. Why? Do you want to be?” He didn’t answer - he didn’t really know.

“What are you working on?” he asked, changing the topic away from him. “I’m making spells scrolls so that I don’t have to rely on my spirit font,” she answered, but his perplexed expression told her immediately that he had no idea what she had just said. “I can only cast so many spells of different tiers - you know that already. Inside all of us is a Spirit Font: a cascading waterfall of magic, or mana, made up of ten bowls. It refills top down so, if I’m empty, it takes forever for my stronger, more expensive spells to replenish. It’s why it’s good form to

start off with your most powerful spells first. I'm crafting spell scrolls, preemptively spending my magic so I don't have to later. Make sense?"

He nodded. "Good, cause I'm not repeating it. Cinderlee can explain it all to you, she's a Mage too," she added. Damian looked at the array of sheets that were everywhere. "Are these all spell scrolls?" he asked. She nodded, before setting aside her tools and stretching. "Most are half-done. I don't have the energy to finish them off, but it saves me time later. I also have to conserve my energy so I can make a teleportation circle for Tempest." Damian frowned and she rolled her eyes, standing up and careful dancing across her room to the door. "Have you eaten?" He shook his head. "Come on then, let's get some food."

Wicke took him across the bridge to the Isle of Sanctity; she strode with purpose and meaning, and people stepped aside for her. Damian hadn't really noticed it before, but Wicke was confident, intimidating, and held a power about her that was almost immediately obvious. Power that was unfitting for a sixteen year-old. She took him to a restaurant situated at the edge of the island, overlooking the harbours and defensive walls, but ultimately isolated. The building was massive, opulent and packed with smartly dressed clientele – a quiet respite from the rest of the Capital.

"Table for two," Wicke stated as soon as she entered, taking off her large coat and wide-brimmed hat before handing it to an attendant. The host looked at her, before glancing towards Damian. "I'm sorry, miss, we're full. Do you perhaps have a reservation?" he asked. Wicke glanced towards Damian, a mean expression on his face and his body slouched. "Stand up straight, look like you want to be here," she told him quietly. "Wicke, of the Rising Aces," Wicke stated, pulling out a black coin from her bottomless bag and placing it on the wooden stand in front of the host. "I think a table just opened up. Please follow me, Miss Wicke."

They were led up two sets of stairs to a far quieter and secluded floor. Compared to the abundance of seating on the floors they had passed, this floor had only a handful of private tables. They were seated at the corner of the building, where two wide windows met, creating an expansive view into the darkness of the evening. Snow was falling heavily and countless ships were visible throughout the darkness, illuminated by their own lighting and buoys that acted like miniature lighthouses.

Damian sat down before Wicke did and she gave him a look of disappointment, met equally by their attendant who raised an eyebrow at Wicke before departing.

"Should I bring the wine menu?" asked the waitress assigned to them. Damian opened his mouth to speak, but Wicke beat him to it. "We're both underage," she clarified, to Damian's disappointment. "My apologies, I will give you some time to look at the menu," she stated, stepping away before returning with glass bottles of water and then once again departing.

"How did you do that? They said they were full and we're basically alone," Damian questioned, with both amusement and awe. "It's something I learnt from Marisha and Zeta: show enough money up front and people will do whatever they can for you. Food is paid for already, so pick whatever you want. And try to cheer up, you've been dragging your feet the entire way here," she stated, glancing at the menu she'd pre-emptively looked at already, before looking out of the window.

"Sorry," he said quietly, noticing almost immediately that the menus didn't have prices. She nodded. "It's okay. I won't ask what happened but, if it's something that can be dealt with, you have a day to sort it," she said sternly and somewhat coldly. Damian nodded. "It isn't, but thanks." She looked back at him, their waitress returning to take their orders. "So," Damian started, once the waitress had left. "So?" Wicke returned.

"It's been a few months now, how is it without them?" he questioned. Wicke shrugged, leaning on her wrist and swirling her glass. "It's... different. Not a good different - no offence - just a strange one," she answered honestly. He raised an eyebrow. "How so?" he questioned, trying his best not to mirror her. "It was nearly three years with your brother. Nothing in the big scheme of things... but it feels like I can't remember anything other than being with him and Bjorn... Marisha, Yuthura, Little Witch... Vexx. It's strange not seeing them in the morning, or chatting to them at night."

"Would you be with them now if you could?" Damian asked, somewhat nervously. "In a heartbeat," she answered bluntly, ignoring the poorly hidden look of hurt on his face. "From their letters it seems like it's one disaster after another. I want to be there to help. And I want Vexx back too, not just them." "I never met him, but you all speak... strangely about him - like you love him and hate him. What was Vexx like?" Damian asked, helping himself to the starter Wicke had ordered, much to her ire.

Wicke thought for a moment, not sure how best to answer. "He was... like my older brother. Different from the relationship I have with Jayce. Vexx was less mature, more chaotic, a prankster... a drunk. He was irresponsible and not to be

trusted, nearly got me killed countless times, but that was him when he was at his worst... When he was... better, he was the best person you could have by your side. He was loyal and would fight to the death for you... I don't know the full details but he washed out of the Emperor's Fists, or he left... I-I don't really know, no one does, and it... affected him, more than he ever let us know."

"Did Corina know him? Ottar?" Damian asked. Wicke shook her head. "Jayce asked, they said they didn't remember him. That's not to say they didn't but... It doesn't matter, it's not my business." Damian nodded, smiling to the waiter as his food was set down for him: a steak, cooked just the way he liked it. Wicke had a meaty pasta dish of sorts. "Thank you," they both stated, taking a few bites before resuming their conversation. "He was a lot like you," she concluded. "I don't know if I should be offended or flattered," Damian immediately countered. She smiled. "A bit of both."

They finished their meal and left, stepping out into a blizzard. "Head on back, I've got some things to do," Wicke told him, holding her hat to her head. "In this? At this time? What could you possibly have to do right now?" Damian questioned. "Don't worry about it," she returned. "I may not be back tonight - if so make sure you buy clothing and gear for the Storm. Our ship is heading through it, so be prepared for worse weather than this," she added, disappearing into the snow. Damian looked around for her before eventually sighing. "The Storm, huh?" he questioned to himself, before trudging forwards into the darkness.

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Memories of the Past**

"How did it go?" questioned Sylvie Gamble – the aide-de-camp of Fleet Admiral Exarga. Cassandra looked towards her closest friend: the ally that had walked alongside her since their first interaction with each other – even throwing away familial ties and promise of promotions and glory to be with her. She pulled a face, one that only Sylvie, Philip, and a few others would recognise. But the blood covering her body and uniform spoke far more than any look could. "That bad?" Sylvie questioned, standing up and locking the door before heading to one of Cassandra's wardrobes and retrieving a towel. Cassandra didn't answer, her mind still processing the actions she had been forced to take, instead stepping into the bathroom connected to her office.

"Better?" questioned Sylvie, as Cassandra returned to her office in fresh clothes. "Yeah... Anything I need to know?" she questioned. Sylvie ran through her notifications, ranging from reports from the Old World to messages from other

Admirals, and a check-in from Admiral Exarga with a request for a dinner date. "Oh, and Truth apparently encountered Damian and Wicke about a month ago – he's not too happy with them and stated that you should be aware that they have entered and exited the Dungeon. Apparently even recruiting one of the terrorists that had been with Caelie."

Cassandra looked out of her window, sitting on the sofa she had placed in front of it, a curious grin spreading across her face as she wondered just what mischief the pair of them were getting into. "It'll do them both good. If possible I'd like eyes and ears on – the Dungeon's not to be trifled with and Wicke won't be experimenting without reason," Cassandra stated. "Apparently they've already left, heading to Caedom," informed Sylvie. Cassandra shrugged it off. "It's the Guild's problem then – good."

She lay down, covering her eyes with her forearm. She felt something land on her stomach, but only looked down at it as the door to her office opened and closed as Sylvie departed. She lifted it up to the light – it had come straight from her husband, itself straight from its author: Commander Astris Kai. She flicked through it, grateful to be aware of her son's movements, but equally aware that it was only what he wanted her to know. She then paused on the final entry.

"Crach?" she questioned aloud. She sat up and set the file aside. It had been a long time since she'd concerned herself with him – his appearance during the Therian War had been useful, but ultimately he'd shown his face and fled. She hunched over and leant on her knuckles. It was his fault she'd risen so far, his fault that she'd ever joined in the first place. In a lot of ways he owed the Marines and the Republic to him. To him and his Blood Wars.

**Chapter 181: The Therian Lord**

Jayce couldn't help but grin with excitement as the fog around the Stacked Hand began to lift. It had been a long journey south at the behest of Ex-Pirate Lord Crach Leòmhann Cridhe and Jayce, for one, had spent each day in eager anticipation. Others on his crew were also excited to see the therian nation: most notably the Beastly Boys – even after the lessons on expected behaviour that had been drilled into them by Marisha and Bjorn. But Jayce was more than aware of the equal dread that had begun to fill the minds of certain crew members.

