

Chapter 184: Stormless Seas

The world felt strange around Wicke: the walls of the ancient room she was in seemed to twist and bend, warping around her. The floor felt unsteady, rocking and rumbling as if the building she was in was moving. She herself felt strange: her back stung, the loose and ragged clothes across her skin scraping against a sore she didn't recognise. She looked down - her hands seemed smaller, the ground closer, her body unfamiliar. Yet the lab she was in felt familiar.

A huge cylindrical tube stood in the centre over a large console covered in buttons, knobs and dials. Some of the giant walls were covered in countless metal caskets - each containing a glass window that had frozen over. A series of metal benches sat in an open space, one specked with blood that seemed to float in the air - the stench overpowering, sickly and unbearable. Everything felt surgical, and the tools and glowing jars only matched the atmosphere.

Wicke grimaced as she moved, the pain on her back like a fresh graze, approaching the centre console. It looked strange, a crane-like machine hanging over it that hissed to life and began to move - reaching for one of the metal caskets. Wicke stepped on her tiptoes, looking into the glass of the tube. Dried blood coated the bottom, a cross-like marking on the metal floor. She stepped back, a cold feeling passing through her.

A whine and whir drew her attention upwards, a casket attaching to the tube before opening. A body fell out, suspended off the bottom by wires connected to its skin. She hung there for a moment before they detached, a stream of icy mist flowing down over her naked skin. Her eyes were open - both amber-coloured, just like her long hair - but she saw nothing, staring blankly at Wicke. Wicke tried to speak, tried to say the name of the girl she recognised, but nothing came out.

The body twitched, the eyes slowly beginning to stir and see before falling down onto Wicke's face. Recognition crossed the face identical to hers. "Sister?" questioned Wicke's sibling. "Sister?" Wicke echoed back to her, reaching up to touch the hand pressed against the glass. It felt cold to touch, but a warmth bled through. The body inside the tube smiled, but there was desperation between the forced grin. "Let me out of here, please. Wake up. Please," she asked with increasing panic. Wicke looked down at the console, the arcane runes across the surface pure gibberish to her eyes. A red button stood out and Wicke reached for it on a silent command, her body obeying.

“No! Wake up! Wake up! Wake-” screamed the girl in the tube. Wicke pressed the button without thought, the floor of the chamber opening up and the girl disappearing from sight, her scream silenced immediately with a whirl of slicing coming from beneath the floor. The inside of the glass was sprayed with a crimson fluid and Wicke stepped back in horror, clutching her face. A hand grabbed her shoulder and she turned. “No!”

“No!” Wicke screamed, bolting upright in an unfamiliar bed. Almost immediately, a metal scraping filled the air, a pair of heavy feet landing on the floor. “What is it? What’s wrong?” Morgause questioned, dressed in warm, black night clothes and fluffy socks – her colossal greatsword in her arms. It was cold – the wooden ship they were sailing on lacked any real source of insulation, so much so that the windows to their room had frozen over – yet Wicke was sweaty and hot. She gasped for air, a panic clutching her throat and her heartbeat thundering throughout her body.

“Wha... Wh-what’s going on?” came a groan from another bed, Sabine peering through the darkness as Morgause put her blade away and sat on Wicke’s bed. “Nothing, go back to sleep,” Morgause commanded, an immediate snoring resuming from Sabine. “You’re okay,” Morgause said more quietly to Wicke, taking her hands and forcing her to look at her. Wicke looked down, still partially in her dream, before blinking herself back to reality. “It’s just a dream, you’re safe,” Morgause confirmed.

Wicke pulled her hands back, tucking into a ball and looking down. “Yeah, I-I know. Just a dream,” she said, confirming more for herself than for Morgause. Morgause stared at her, the gold eyes glinting in the darkness as she read Wicke’s face. “Try to sleep if you can, we’ll talk in the morning,” Morgause reassured, standing up and returning to her bed. Wicke watched her before eventually laying back down. “Just a dream,” she muttered, not sure what she had seen.