Bjorn's nails dug into the wood of the wheel as the island – if that was even the best description of the location – came into view. The island, or collection of islands, was shaped like a giant paw emerging from the ocean. Five claw-like mountains acted as fingers, all connecting to a central palm-like landmass. A sixth jutting emerged at the base of the palm, where the wrist would be. "Could you just... settle?" Bjorn questioned, almost desperately, as Jayce paced next to him.

"Uh, sorry. You okay?" Jayce returned, glancing from Bjorn to Marisha as she tapped her foot on the main deck like a rabbit. "Yeah, I think - just eager to see my family again," Bjorn answered. Jayce nodded. It had been three years since Bjorn and Marisha had seen or heard from the Frostbear Tribe – their nomadic people. It would make anyone nervous. "It'll go fine. We're not leaving anytime soon, so you've got plenty of time," Jayce reassured, although from Bjorn's forced grin he wasn't quite sure if that helped.

"Hey, Jayce," Morgana stated, as she walked away from the bow where a small gathering was stood surrounding Thalia. "Yeah, what?" Jayce called down to her, before looking forwards as she pointed ahead to the island. "Look at the shape of it, do you think an asteroid or something formed this place?" she questioned. Jayce furrowed his brow, taking a better look. The mountains were jagged, pointing away from the centre of the palm and, on closer inspection, Jayce recognised a lake in the centre of the island with a castle in the middle. A huge city surrounded the north of the lake, leading all the way towards the mountain at the base of the palm. Jayce saw no harbour; the city didn't connect to the ocean, a sizeable farmland creating a wall, but ships were sailing towards the northern mountain.

"Interesting theory. Does Mai Lu know anything about it?" Jayce returned. Morgana shook her head. "No, we couldn't find anything on Belluabella. They didn't used to let outsiders in, so not much is known," she explained. Jayce

looked towards Bjorn. "Don't look at me. I know as much about this place as a monkey knows how to write a play," he immediately clarified, loosening up a little with a bit of self-bemusement at his own comment. Jayce rolled his eyes. "Guess we get the fun of exploring."

Jayce glanced ahead towards the final member he knew was nervous about their arrival: Thalia. She stood confident and proud amongst her friends and crewmates, but even without hearing what they were saying Jayce could tell it was beginning to bother her. Everyone knew Crach had asked for her return to him: what that meant was unknown, but everyone had taken it as Thalia was about to say goodbye.

The Stacked Hand wasn't the only ship arriving at Belluabella, but it was clear the Rising Aces' reputation preceded them, as a trio of warships left a fleet surrounding the northern mountain and began to sail towards them. A message was flashed their way and Bjorn responded in turn, immediately receiving a set of instructions to follow closely. "I don't know if we should be happy or worried about that," Bjorn confessed, as he span the wheel to follow the huge trireme. "Let's say it's a good thing for now," Jayce returned. "All crew prepare for departure, I want a meeting first," Jayce commanded, nodding to Bjorn before entering his quarters.

He grabbed his backpack, pet Little Witch, and then stepped back out into the icy air. They were nearing the mountain, a gigantic metal gate was built into the stone, connecting directly to the ocean. An expansive channel led inside, but as the trireme escorted them, the numerous ships coming and going all pulled to the side, giving a more than wide berth. "I'm not going to say that I don't like this," Bjorn stated, admiring the colossal cavern they were passing through. There was a dock inside, marked by an emblem of a grey wolf on a blood moon, with cargo being loaded and taken away through passageways. A staircase also lined the cavern, rising higher and higher before disappearing into the stone.

But the Rising Aces sailed onwards, passing straight through before reemerging into the open air. "Woah," Jayce said unconsciously, as he looked at the channel of heavy guns lining their approach. "Even if enemies managed to pass through the mountain, they wouldn't make it far," Astris stated, walking up to the aft-deck to join them. "If we need to flee for any reason, we're going through the farms," Jayce clarified, both his hands nodding in agreement.

They docked in a private harbour, deep within the city, a detachment of therians making their way towards them. They stopped on the pier next to the ship,

waiting for permission to board. "Go on then," Jayce told Bjorn, his crew still assembling. Bjorn walked to the edge. "Captain Exarga says you're fine to board," he called down, a trio separating from the dozen therians and beginning to climb.

"Captain Exarga," stated the leader, a reptilian therian that looked almost draconic – with green-grey scales, claws, sharp teeth, a frill and a forked tongue. Both Jayce and Bjorn stood stunned. "Welcome to Belluabella. Call me Hecate," she stated, glancing from them to Astris – a shared curiosity burgeoning between them. "Thank you, uh, sorry – I'm not used to seeing a..." he trailed off as she transformed out of her therian form. She bore a look of curiosity and warning.

"There will be much that I'm sure you will be surprised by during your stay. Lord Crach invites you to the castle, mounted in the centre of this region. A teleportation array is available for use in the fortress south of here, you can't miss it. Or you could walk, I'm sure you of all people won't find the water an issue. I have brought you a map and an invitation from the six Lords and the King. Each would be grateful for your presence and would very much like to meet you," she clarified.

She turned to Bjorn. "Your people are at the third claw, Lord Solan has taken them in. Look for the bear symbols, they're hard to miss," Hecate stated. Bjorn bowed his head appreciatively and she transformed back into her giant monitor lizard form. "Rules are as would be expected, be respectful and courteous and you will not have issue. Lord Crach is being made aware of your arrival as we speak. I would not test his patience," she warned. Jayce nodded in appreciation, glancing to the two other therians – both of forms he hadn't seen before. "Thank you, Hecate," he stated, taking the map she had held out from her. She turned and climbed off the ship, her escorts departing promptly.

"Well that was... something," Bjorn stated, glancing over the map before handing it back to Jayce – who in turn threw it to Falconer. "Right, listen up," Jayce stated, drawing his crew's attention. "We have time, a lot of it, before the Revelry. We should be safe here, but it's not for certain so don't lay anything down for at least a few days. Afterwards do whatever, but check in every three days. We have three tasks: take Thalia to her grandfather, meet up with the Nomads, and finally pay Wicke's family a visit – if they're here. I'm taking the ship with me, but once we're certain things are safe it will be in dock here. Enjoy yourselves, you've earned this peace," Jayce stated, his crew beginning to break off into groups.

"Are you coming with us?" Jayce questioned towards Bjorn, as he began to walk towards Marisha, Fenn, Wam and Ohno. "Yeah, I'm not leaving the fate of my people here unsupervised," he stated, looking directly towards Thalia. "No fights, right?" he added. She shrugged and he glared at her before turning back to Marisha. "Explore the city, I'll meet you once this is over," he told her and the three boys. "Stay safe," she said in turn, beginning to walk away. Bjorn nodded to the Beastly Boys before returning to Jayce's squad, consisting of Ordo, Thalia, Zeta and Astris. "Let's go meet a Pirate Lord," Jayce concluded.

The city was a fascinating region to explore, the magnitude similar to the New World Capital, but the streets were filled with far more energy and unconstrained excitement. The houses were small, separate, and of a similar yet varied variety. Each building was made of stone and wood, and hand-crafted with decorative carvings and tribal, totem-like designs that glowed against the uniform brown and grey through dazzling and brilliant painted colours. Everywhere seemed to have a connection to - what Jayce and Bjorn both quickly learnt were - the local Lords and their clans.

Each mountain held a leader and noble house, all representing a common form of therian: the wolves, the cats, the bears, the elks, the bulls, the eagles. Even just walking around, Jayce and Bjorn saw far more varieties of therians than the six noble houses, and therians they'd rarely seen – therians that swam, similar to Ottar, or flew with their own wings – were on every street. It was strange, and for once, everyone other than Bjorn felt out of place. There were plenty of non-therians, but they seemed the minority by far.

They passed through a bustling market place. Guild agents had their own shops and there were goods being sold from all over the world, but amongst the other stalls weapons and armour were the vast majority – other than produce. "A warrior people," Astris stated. Bjorn glanced down at her and raised an eyebrow. "What's that supposed to mean?" he questioned, grinning as she rolled her eyes. "Yeah," he stated proudly. "We were made to guard the world."

The fortress that had been mentioned to them was visible from practically the entire city. It was a bastion of stone, nestled on the edge of the lake, and proudly displayed seven large banners – all of different vibrant colours. They walked straight up to the portcullis, a pair of guards stood outside. Before Jayce and Bjorn could even say anything one of them turned and called out. "Open the gate!" he said, the pair of them standing at attention. "You'll find the teleportation circle in the main courtyard," stated the other. Jayce thanked them both, but they

looked towards Bjorn more than him. "Carry on," Bjorn told them, the pair beaming with pride. "I thought I was the Pirate Lord..." Jayce muttered to himself.