The morning eventually came, but, by the time Wicke woke up, she found herself alone in her quarters, her two roommates absent. She dressed, wrapping up for the weather before stepping out into the bowels of the Reliant – the commercial ship they were sailing with. She headed along the corridor, passing the numerous other rooms – including Cinderlee and Damian’s, the latter of whom had drawn the short straw and had to bunk with the crazy lady. She climbed up, emerging out into the weather of the Storm Archipelago.

For the middle of winter, and for a region known for its tempestuous environment, the skies were unusually clear, and the seas unusually calm – as

they had been the entire journey so far. Wicke let out a sigh, glancing out towards the horizon. The meddling of the Rising Aces had changed the world in more ways than one, but she could only question whether the revival and removal of the giant known as the Storm Lord had benefitted the people of the region. It was hard to tell, but there was nothing she could do to change it.

“Morning,” Damian stated, stepping over to her with a cup of coffee in hand. She reached out for it and he pulled it back. “Uh, get your own – that’s mine,” he stated. She sighed and stepped away, but he followed. “Morgause said you had a nightmare. Anything you want to talk about?” he questioned, following her to the canteen. “No,” she said firmly, hugging her sides as she walked. Damian stepped closer to her, walking in her periphery. “It’s nothing, I don’t even know what it was about,” she answered honestly. “I don’t remember it,” she lied.

“Uh huh, sure. Well, you know where to find me if you do need to talk. It’s still a long way to Caedom,” he stated, turning and walking away, only to stumble as the ship lurched. “What in the abyss?” he questioned, grabbing onto the door frame and looking towards Wicke as an alarm bell began to rang. She shrugged and then surged forwards as the ship lurched again. “Come on!” she yelled, stepping past him and rushing back towards the main deck.

For the most part, passengers ran to their rooms, but a few with their own armaments ran in the same direction as Wicke and Damian. The ship lurched once more, as if something heavy had impacted the side. But Damian heard no cannon fire, there was no yells of Pirates, and as he entered Focus he sensed something massive on the other side of the hull. He and Wicke darted out into the open, a huge tentacle slamming down on the main deck and splattering one of the guards armed with rifles. “Kraken!” yelled a mercenary.

“Cover me!” Wicke commanded to Damian, beginning to chant as he threw on his metal gauntlets and intercepted a flailing strike. His heavy fist rippled the flesh of the grey tentacle, but didn’t seem to do much other than redirect its strike. In turn, one of the suckers spurted out a black liquid, coating Damian from head to toe in ink. “Gross!” he yelled, desperately shielding his face with his arms before throwing off his ruined coat – a few splotches across his face.

Wicke finished chanting, her hands fizzing and sparking with green lightning. She waited for another heavy slam from a tentacle before she grabbed it and surged the energy into it. The creature writhed and twitched, a heavy screech piercing the air before all of the tentacles retracted into the water. Wicke, Damian,

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Morgause, and the others that had run to the main deck to help, all darted to the side of the ship, looking over the edge to see where the creature had gone.

They saw the creature's large red eyes, but the gaze was focused on its surroundings, a flurry of fast moving creatures attacking the kraken from within the water. "We're fine," Wicke stated. "The jiaoren are here!" A few sighs of relief spread around, but a sailor emerged from below. "Hull breach! We're taking on water!" he cried, rushing towards the helm. Wicke read the Captain's lips, a heavy scowl on her face. "To the nearest island! Now!" she commanded.

It wasn't long before the Reliant docked, the ship stopping at an island consisting almost entirely of black, shard-like rock. It was hilly, covered in bursts of glass and sharp cliffs, and didn't have much in the ways of settlements: only a sizeable town with a decently large port. Sensing opportunity, the damaged vessel was immediately descended upon by any and all locals with a modicum of shipwright capabilities.

But Damian and Wicke didn't care about that - it wasn't their problem - as long as the Reliant was repaired and capable of getting them to Caedom then that was all that mattered. "A kraken so close to civilisation is... strange," Wicke muttered, mostly to herself, as Cinderlee emerged leisurely from below deck. "I read that there had been some migrations underwater, quite a few jiaoren left for the Old World along with the djinn," Sabine stated, somewhat overly enthusiastically as she pushed into the conversation - her face dyed black with ink. Wicke glanced towards her, raising an eyebrow as she glimpsed Morgause give a pair of reassuring thumbs up in her periphery. "Makes sense, the ocean crawlers are our only real defence against sea monsters - so if they are leaving then..." Wicke surmised, trailing off as she spotted a small squadron of ocean crawlers leap out from the ocean onto dry land.

There were eight of them in total, each one standing well over six foot in height. The jiaoren - the ocean crawlers - still looked distinctly alien to Damian. They were bipedal, and humanoid enough, their flesh covered in slimy crustacean-like carapaces, with fishy scale-like skin beneath - visible through the gaps in their armoured exoskeleton. Connected to their heads was a large tail that ran the full length of their body, the end covered with a pointy, bony tip.

A few, however, had more than one headtail, the large mass having been split into anywhere from six to nine thinner headtails, each still holding a sharp tip. Damian stared in amazement as one of the ocean crawlers merged the headtails back into its singular form - the prehensile limb looking singular when together

with no visible seams. One more lazy ocean crawler used the tips of its multiple headtails to hold itself aloft, walking without touching the floor with its feet.

They ranged in colours, mostly blues and purples – but the smallest of the group was a usual golden colour, that blended into green at the edges of its countless fins and frills. Damian frowned as the clear youngster looked around, eventually setting his gaze on the ship before bearing a wide and pointy smile – his eyes flat and black. “Why do I recognise that ocean crawler?” Damian questioned, turning and looking towards Wicke for an answer. “Why would I know? Are you sure you’re not confusing them for Red? You know jiaoren are all different, right?” she returned. He scowled, walking to the edge of the ship before surging down the gangplank and strolling towards the alien people.

His confidence quickly faltered as he approached the group, all of them far larger than him and quite intimidating. They turned and stared him down, several of them holding pads of an unusual material and what looked like pens. On closer look, Damian quickly spotted clothes over their carapaces, they all wore backpacks of varying sizes – the youngest wearing the largest. One even reached into their bag and pulled out what looked like a camera – bearing Guild markings - aiming it at Damian and snapping a photo. He staggered back in shock, the aliens observing him with curiosity and bemusement. “You’re tourists,” he realised.

“Archaeologists,” corrected the largest of the group. Damian tilted his head, the word unfamiliar. “What?” he questioned, drawing a deep sigh from within. “They study the past,” Wicke answered, approaching from behind along with the rest of their crew. “So... tourists that write things down?” Damian questioned. There was a further sigh, the group immediately turning their attention away from Damian to Wicke – other than the golden jiaoren, who continued to stare at Damian.

“Thank you for your assistance with the kraken,” Wicke stated, approaching the group closely and making it clear that she was in charge. “Of course,” returned the leader, “it was of no issue. Now, I don’t suppose you are familiar with this region? We are in search of a temple.” Wicke shook her head and the jiaoren turned away from her. “Let us be on our way,” he ordered, the group beginning to walk away. “Woah, hang on. We may not be local but I’m sure we can help – it’s not like we have much else to do,” Wicke stated.

“I doubt that very much, you islanders are sloppy and unrefined and unfamiliar with our methods. You will cause more harm to our search than aid you could

provide. The way you gawk tells us a lot," he stated, looking directly at Damian and then Sabine. "I-I have worked with jiaoren before – there's one in my crew: Chalakon Lore, of the Crushing Core Clan," she stated, the group immediately faltering and looking at her. The eyes were full of suspicion and they all immediately tensed, as if waiting for a command to strike. "Choose your next words carefully, human," warned the leader, his voice a deep growl.

"He's red, somewhat stubborn, but otherwise nice," Wicke immediately added. "He's fulfilling a life debt to my Captain for freeing him from his captors." "Supervisor..." said a purple jiaoren quietly. The leader turned and spoke quietly to her, the pair in hushed tones that Wicke couldn't quite catch. He then turned and looked down at her. "You will join us on our expedition and you will explain fully where the Prince is. Am I understood?" the older jiaoren questioned. Wicke nodded and he glanced to Damian and the others, who mirrored her nod. "Enki," he then stated, the golden jiaoren perking up. "Walk with me and explain your connection to that one," commanded the supervisor, pointing to Damian. "Follow close, do not fall behind."