They followed the directions given to them, eventually arriving at the circular courtyard in the centre of the fortress. A large glowing ritual circle lay etched into the stone, the circle large enough for at thirty people. "It is ready for you, Lord, or we can extend the bridge for you – if you would prefer," offered a human man dressed in ceremonial clothes. "Perhaps another time, I don't want to keep Crach waiting," Jayce stated. The Mage nodded, beginning to chant whilst beckoning for the group to step into the circle.

With a stomach-twisting lurch, Jayce landed on an identical circle inside an opulent room. The stone walls were polished and shone brightly, large stain-glass windows on the walls and ceiling provided a view outwards, in almost all directions. The floor was red and black marble with specks of gold dancing across the room. It quickly dawned on all of them that the room they had landed in was high up, an extension at the top of the castle with no exit. "Welcome," growled a deep voice, alerting the group to two presences in the otherwise empty room. Jayce turned, his body on edge for a reason he couldn't yet understand. His mouth immediately fell slightly open, a heavy set of footsteps rumbling the room as one of the two therians approached.

He was huge – colossal – and larger than even Bjorn, dwarfing the giant polar bear by at least a foot. A long trunk dangled from his face, his skin grey and leathery, and on either side sat a colossal tusk, curving down low to his waist and tattooed with red markings. A large pair of flappy ears hung either side of his head, both of them pierced with an array of gold and gemstone jewellery. His brown eyes were calm and bore into Jayce, a monstrous halberd in one hand and a tower shield - that looked tiny on him - in the other. His entire body was covered in a custom suit of plated armour, a metal skirt around his waist and a metal ring around the top of his trunk. A metal plate covered his forehead.

Jayce had never seen an elephant therian before, but he couldn't help but feel like he recognised him. "Lord Crach has been expecting you, Lord Exarga," stated the elephant before glancing back at his companion: a horned owl therian dressed in grey robes. "Is there anyone else we are waiting on?" she questioned. Jayce shook his head and she began to chant, startling the group as she held a crystal ball in her hand. "A Mage?" Bjorn questioned in disbelief. Her yellow eyes locked

onto him, a smug look on her face. "Who?" she questioned, the room shifting as they all teleported.

They found themselves in a large dining room, the room long and similarly ornate to the previous entrance. "Apologies," stated a familiar voice, from further along the large table they had landed next to. "Lunch has just concluded," said Crach Leòmhann Cridhe, leaning forwards from his position at the head of the giant table – the rest of the seats empty – before getting to his feet. "Mare, Pheldor, you may go," he commanded. The two therians nodded and walked promptly away, leaving an array of guards around the edges of the room.

Crach hadn't changed much: he still held a calm and intimidating aura about him, but the old lion therian looked more bedraggled than ever. His black, white and yellow fur was slightly knotted, and he looked more scrawny. He had swapped out his dark armour for an open black shirt and beige trousers. His singular golden eye remained locked on Jayce as he approached, only looking away from him towards his granddaughter as he stepped with arm's reach. "Thank you for coming," Crach said, with an unusual hospitality.

Jayce faltered, measuring up the fellow Ex-Pirate Lord, before extending a hand. Crach smiled as he looked down at Jayce, gripping the hand firmly before shaking it. "I'm still not sure if I'm going to regret this or not, but given what happened to the Governor I'd like to hope we are still technically allies," Jayce stated. Crach nodded, turning away from Jayce to Bjorn. "It is good to see you, Hero, are you finally done being Exarga's pet?" Crach questioned, resting his hands in his pockets and looking up at Bjorn. "I'm my own man," Bjorn stated in return. "But the offer is noted."

Jayce rolled his eyes and Bjorn smirked. Crach then glanced towards Astris. "Commander," he greeted plainly. She nodded back but kept her hands firmly by her weapons. Crach looked at Ordo. "Pup," he stated. Ordo tensed and a moment passed where Jayce feared Ordo was going to strike him. "You're looking feeble, old puss," Ordo snapped back. Crach snarled but moved on, looking down at Zeta. "Blood of my foe," he greeted. She cowered away and stepped behind Ordo.

Crach then stopped in place in front of Thalia, the pair locking eyes before she looked away. Crach seemed to flinch, a moment of confusion passing through him before he looked back at Jayce. "I must confess my disappointment, and my respect to you, Exarga – I was not expecting anyone to temper my Granddaughter. Even you," he added, looking back towards Ordo. Thalia took a

step back, shaking her head, before taking two steps forwards and putting herself as close to her grandfather as possible. "I am not tempered!" she growled, a moment of hesitation and confusion invisible to anyone who didn't know her intimately. Crach raised a hand, his guards relaxing.

"Lies, to your own blood – how cruel. Your fangs have dulled, but in some ways I'm happy you've known peace," he stated, glancing from her to Zeta. "Do not take it as an insult, the wars of the past are long gone. Now is a time for peace." Thalia looked down and Crach placed a hand on her shoulder, her body flinching from the simple contact. "I've been waiting for you. There are people I wish for you to see."

The large golden doors that sat at one of end of the room opened, a flood of cold air entering the room that brought with it a feeling of despair and death. A lone therian stood in the doorway, the orange light behind him covering his black fur so that it looked like he was on fire. He stared at Jayce, his golden eyes glowing against his dark fur. The black lion strode into the room in nothing other than a pair of ragged trousers.

"That's him," Bjorn muttered, almost fearfully. "The one from the Necropolis." Jayce glanced towards Bjorn, his eyes wide with surprise, but as he turned his head back he found an extended claw hovering over his neck. "So... delicate," said the lion therian, his voice surprisingly soft and regal – yet intimately terrifying. Jayce didn't move, he glared down the threat with as much singular malice as he could muster. "You'd make a good rug, maybe also a pair of shoes," Jayce returned, drawing out a sinister grin from the therian. He burst into laughter, withdrawing his claw before holding up his hands. "My bad, Pirate Lord."

Seven other therians had slipped into the room behind him, two of which were the owl and elephant, Mare and Pheldor, from earlier. The menagerie was an array of rare therians: a golden eagle, a boar, a hyena, a crocodile, and a pink hippopotamus. "I wish to introduce you to the War Hounds – my finest, and most loyal, soldiers – back from the dead. This is Xerxes," Crach stated, gesturing to the black lion. Ordo stepped forwards, just enough to be in Jayce's peripheral. His face was ghostly white. Jayce folded his arms, Xerxes stepping past him towards Crach. He stopped right next to him.

The pair looked very similar, uncannily so, but the younger lion was bigger, and possibly stronger. He turned and looked towards Bjorn, a hint of recognition crossing his face before he nodded. "You have my gratitude, bear, my freedom

is because of you. For that you live, regardless of my place as your sacrifice," he growled. Bjorn didn't answer, he was doing everything he could not to pass out. "Still, I respect the willingness to do what must be done. You will go far, if you wish to join us. I personally would see to a position fitting for you," the black lion stated. "Sorry," Bjorn forced out. "I'm busy." Xerxes nodded and moved on, stepping in front of Thalia and looking down at her.

He glanced back towards Crach with a look of confusion. "My daughter? This one?" he questioned, stunning the Rising Aces. Crach nodded and Thalia immediately turned her gaze on him, glaring daggers at him. "Pity," Xerxes stated, before turning and walking away without a further word. The War Hounds followed him out of the room, the door slamming shut behind them. Thalia immediately turned towards her grandfather.

"A later discussion," he intercepted. "There are more pressing matters." He looked at Jayce. "With you here, I think it is about time I begin the journey to a new era."

### **Seize the Seas Tales: A Strange Land**

Mai Lu and Morgana were have a blast of a time in the city of Belluabella. They had both promptly decreed that they were going to ignore the safety protocols of the Rising Aces and had immediately rushed off to enjoy the various foods of the city before zooming across the land on Morgana's broomstick. "See, now this is how you explore a new area," Morgana stated, Mai Lu's arms wrapped around her waist as she desperately tried not to fall off. "If you say so," Mai Lu returned.

They both looked down as they flew across the central lake, their eyes passing over every defence towards the central castle where Jayce and the others had gone. "What's that?" Morgana questioned, a shimmering rainbow stretching out from the central castle across the lake. "I don't know," Mai Lu answered. "Bring us closer. Slowly, please." Morgana dive-bombed, resulting in Mai Lu's screams being audible across the entire island.

The shimmering solidified, resulting in a wide and flat stretch of iridescent light. They both hovered over it before Mai Lu cautiously descended and stood on the rainbow bridge. "Fascinating," they both echoed, only to immediately yelp as someone crossing began to yell at them. "Quick!" Morgana stated, as Mai Lu hopped back on and they took the skies once again. "A rainbow bridge that can be extended between the castle and the fortress. We should come back later with

Caelie and Tempest and see if we can find the source,” Morgana suggested. Mai Lu nodded in agreement. “Exactly what I was thinking.”

They flew onwards, flying to the central castle and circling over it before hovering over a large courtyard. Dozens of therians were fighting each other, training in battle – a sight they’d seen before countless times – but periodically one would do something unusual. A therian would transform part of their body into their human form, to then use a Focused attack, or - even stranger – another would create a spray of fire, ice, rock or wind in an elemental burst. The pair looked at each other as they spied, both equally confused and curious.