The ocean crawlers set off quickly, walking either using their headtails or their legs, but after realising that Wicke and the others were quickly falling behind the supervisor sent his group on ahead, walking more slowly along with the purple and golden jiaoren. Wicke watched as the others headed upwards, scaling the cliffs to climb up the island, but almost immediately her attention was drawn elsewhere. "You may refer to me as Captain Tano Plovol," stated the lead jiaoren. "Wicke," Wicke said in turn before naming her group.

"This is Livet Ojo and Enki Soko," Tano then added, gesturing to the purple and golden ocean crawlers. "So how do you know Damian?" Wicke asked Enki, the smaller ocean crawler flushing green and shying away. Damian stared at him, a strange memory bubbling to the surface. Instead of answering, Enki began to chant, magical markings surrounding his neck. A bubble formed around him before popping, leaving a dampness on the air that floated around him. He then pulled out a large paintbrush, dipping it into several vials on a bandolier across his chest before painting in the air – leaving a floating mark behind.

The paint changed as they walked, forming an image of a small yacht – Corina's yacht – it then changed to an image of a young boy dangling from the edge above the water, a mirrored image of Enki below the surface. "That was you!" Damian realised, his mind remembering the incident over three years prior. "I fell in because of you." Enki shook his head, shying away behind the purple jiaoren.

“No, it was because you were stupid,” he said quietly, his voice monotone and soft. Damian flushed red as the image showed him wrapping his ankle in rope before falling and flailing in the water. Wicke and Sabine both burst into laughter.

“And why were you at the surface?” questioned Livet, turning on her cowering protégé. “Uh, I, uh...” Enki stammered, before looking down in shame. She sighed and formed a fist before rapping the top of his head with it. He hugged his head defensively, the impact more surprising than painful. “We will discuss with your broodmatron later,” Tano stated, moving the conversation onwards. “Where is the Prince currently?” he questioned assertively.

“I don’t know. He was with my Captain, Jayce Exarga – of the Rising Aces – but they left for the Old World, beyond the Frontier,” she answered quickly and honestly. Tano sighed, shaking his head – his head tails flicking from side to side. “That makes things tricky. How did your Captain come to be owed a life debt?” “Red – uh – the Prince, we found him in an Imperial Arena. He had been captured and sold, we helped him escape.”

“That fool,” Livet scowled. Tano gave her a warning glare, his flat grey eyes boring into her. “It’s an old tradition, but it is a tradition,” Tano stated to her. “It is a shame, but there is nothing we can do until the Prince has obtained his story of valour,” he said with a sigh, looking up to see a waving jiaoren. He began to climb a near vertical cliff, Wicke and the others doing their best to follow. “Enki, provide them some aid,” Livet commanded.

Enki began to paint once more, this time painting a brown ladder in the air. He then pushed it with his palm, the ladder materialising and attaching to the cliff’s surface. “Okay that’s cool,” Sabine stated bluntly, testing her foot on the bottom rung before beginning to climb. “It will not last long,” warned Enki, using his headtails to climb by imbedding the tips in the stone. Wicke was the last to climb, spending every second analysing the conjuration – her mind fascinated with the magic. As soon as she reached the top, the ladder melted back into paint before washing away.

The jiaoren led them through a concealed passageway, not too dissimilar to the ruins Wicke had traversed through during Thalia’s Storm Maiden trials. Murals lined the walls of the circular chamber, depicting images of Giants waging wars against endless Dragons. It showed the Dragons then feasting on the corpses of the Giants before using their runic magic to turn into larger versions of themselves. One image stuck out in particular: an image of an ice-white Dragon

stood staring at a woman with matching white hair and pale skin. Their eyes were the same icy blue colour.

"A pity," Tano eventually stated. "Nothing of note," he told his followers, beginning to pack up. "Nothing of note?" questioned Cinderlee. "Is he mad?" "What were you searching for?" Wicke questioned as the ocean crawler glared at Cinderlee. There was a cautious pause. "Wicke, the information you have provided has been appreciated, and I have no reward to grant you for it, so I will speak earnestly. We seek information on the end of days: the apocalypse of the past. Much remains a mystery, and your people may hold the answer."