The therians separated as a group stepped outside, a few familiar faces amongst them. A series of colourful flashes spread across the area and multiple other groups of therians appeared from nowhere before approaching Jayce and his party. “Looks boring, let’s go see the library,” Mai Lu stated, Morgana nodding in agreement before angling her broomstick away from the castle.

## **Chapter 182: The Therian King**

As Crach led them through the therian castle, Jayce couldn't help but take in his surroundings. The castle itself was unusually open, with large expansive rooms and archways that didn't provide much of a defensive capability. Smooth and polished marble made up the floors and pillars, and most windows were stained glass. There was tribal artwork all over, along with statues and decorative fountains and gardens. The castle was a trophy: a prize, not a stronghold.

Jayce glanced up as Crach led them outside towards an expansive courtyard where droves of therians were training using weapons and martial arts. A familiar broomstick hovered high above, but most others didn't seem to have noticed. A guard yelled out and the training ceased, with the countless therians stepping aside into clear clusters. All eyes looked towards Crach and Jayce. "I call upon the council, and announce my challenge," Crach bellowed, a ceremonial gong being hammered somewhere in the distance.

A loud bell then began to ring: a series of slow and heavy chimes that echoed across the region. With every chime, a purple spark of lightning announced the arrival of another therian of some importance – each one appearing with a congregation of officials, wearing colourful robes and displaying banners. "The six Lords of Belluabella," Crach clarified gently to Jayce, glancing down towards him. "What is going on?" Jayce questioned.

"Lord Crach, are you certain that you wish to invite such scrutiny upon yourself?" boomed a voice from across the giant court. Jayce glanced across the area, his eyes landing on a white wolf – a banner displaying a grey wolf on a blood moon stood proudly behind him. He wore a heavy fur cloak that flowed in the cold wind and one of his eyes was scarred over, a huge curved sword was held by a retainer. "I do. These lands have fallen to weakness, I will not stand for it!" Crach proclaimed, stepping away from Jayce and the others and entering into what Jayce now realised was an arena. "So be it," stated the wolverine Therian Lord.

He glanced to the others: a giant sun bear wearing metal armour, a jaguar in a black suit, a red deer with a pair of decorated, colossal antlers, a topless black bull wearing a kilt, and a golden eagle in large brown robes. They all turned to their retainers, each one handing over a weapon. They then all stepped forwards to surround Crach. They said something quietly to him, but Jayce only heard loudly and clearly from the bull. "For all our sakes, I hope you lose," he said coldly to Crach.

Jayce glanced to Bjorn, he met Jayce's gaze before folding his arms and nodding. All six Therian Lords raised their weapons, a beam of elemental power emanating from them high into the sky. The six rays of energy shone brightly and clearly and didn't last particularly long, but a nervous silence fell across the entire area. The Lords stepped away and a cold air swept past Jayce from behind.

Snow immediately began to fall, the temperature dropping sharply and forcing Jayce to tuck into his coat, as he turned and looked behind him towards the presence that had just appeared. He saw a far smaller therian than he had been expecting: a wizened and white baboon hobbled along on a cane. He approached Jayce, looking up at him before gently tapping his hip with his cane, indicating for him to step aside – which Jayce did. "Thank you," croaked the King, with a wide and friendly grin, stepping forwards. "All hail King Aizen!" called out the six Lords, bowing their heads low in subservience. "All hail!" clamoured the countless therians present.

The Therian King was far from what Jayce was expecting, but his past experience with Lord Gamble had taught him not to underestimate old warriors. He glanced at the baboon though his Focus, reading nothing – as was common with most therians. The baboon therian's face was bright blue, with a central red stripe and nose. It made him colourful, and his clothes matched his face and fur – with whites, blues and reds. He had no visible weapons, only his cane, and his tail was thin and bony.

"Jayce," muttered Bjorn, drawing Jayce's attention away from the King and Crach – both now staring each other down. "Up there," Bjorn said cautiously. Jayce glanced across the courtyard, a bright display of orange colours immediately bringing unnerve and excitement to his chest. Tanare stood on the surrounding wall, his gaze blank and cold. He wore a long crimson coat that flowed behind him in the wind. His orange eyes bore down at the King and Crach, completely ignoring Jayce – no matter how much he stared or waved.

"So the time has come at last?" questioned the King, his voice quiet but audible across the entire courtyard. "I welcomed you here, brought you into the fold – an exile, a fallen Lord – a foe from another world. And yet, you seek my throne – through my blood. Why? Why seek to unearth what I have so desperately fought to entomb?" questioned Aizen. Crach towered over the baboon: a lion staring down at his prey. "Because you are weak."

"Hear me, therians! Brothers and sisters! The Sea Sovereign has taught you humility - as she has us all – but now is not the time to cower and retreat. To hide

amongst the rocks. This world is ours – not hers-” Crach declared, turning from the King to his audience. A low growl cut through his speech, all eyes – even the King’s – turning to the Betrayer. “Mind your tongue – Lord,” threatened Tanare plainly. “The Sovereign is here, even if you do not see her.”

The entire courtyard seemed to hold its breath, and even Crach seemed shaken, but he quickly shook it off – standing tall and facing Tanare. “This world is the Sovereign’s, but its territories are for the taking. We are strong, stronger than all the rest. We are guardians, custodians of the people of this world, and it is our place in life to fulfil that duty. Not to be pets or prizes for flaunting!” he goaded. Tanare extended the claws in his hand but did not move from his position.

Crach turned, looking once more at his audience before looking directly towards Jayce and then Thalia. “I refuse to let us waste away in a world where there has never been greater freedom. It is time for a new age, a new era, heralded by the therians!” He turned and looked to Aizen. “I challenge your right to rule, under the duty and tradition of the leadership of strength. Your might has faded, and if you submit to me I will spare you and offer a position fitting of your legacy.”

“I yield to only one, and you are not she,” returned Aizen, his gaze cold and sinister. “I have lived as doomsayer - surrendering a peaceful, innocent life for one of duty to the people. I am all that remains, the survivor of a war you have all already forgotten,” he addressed to his audience. “Crach, the fool – a title that will long be your legacy – win or lose, I wish for you to remember these next words. It takes far more than good intentions or cruel brutality to change the world for the better. Sometimes the best and only path to peace and betterment is to have the grace to give up the pursuit of power. So which will you choose: power for yourself, or peace for the people?” Aizen questioned.

Crach remained silent, his body steaming in the cold and a snarl on his face. He extended his hand outwards, a dark shadow growing before shaping into a large battleaxe. “Make your peace with the world,” he growled, taking a battle stance. Aizen sighed and stepped back. He had no visible weapons other than his cane, and there was a clear difference in size and strength. He held a hand out before beckoning for Crach to attack him.

Crach roared, lunging forwards and swinging. But he had hardly taken a step before Aizen swung his cane, conjuring a flurry of icy water - from seemingly nowhere - that engulfed Crach. It solidified, encasing his torso down in spiky ice. The baboon then flicked out his cane, a mirror copy of Crach’s battleaxe forming out of blue ice. “What was that?” questioned Jayce, his eyes glued to the fight as

Crach broke free from the ice by partially transforming out of his therian form and using Focus. "It's the next step," Bjorn stated, his expression showing disbelief as Crach and Aizen swung at each other with their axes.

They swung wildly and aggressively, matching each other blow for blow, but periodically a strike would break through both sides' defences. Crach would transform the area to his human form, the wound healing on the therian form. Aizen would forge a shield, or a piece of armour, out of ice, coating his body to defend from the blow. But as the fight continued, it became clear it was only going to end one way.

Crach roared as he sacrificed his weapon, using it to block and then disarm Aizen – both weapons skittering across the stone. He then grabbed the smaller baboon, picking him up and slamming him to the floor – the stone cracking beneath the impact. Aizen lay there, stunned for a moment, and Crach descended upon him with his claws, raking the old therian's flesh and tearing his skin open. The baboon tried to fight back, desperately raising his arms and trying to crawl away, exposing his back to the savagery.

Crach grabbed his tail, dragging him back. "Mercy! Mercy!" begged Aizen, but Crach instead grabbed the back of the fallen king's head, yanking it back and reaching underneath. "Crach!" cried the eagle Therian Lord, stepping forwards to stop the fight. Crach ignored him, digging his claws into Aizen's throat and tearing out his windpipe in a gory display. The body of the old baboon faded away, the man inside desperately trying to save himself as he transformed.

"And so the real you is revealed: the survivor!" Crach declared, staring down at the terrified, scarred and bleeding old man. Aizen's throat was cut, but nothing compared to the injuries of his other form. "Mercy!" pleaded Aizen, rolling over to get on his hands and knees and bowing his head. Crach turned and looked away from Aizen, back towards Jayce. But he wasn't looking at him, he locked eyes with his granddaughter. "There is no mercy," he told her, his axe reappearing in his hands in a bubbling of shadow. "Please!" begged the fallen King. Crach hefted the weapon and struck downwards, cleaving the King's head and torso in two.

A deafening silence followed, broken only by the howling of the icy wind and the spurting of blood from the corpse. Crach was panting heavily, blood covering his fur. He slowly turned and looked up to the sky, opening his mouth and tasting the falling snow on his tongue. He then took a series of deep breaths, pausing before letting out a roar that shook the castle. Jayce stared at the

brutalised corpse, the sight a stark reminder of just what type of people he had as allies. "All hail, King Crach!" declared the jaguar Therian Lord, being the first to kneel. "All hail!" copied the rest, one by one kneeling down before him.

Jayce glanced past the scene towards Tanare, the tiger therian turning and beginning to walk away. "Wait!" Jayce yelled, charging forwards past Crach and through the kneeling audience without thought. "Exarga," growled Crach, his words falling on deaf ears as Jayce used his Focus to leap up to the wall. Tanare didn't turn to look at him, he outright ignored Jayce as Jayce dashed towards him.

"Tanare! Wait!" Jayce commanded, sliding in front of him to block his path. Tanare towered over Jayce, as he always had. "Go away," he warned Jayce, through a somewhat gentle growl – his gaze anywhere other than at Jayce. Jayce shook his head, staring at the stranger wearing the skin of his friend. "Is that all you have to say to me after all this time?" Jayce questioned, trying to get Tanare to look at him.

Tanare remained where he was stood, his fists and jaw clenched, unwilling – or unable – to look at Jayce. "I have no business with you," Tanare stated eventually. "Step aside, or I will walk through you – Pirate Lord." Jayce grit his teeth. He had known Tanare for years, and this was all he had to say? Something had happened, something horrific – Jayce knew it. "You won't even look at me, what's happened to you? Where's Valentine?" Jayce demanded desperately.

Tanare flinched and then looked directly at him, a fire igniting in his dull orange eyes. "Never mention that man again. Forget about him. That is my one and only warning to you." Jayce took an unconscious step back, Tanare using the opportunity to step forwards and push past Jayce. "Tanare! Tanare!" Jayce yelled after him. He kept walking and eventually a flaming portal appeared in front of him, which he then stepped through before it closed behind him. Jayce looked down, his legs wanting to give out on him – a strange and unusual feeling of adrenaline passing through him. "What's happened to you?" Jayce questioned aloud.

Bjorn observed Jayce from afar, waiting for the worst to happen – expecting it to happen. Jayce had only ever spoken positively of Tanare, but that tiger was infamous. Unsurprisingly Tanare fled the conversation, and Jayce slumped into himself – a clear wave of disappointment crossing him. "As we suspected," Ordo said quietly to Bjorn. Bjorn turned and looked down at the Old Dog. "Could have gone worse," he suggested. Ordo nodded in simple agreement before placing a

hand on Bjorn's back. "Go be with your people. We'll visit you later – I've got the Captain."

Bjorn smiled appreciatively, quickly stepping away from the other Rising Aces and approaching King Crach and his new Lords. Crach turned and looked to him. "I have a bone to pick with your Captain," he stated. Bjorn nodded and pointed to Jayce's location. "I apologise on his behalf, but he's there if you wish to speak to him," Bjorn stated, turning away from the King to the sun bear Therian Lord.

"Lord Solan, Hecate told me that you have taken my people under your care. Is this true?" Bjorn asked respectfully, looking down at the large armoured bear – his fur and armour black, other than a golden ring on his chest. "Bjorn...? So you are the heir of the Frostbear Tribe? It is good to finally meet the legend," Lord Solan stated, taking off his armour's gauntlet and extending a hand to shake. Bjorn shook it. "I'm not sure 'legend' is the word to use, nor am I the heir, but... otherwise, you have my sincerest thanks for taking in my people. I hope they have not caused any trouble?" Bjorn returned. Solan put his gauntlet back on, looked towards Crach and bowed before he turned and gestured for Bjorn to walk with him towards his congregation. "Not at all. Come, let me take you home."

Bjorn disappeared in a spark of purple lightning, forcing Jayce to quit his moping. With a short expletive, he returned to the others – almost immediately finding Crach waiting for him. "You and my granddaughter will remain here until I am ready for you. And then we shall discuss the future," he commanded. Jayce looked towards the countless therians that were now under Crach's command. "Fine," he said with a sigh.

It was a few boring hours before Crach was finally freed up to meet with Jayce and Thalia. Jayce had occupied himself with the grand library buried within the castle, and - from the reports he'd been given by the guards – Thalia, rather disappointingly, had occupied herself by beating up anyone who looked at her sideways. "You're better than this," he told her sternly, as they met at the front of the castle, a rainbow bridge next to them extending out towards the city. "No, I'm not," she returned plainly, turning and beginning to walk towards the throne room.

The main entrance had a singular walkway of white stairs that led straight through the middle of the entire castle. The path was wide, almost twenty metres across, and consisted of two parallel lines of stairs, numbering in the hundreds,

with several statues and fountains periodically spaced between. As they walked, Jayce couldn't help but notice the countless guards stood on overlooking balconies and platforms. The entire walkway was a trap for enemies, a deliberate and abundantly guarded weakness.

At the end of the long walk sat an open room – a domed chamber with an entranceway built out of two large pillars. There was no door, and snow had managed to flow inside, but the view it gave was fantastic. Jayce turned and stared at the rainbow bridge, the waters either side of it, the city and the far mountain beyond it. Belluabella lay in front of him. "This way, Lord Exarga," uttered a waiting guard, stood in front of a set of golden doors.

Rather than the dining room they had been in previously, they instead found Crach sitting in his new throne room. Like most rooms within the therian castle, it was opulent, well lit, and quite beautiful. Crach sat on a well-cushioned, black and platinum throne. A beam of light flowed down onto him: a stylised stain glass ceiling painted him with a red ray, that Jayce quickly realised would change colour throughout the day. A squadron of guards stood around the edge of the round room – all watching the only obvious entrance and exit.

"Leave us," Crach commanded, the guards standing at attention before exiting the room through various concealed entrances, invisible to the naked eye. Jayce and Thalia stepped forwards, standing at the foot of the throne, itself on a raised pedestal. "I was hoping that you would kneel... I am King, after all," Crach said in bemusement, as Jayce folded his arms. He then looked at Thalia. "Have I lost such respect from you in such short a time?"

"I kneel for no one. Not even you grandfather," she answered plainly. He looked at her curiously. "Perhaps my initial observations were incorrect. That, or this is a childish protest to my criticisms," he goaded. Thalia tensed and Jayce extended an arm between her and her grandfather. "We came to talk, so let's talk," he stated. "Indeed. First, a question. What did you say to Tanare that was so desperate as to intrude on my moment of triumph?" he asked.

"Nothing." Crach's face hardened, a clear look of disapproval and disbelief immediately recognisable. "I find that... difficult to believe, Exarga. Are we allies or not? I deserve more than that," he growled. Jayce faltered before he let out a short sigh. "I asked where Valentine was. Why I was being... avoided. He refused to answer and warned me to... to stay away," Jayce answered honestly. Crach nodded, pulling at the hair on his chin. "I see... I was hoping for more, but it's clear there's something greater at work... Ask away."

Jayce looked towards Thalia, a clear question on her mind. "Why seize the throne?" Jayce asked first, ignoring her disappointment. Crach chuckled, reclining in his seat. "Why shouldn't I have? We are Pirates, Exarga, do not forget that. We may both fight for other reasons, but we are still criminals given power through the fear we impose. With the Sovereign in control, I need any and all power that I can get – especially for the future."

"I ask the same of you," Crach questioned. "Why seek the title again?" Jayce shrugged before he looked towards Thalia. "I don't really know, perhaps because I'm afraid of losing what I have. Or perhaps, I just want to change the world for the better and this is the only way I see it possible," he proposed, not certain of his own answer. Thalia observed him, her eyes locked onto Jayce in a manner that felt unnerving, but also somewhat caring and unusually empathetic.

"I understand... better than most would." He looked towards Thalia. "Granddaughter, do you wish to know more about your father?" he asked. Thalia nodded. "Then I guess it's best you learn my side of history."

### **Seize the Seas Tales: The Blood Wars**

Astris couldn't help but feel nervous, it had been hours since her last contact with Jayce and Thalia, and Bjorn. Belluabella was alien to her, and they were in the territory of King Crach Leòmhann Cridhe. "Ease up," Ordo told her, taking a heavy bite of the chunk of roasted meat – still raw in the middle – that had been brought to their table. "Oh yeah, that's good stuff," he added, Mai Lu nodding in agreement as she and Caelie did the same with their own pieces. "Savages," muttered Morgana, as she handled her - far more cooked - meat with a knife and fork.

The inn, the five of them had gathered within, was huge, and crowded beyond belief. Ordo and Caelie loved the energy, Morgana and Astris hated it. It was too much for Morgana, and too risky for Astris. Caelie stood up on her rickety stool, waving over a waitress carrying a large platter of food and beer. "I still don't know how someone as small as you eats and drinks so much," Astris stated, taking a deep breath and forcing herself to relax – as much as it was possible for her to do. "It's the Demon inside," Mai Lu stated, her meat dripping as she tore into it. "We burn a lot of energy, similar to therians."

A hand placed itself on Astris' shoulder, causing her to jump up and draw her pistol. "Calm yourself, Commander," stated Red, dragging a chair over and sitting down. Water dripped from his headtails and it was clear that he had just

been swimming. A crash drew their attention away as someone slipped on the trail of water he had left behind – a heavy barrage of swearwords following suit, as well as a loud cheer as some glasses broke.

“Is anyone else coming?” Morgana asked, looking towards Astris and Ordo. “I doubt it, Cap’ is busy, so is Bjorn and his family. Falconer has gone to investigate a nearby Leyline. Zeta’s arranging a concert. Tempest... enough said,” Ordo answered. “Oh, and Yuthura’s found herself some students.” “Shots?” Caelie inserted, snatching Astris’ money pouch from the table. Astris glared at her but she just giggled and ran off.

“So...” Astris stated, looking across the group. “Do you think we’re safe here?” “Definitely,” Ordo clarified. “We have nothing to worry about, these people aren’t like the therians back home.” A round of curious glances flew his way. “The history is different here - don’t read into anything that’s not true. I have no problems with therians,” he defended. A mop was presented to the table, all fingers pointing towards Red, who immediately sighed and got to mopping. “How so?” Morgana asked, taking a glass from a tray filled with glowing shots before sniffing it and recoiling. “They look alive,” she added in horror.

Ordo downed his shot, hissed out through his teeth. “They’ve not had the Blood Wars,” he answered, again receiving glances expecting further explanation. “Look, there are historians for this,” he stated, gesturing toward Mai Lu. “My accounts will be far different from yours. Say yours and I will correct it,” she stated. “Fine,” he sighed. “To be blunt – I have no doubt something similar occurred here too, so don’t go spouting things to or at the locals.”

“The therians of the New World never really integrated well with our society. They were always outsiders – supposedly even before the Dungeons. The Church capitalised on it, painting their... gifts as an affliction: the baned. It spiralled and the Church took it too far, painting them as inhuman – as demons, no offence.” “Close,” Mai Lu inserted. “They ran out of scapegoats. The djinn and jiaoren had already had their conflicts with the Empire. The Church needed something new.” “Yes, I was getting to that. They needed a way to insert themselves fully into the Imperial Navy. A civil war helped that, and for that they needed a martyr.” “Crach,” Astris answered.

“Yes,” Ordo stated. “He was not the first choice, but he was the best weapon the Church created – one so dangerous it cost them dearly. A leader, a warrior, that therians rallied to in droves after tensions ignited. The Church were so overzealous in their persecution of the therians that even normal people joined

them. Open war ignited, and Crach led an assault that painted his name into the history books. He eradicated imperial command in a way that was unprecedented. It was subtle, he lured them out one by one into separate engagements, spreading the Empire thin before unleashing his War Hounds.”

“Mentors, leaders, gone. Each with their forces eradicated in traps hand-designed for them before finding their ends at the hands of Crach’s most fanatic followers. He was a genius, but he was too cruel, and that turned allies against him. The Exarga’s, Vanathurs, us Old Dogs – it let us foster relationships with those who Crach had overlooked, the weak. We built the Marines, incorporating the therians as shock troopers – equals to those around them. And that image stuck. Destroying trust in Crach, and also obliterating any chance the Church had in establishing themselves as the solution to the Blood Wars.”

Ordo looked towards Mai Lu and she simply nodded. “The Marines were fully integrated, high command consisted of a new breed of thinkers and we know the rest,” he concluded. Astris looked at her plate, before she glanced around at the therians around them. “So why wasn’t Crach brought to justice, how could he become King?” she questioned. Ordo shrugged and shook his head. “We couldn’t beat him, so a compromise was forced: he gave us his War Hounds.”

### **Chapter 183: Family**

Jayce paced back and forth, not certain quite what to say as Crach explained the Blood Wars. "I won... in the end," Crach concluded, with a voice that sounded uncertain. "What we fought for, that... peace and respect was given to us, but... I still don't really know. It's been more than thirty years since it all started and only recently have I felt like we won. Thanks to you, someone who wasn't a therian."

Jayce shook his head. "No, it was Bjorn. He did it by destroying the Necropolis." Crach sighed. "And with it he gave me a chance to relive my greatest regret." "The War Hounds?" Jayce questioned. Crach nodded, looking to Thalia. "I am sorry for taking your parents away from you. My son was my greatest warrior, one I forged to be better than myself – but at a cost to his humanity." "Why did you give them up?" Jayce questioned, Thalia standing in unmoving silence.

"It was still many years after I signed the peace treaty that the Blood Wars truly concluded, and that is mostly due to the War Hounds. The Fallout Years brought almost and equal amount of the damage to the conflicts before. I... had no choice," Crach said softly, his voice fading and a heavy look of regret in his eyes. "They deserved it," Thalia stated coldly, drawing concern from both Jayce and Crach. "Xerxes is still family, regardless of his crimes – Granddaughter." Thalia shook her head. "And my mother?" Crach didn't answer, looking down in shame. "I have never hidden the truth from you – only the perpetrator of her death. She... was a casualty of his rage."

Thalia turned and approached the nearest wall, burying his fist into it in a flash of controlled rage. Crach looked towards Jayce. "I have seized these lands for my family, Exarga. You and your crew have given me a chance to atone for my greatest sin, to make up for my biggest regret. Thalia," he stated, drawing her immediate attention. "I wish for you to stay here, with me, so that we can be a family – and fix what the world broke. Please, join me. Meet your father, I know that we can change him."

Thalia looked towards Jayce, hoping he would answer for her, but he looked back at her – awaiting her answer. "Your choice," he said softly. She shook her head immediately. "I am a Rising Ace," she said in a surprising burst of sentimentality. "We will destroy the Sea Sovereign and the Betrayers, seizing this world for ourselves. You won't be able to do that, I won't be able to do that here – not with my family," she stated more selfishly.

Crach laughed. "I should have known." He stood and descended from his throne, stepping as close to Jayce as possible and staring down at him. "She's saying it's my fangs that have dulled," he snarled, bearing his fangs at Jayce. Jayce stared up at him. He then smiled. "She's not wrong, old man – we're the ones who are going to change the world," he goaded. Crach bellowed with laughter, backing down and returning to his throne. "Perhaps so. Still, I think this world has changed – whether we admit it or not. Peace has finally arrived and it has dulled our claws – maybe I am the latest victim."

"I will see you at the Revelry, or perhaps you will stay a while – and have the rest that you have earnt. The Sovereign will be waiting for us, so I hope that you are ready for her, my ally. She is... the last testament to the old ways, and we will find no mercy from her. Belluabella is yours to explore, as is fitting of a Pirate Lord, and a princess," he stated, looking towards them both. Jayce nodded and turned, beginning to walk towards the exit with Thalia in tow. "Thalia," Crach called out, causing them both to stop. "Scorn your father, it is your right to, but take time to see your kin, please. They have missed you... I have missed you." She turned and stormed forwards out of the room. "Goodbye, King of the Therians," Jayce concluded.

Bjorn followed Lord Solan closely through the halls of his fortress. The vast majority of the therians present were, unsurprisingly, bears, but there was also a surprising amount of regular humans. Trophies and sets of armour decorated the halls, alongside displays showing off weapons belonging to past warriors – friend and foe alike. "It's an impressive place," Bjorn stated, stopping in front of a tapestry depicting a past battle. His eyes were drawn towards a female figure surrounded by shadow, an army against her.

"Thank you. Every day walking these halls reminds me just how hard my forefathers worked in order to build this. And each day it also reminds me just how much more can be taken from us," Lord Solan lamented. They stepped through the main doors, emerging out onto a flat platform at the top of the middle mountain. The whole region lay before them, the city tiny from their view. It was immensely pretty and the snow painted almost all of it white.

"You will find your people nestled amongst the villages: most have stuck together but a few have dispersed. I believe you should find the majority amongst the Icewalls, to the south of here – follow the paths, the guides can show you the way if needed," Solan stated, gesturing towards the wooden path connected to the platform. "Thank you, Lord Solan," Bjorn stated, placing his fist

across his chest to his heart and bowing his head. The other bear reached up and placed a hand on Bjorn's shoulder. "I would be honoured to have your presence at dinner, along with any family you wish to bring. Take care, we will talk soon."

Bjorn departed, following the signs and winding paths to the south of the mountain. He passed numerous people on the way, some transporting ores and precious materials, others crops and manufactured goods. They greeted him with friendliness, some stopping him to offer directions or ask him questions about how his day was going. It felt strange... nice. And in an immediate wave of uncomfortable emotion, Bjorn felt a rush of loss – a feeling of longing that he had buried for so long. He missed his people - his family.

The Icewalls turned out to be named in the literal sense. It was clear on approach, across the large mountain, that when it wasn't winter the Solan's mountain flowed with water – the southern side a cascading array of waterfalls. As it was the middle of winter, these waterfalls had frozen over, allowing the village nestled among them to walk and climb along the ice. He readied himself as he approached the wooden huts and dug caves, but a lookout noticed him almost immediately.

A bell began to ring, and almost immediately he heard his own name being yelled out. The village exploded, with countless people emerging from homes or appearing out of nowhere and surging towards him. "Bjorn! Bjorn's here!" cried out his tribe. He chuckled and walked to meet them, immediately being buried in a crush of familiar faces and bodies. Hands grabbed him, arms wrapped themselves around him, kisses were planted on his cheek. His friends of old grasped his forearms and punched his shoulder, the elders he had been raised by coddled him like a lost child, and the children stared curiously from afar.

"Everyone back! Get back! Let him through!" cried out a voice, a familiar and tanned elderly man shaking a stick that rattled. The tribe spread out, giving Bjorn a moment to breathe and a clear path forwards. "Bjorn," stated Magnus, a big smile on his face as he stepped forwards, transforming into his polar bear form. But he faltered as Bjorn did the reverse, transforming down to his human form – the pair of them looking at each other from a reverse in heights. Magnus roared with laughter, transforming back and embracing Bjorn tightly. "You found yourself again! By the ancestors! Oh, Inger will be overjoyed!" he yelled joyously.

Bjorn looked down at the old man: he hadn't changed much in three years, but he looked older – more worn, and Bjorn couldn't help but feel worried for him. Magnus seemed to read it on his face. "We all age, bear, even me. I'm still

strong... we both are," he added, answering Bjorn's silent question. "Come, the matriarch has been waiting for you long enough," he said, gesturing forwards and beginning to walk with the aid of his stick.

He was taken to a hut at the edge of the village, in the highest spot, with the best view of the surrounding ocean. A small garden sat around it, likely filled with all manner of crops waiting for spring, and a frozen river was nearby with a dedicated tree stump for fishing. Bjorn followed Magnus inside, the hut large enough for therians to stand comfortably within. Fur bedrolls sat to the side, the floor covered with a soft padding so that it could be slept on. A lit fireplace sat within a small kitchen, providing both warmth and a means to cook food. It was plain, simple, comfortable.

Bjorn's nose immediately twitched, a strong smell of food he hadn't tasted in a long time filling his nostrils. He began to salivate, his stomach rumbling, and he immediately looked for the source – a steaming pot on top of the fireplace. "As soon as I heard of your arrival, I put this on for you. Welcome home, little bear," stated Inger, sitting in a rocking chair. "Nana," he said softly, stepping towards her and getting down on his knees in order to embrace her.

They embraced for a long time, but she eventually released him and held his face in her hands. "It is good to see you Bjorn, and I am proud to hear of all that you have achieved," she stated, gesturing towards the food in a silent offer. Bjorn stood up taking a bowl and filling it with the bisque. It tasted divine, the seafood soup creamy and flavourful. "I was hoping that you would have Marisha with you. Where is she?" questioned Inger.

Bjorn looked up from his bowl, as he sat cross-legged on the floor. "She is in the city with three young boys that we have taken under our care," Bjorn stated. Inger and Magnus glanced towards each other before back at Bjorn. "You've adopted?" she questioned. He shook his head and set the bowl down on the floor. "No, no, they are all adults. Young men who had nowhere to go, Jayce took them in and I've been placed as their mentor. I... was hoping to introduce you." "Sounds more than fitting. Bring them to me." Bjorn held his hand up to his communicator. "Marisha, Wam, Ohno, Fenn, return to the Stacked Hand within the next few hours and pack your bags. I will make my way to you," he stated.

Bjorn stayed and rested for a while before eventually beginning the long journey back to the ship. It took longer than he had expected, the descent down the mountain slower than he had hoped for, and his navigation through the city slow, but eventually he set his eyes upon his ship: his home. The Beastly Boys

were on board, but they rushed about the ship in a panic that he didn't quite understand.

"Slow down! Slow down!" Bjorn repeated, as he stood on the main deck, holding his hands out in front of him to stop Wam pushing past him. "Talk to me." Wam turned his gaze from the floor, his eyes shining and a look of hurt on his face. "Figures it would be now – don't worry, we'll get out of your way," he spat, pushing past Bjorn. "What are you talking about?" Marisha asked, following Wam and stepping between him and the stairs to the deck below. He stopped, unwilling to push past her. "Why are you getting in the way? You want us gone, don't you?" Wam yelled.

Both Bjorn and Marisha felt their chests tighten. "What?" they both questioned, Fenn and Ohno emerging onto the deck with similar expressions to Wam. "No!" Bjorn asserted. "Is that what you thought? Why? Why would we get rid of you?" he questioned, the three boys looking at the floor. Wam couldn't bring himself to answer, and Ohno was blubbing to himself. "We've never made it a year..." Fenn answered quietly. "We're normally returned before then..." Wam added.

"Boys..." Marisha said softly, placing a hand on Wam and Ohno's shoulders before reaching up to touch their faces. "Is that how it's always been?" she asked, looking at them one after another. They nodded. "We... we almost made it a year once," Fenn said quietly, holding his arm like he had been hurt. "The mayor," he said, the other two looking towards him. Ohno held his head in his hands, visibly shaking. "We thought we'd won. The mayor was nice, kind... rich. But he just got us to win votes..." Wam answered. Bjorn approached the three of them, all of them looking up at him. "You're not going anywhere. I'm taking you to my family. We'll be there some time, but we will be coming back. Pack for that, and that only. Understood?" Bjorn stated. The trio nodded, heading back below deck. Marisha and Bjorn then glanced to each other, the pair sharing a singular look of worry and disbelief.

The three boys stood at attention as Inger looked up at them. Bjorn had never seen them so well-behaved before, but it was immediately obvious that it wouldn't last. "Breath, children," she stated, tapping Ohno's sucked in stomach with a stick. He exhaled, and they all immediately slouched. "Strong boys, you've brought me," she stated, turning to Bjorn and Marisha – the pair kneeling on the floor nearby. "The strongest!" Fenn stated, the trio pulling various poses as they flexed their invisible muscles.

Bjorn glimpsed Magnus crack a smile, but it quickly disappeared. "Then you shall have no problems aiding our village. My soul, provide them an introduction," she commanded, Magnus nodding and practically dragging the trio out into the night by the scruffs of their necks. "Boss Bjorn, help us!" they cried, disappearing into the darkness. Marisha laughed to herself, a broad smile on her face as Inger settled into her chair.

"They will be fine," Inger reassured. "Now, I am glad to hear of your bonding. We will have to hold a celebration, provided there is time. Will you be staying long?" she asked. Bjorn and Marisha glanced at each other, uncertain of the answer. "We don't know. But at least a while. We will be leaving eventually," Marisha answered. "As I foresaw... Now, I am under the understanding that Lord Solan requested your presence for dinner. The journey is... challenging for me in the darkness, but Magnus will go with you. You are welcome to stay there, or we have a place for you to sleep here on your return," she offered. With a groan, Bjorn stood up – a bemused smile spreading on Inger's face. "Thank you," he told her. "We will return, most likely." She nodded, glancing towards Marisha as she stepped past and extending out a hand to her. Marisha grasped the bony fingers and Inger met her gaze, the pair exchanging a silent conversation that Bjorn couldn't understand. Marisha nodded and Inger took back her hand.

They found Magnus waiting for them, a bundle of clothes in his arms. "Here, a gift – clothes of your people. I'm sure Lord Solan will wish for something more formal than your current getup," he informed. The evening wind was howling and the snow was falling fast – not exactly somewhere to get changed. "Change in that guard station. They will not mind," he reassured, turning to stare out into the horizon.

They changed clothes, dressing in thick clothes decorated in blues, white and black – the patterns beautiful and easily identifiable. They emerged outside, Marisha ensuring to add her own blue jewellery to the outfit along with a matching eyepatch. "Well?" she asked Magnus, as they rejoined him, the snow getting heavier with each moment. "Like a second skin," he reassured, Bjorn transforming into his polar bear form to match him. "Let us depart. Mind your step – the mountainside can be treacherous at this time of eve," he warned.

They stuck close together, following the burning torches – each kept within designed cages to protect from the wind – and the totem signposts to make their way up the mountain towards Solan's keep. "It would be faster to climb," Magnus suggested, a strong flurry making everything around them almost

invisible. "Then I'll meet you up there," Marisha stated, summoning her two spears from a pair of bangles Tempest had made her, stabbing the weapons into the ice and rock and beginning to climb. Magnus and Bjorn looked at each other. "She has matured, but the fire is still there," Magnus said with a smile. "Just like Inger," he then added with a wink, using his claws and beginning to climb. Bjorn wasn't quite sure whether to be worried or not, beginning the climb after them.

Eventually the keep came into sight, the giant main doors closed. But on approach, one of the armoured bears called out and the heavy wooden doors began to open. They stepped inside into a small chamber, shaking off the snow, before choosing one of the two paths leading around an ornate stone wall, displaying the bear's banner, to the main hall. The giant central table was full of therians and officials, the two additional tables also packed – some members of the Frostbear tribe amongst them. Music filled the air, a familiar blue-haired woman playing a hand drum amongst the Bards.

"I was expecting something more..." Bjorn stated to Magnus, descending the steps as eyes turned towards him. "Quiet? Sedate?" Magnus questioned. A heavy drumming built up amongst the musicians, many of the therians stomping their feet to a tune they all knew. Marisha glanced towards the two barrels that had been placed in the hall, each almost as high as the giant ceiling and each with a large tap that spewed beer. "Lord Solan doesn't do sedate," Magnus clarified, a pair of large therians getting up from their seats and throwing themselves at each other to the cheers of their observers.

Lord Solan stood up from his throne at the end of the main table, a huge tankard in one hand, an even larger leg of some animal in the other. "Magnus! Bjorn! Welcome!" he bellowed, gesturing to some empty seats left near him. Bjorn glanced to the guests near the empty seats: the majority of his crew amongst the mass. Jayce was sat directly next to Lord Solan, a bemused expression on his face. Thalia sat opposite him, and Astris sat next to him.

Solan set down his leg of meat, stepping away from his seat to approach Magnus. They grasped each other tightly before Solan turned to Bjorn and did the same. He then turned and looked down at Marisha. "By the ancestors, I greet you amongst this sleuth, fair and divine lady - welcome! Please come and sit," he said with a broad and genuine smile, bowing his head to her and offering an arm. Marisha took it and he guided her to an empty seat, pulling the seat out for her and tucking her in. Marisha glanced towards Bjorn, and he rolled his eyes – before sitting next to her.

"Fancy seeing you here," Jayce called over, as Solan returned to his throne. Bjorn and Marisha laughed. "Says you! The hell are you doing here Captain?" Marisha returned. Jayce gestured around. "How could I miss this?" he questioned. "Solan invited me after Crach's dinner. Nothing wrong with a second... third... fourth dinner," he said with a grin, showing off trophies with the imagery of wolves, eagles, and elk.

Jayce's face was quite red, and it seemed that every time he finished his drink another was promptly brought to him. A tankard was placed in front of Bjorn, the cup heavy to lift and clearly designed for therian hands. A bottle of red wine was brought to Marisha, the design opulent and the year distinctly vintage. "For you my dear!" Solan bellowed, gesturing to Marisha. She blew him a kiss and he pretended to act flustered, fanning his face and grinning bearishly.

"Jayce!" Bjorn called out, after filling his stomach, his Captain turning sluggishly to look at him. "Why's Tempest here?" Bjorn questioned, pointing to the floating suit of armour observing from the edge of the room. "Huh? Oh, this place is full of teleportation circles – he's my ride. That and the Dragons," Jayce stated with a grin. "What a show you put on! Mighty, magnificent beasts!" Solan added, making whooshing sounds as he swung his tankard around in a mock-up of Taranis and Zhurong. "Right," Bjorn stated, the djinn floating over upon noticing the numerous eyes falling his way.

"Did you find Wicke's sisters?" Astris asked. Marisha and Bjorn both shook their head, looking towards Magnus along with the other Rising Aces. "Flare led her people further south, to the Scourge," Magnus stated. "We split up a few months ago, she and her sister claimed that something was pursuing them – that they weren't safe here," he added. Tempest sparked brightly, his helmet angling towards Magnus to listen more closely. "From what?" Jayce asked. Magnus shook his head and shrugged.

"I know not. And we have not had contact since. Where is Wicke?" Magnus asked. There was an awkward pause, and, after a long regaling of the adventures of the Rising Aces, Magnus sat back in his seat. "I see, a shame, but understandable. Perhaps if you have an opportunity you could investigate for me – I hope that they are okay." Jayce nodded in simple acceptance, looking at down at his plate and beginning to ponder.

The sounds of fighting from further along grew louder, and before any of them could react a tankard was thrown across the room in their direction. Caelie turned to look, the heavy metal tankard heading straight for her face. But before

it hit her, a thin wall of frozen beer emerged between her and it. The ice cracked and shattered, the tankard falling harmlessly to the floor. Bjorn's eyes widened as he glanced towards the hand that had reached out to protect her. It was similar to his own, belonging to Magnus. "How did you do that?" Bjorn questioned.

"Simple," Magnus returned. "I embraced our heritage. As shall you."

### **Seize the Seas Tales: Strengthened Bonds**

It was several weeks before the Rising Aces even thought of leaving Belluabella. Each of them had taken the time to train, to grow, to explore and build new bonds. Jayce had isolated himself amongst the isles nearby, training on the beasts that the therians hunted whilst also embracing his wild side and enjoying the solitude. He was visited somewhat constantly by Caelie and Astris, but with Sola and Luna beside him anyway, the extra company made little difference.

In the time Caelie was away from Jayce, she studied the notes he had crafted and left for her. A treasure map of knowledge and guidance he had built, in order to expand upon her Shamanic techniques and also to develop her own connection to the Abyss. Every-so-often he would find her meditating in the Underworld, taunting souls and reapers, or leaving messages about her day for him to find. There was one gap during the weeks, however, where she seemed to disappear from everyone's sight. She vanished through a portal, spending days without contact with anyone, but she eventually returned – with a restocked supply of sweets and treats, the wrappings marked with well-known shops found only in the Capital.

Bjorn found himself under Magnus' and Ordo's care, alongside the Beastly Boys. The old pair trained him hard, working him thoroughly in order to determine how his gifts best functioned. It took weeks of struggle, but eventually – after isolating himself at the very top of Solan's mountain – he looked down at the tiny crystal of ice that had formed in his palm. His roars of success were audible across the entire region. The Boys were less successful – other than Wam who quickly found an ability within himself to partially transform parts of his body, a skill he very much enjoyed flaunting.

Yuthura and Ordo found themselves apprentices: Yuthura in an abundance of wannabe healers scattered across the region, Ordo in an array of upstart youths with little to do other than cause trouble. It was hard to tell which group had a stricter teacher, but before long they each had entire schools of pupils searching them out. The Beastly Boys found themselves the one exception, each member

desperately trying to flee Ordo's drills and regimes, only to be the targets of Ordo's students sent to collect them.

Falconer took to the skies, mapping the stars and the seas in preparation for their next journey. Wren could be seen diving down from mountain peaks, zooming across the region as quickly as possible, often with a Dragon, Demon, or Witch following closely behind. Zeta grew her audience, embracing and learning the local traditions and techniques before adding them to her wild roster of musical techniques. It wasn't long before the entire region knew her songs.

Mai Lu spent as much time as possible doing nothing other than enjoying the peace, the spas, and the food. But eventually she got bored, and immersed herself alongside Morgana in the library, the pair of them creating all manners of theories on the greater world, and an even nastier array of spells and potions to use in their next fights. At times Astris was sent to investigate by the local authorities, and each time she had to reassure them that the Demoness and the Witch were not up to no good.

Outside of keeping her crew out of jail – a tall task with Thalia picking fights with anyone and everyone, and Tempest breaking into keeps to analyse technology and magic – Astris kept her eye to the newspapers. She worried about her former crew, her siblings, and her Republic. But there was nothing she could do for them now. Nothing other than hope and pray. And periodically search out Jeanne and Arthuria for a duel between blade and bullet.

The two Paladins took to the frozen plains, enjoying the quiet away from the city, and the open expanse to dart around in their strongest forms for combat. As had been theorised, a return to romance and companionship had brought back a desire and willingness to fight for Jeanne. And with her doubts gone, and the weight of her guilt guiding her blade, her strength was greater than ever before: the bright light of her magic visible from the highest peaks, and a brilliantly bright foil to the deep orange flames of the Dragon Paladin.

RK-227 was given the opportunity to deal with the waste created from the therian mines. A chance that was initially perceived as a genius solution to a natural problem, but that quickly turned into near disaster when the rokken realised that what the therians were digging out was far more tasty. The rokken was quickly moved to an isolated area, the food brought to it – rather than the other way around.

With peace and safety established for the greater crew, Marisha seized the opportunity to plan a soul-bonding ceremony for her and Bjorn. She kept it small and simple, the entire crew present – thanks to Jayce carrying the Stacked Hand in its bottle, allowing Gaea to temporarily walk the lands away from the ship. Seeing the joy it brought the dryad to be out in the world, Jayce left the Stacked Hand with Tempest for upgrades and to find a solution for Gaea's isolation.

And finally, Red took to the seas, returning to his solitude, but then eventually returning with a new scar and a foul mood.