Wicke nodded in understanding. "I get that, we're currently investigating the Dungeons and seeing what lies at the end of them. Tano paused, thinking to himself before setting his gaze on Enki. "I see. Then perhaps the currents brought us together for a reason. We must return home and inform the King of the Prince's whereabouts. The journey is long and dangerous, and it will be sometime before we can resume our expedition, so – in the spirit of exploration – I offer a trade."

Wicke folded her arms, raising an eyebrow. "Go on," she stated, her curiosity piqued. "I shall bestow an archaeologist to join your party. From your spirit I sense strength about you, so I trust that you will look after them," he offered. Wicke couldn't help but grin. "Could we have Livet? Or if not, then I want your most experienced," she stated. Tano scoffed, shaking his head and stepping back before stopping next to Enki. "It is the duty of the youth to prove themselves to the world, not the other way around. Enki is young, much like your group, so this will be a perfect chance for him to prove himself," Tano stated, placing a hand on Enki's back and guiding him forwards towards Wicke. "What?" Wicke and Enki questioned in unison.

"Enki, your mission is simple: verify her story and connection to the Prince, and collect as much firsthand information on the Dungeons as you can. As our youngest, you have the most to prove – and I eagerly await your tales on your return. Seize this opportunity - we are all jealous not to be in your place," Tano concluded. Enki glanced to the others – they didn't look jealous. "Do I have a choice in the matter?" he asked. Tano shook his head. "Fine..."

Seize the Seas Tales: State of Affairs

Alara did her best to hide the terror surging throughout her body as she read the reports that had been laid out in front of her. She could feel Cyrenna and Beowulf's eyes upon her, her friends waiting for a reaction. She finished the final line, taking a gulp and setting the document down before looking up at the other Captains and Commanders that had assembled in the vanguard base of operations, located two weeks southeast of Final Bastion and the Frontier in a large, crescent island. They all stared at her. "So where does this put us, Captain Vanathur?" Commodore Kai questioned.

"It lines up with what we expected," Alara answered, forcing down her emotions. "The Admirals crossed the Frontier in a trio of ships a little more than fifteen years ago – one of which was under the disguise of Pirate Lord Ghalt Lorus who had been discretely assassinated. The Old World was at war with itself, an all-out battle between the four nations. The three ships separated, each tasked with scouting and analysing the three closest nations. This they did with success, but one day Ghalt's flagship disappeared. Commodore Osiris located its wreckage in the far east. All hands lost or missing."

"Admiral and Admiral Vanathur continued with their crews, they had taken losses - from disease, being caught in the crossfire of conflicts, and attacks from renegades – but otherwise were functional. Around three years ago, Pirate Lord Dick Valentine crossed the Frontier, an act that coincided with the emergence of the Sea Sovereign – Atalana Scáthach. Scáthach brought an end to the war through mass assassination, leaving power vacuums and desperation behind. Scáthach then conquered and unified the Old World, eventually finalising her conquest early last year."

"The Admirals met up, discussing the state of affairs before agreeing to sabotage Scáthach's efforts. They formed the Reapers, alongside a Princess of the Scáthach's own nation who acted as a hidden benefactor. Eventually this benefactor betrayed the Reapers, joining Scáthach as a Betrayer known as Alice. The Admirals' crews were hunted down a few months ago. Admiral Victoire Vanathur's crew was annihilated but she managed to escape with a few others. She later rendezvoused with Admiral Silas Vanathur within Chull. This was where the Reapers were routed and wiped out. The majority receiving public executions."

"The Admirals managed to escape, which..." Alara faltered, looking towards Beowulf. "Brings us to now," he concluded. "We have learnt that Admiral Silas

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Vanathur's ship has been destroyed. It too is now a trophy." Alara looked towards Cyrenna, waiting for an order. "Find that ship. Find the Admirals," she commanded. Alara stood immediately and stormed out of the room.

Chapter 185: A New Norm

Enki's addition to Wicke and Damian's crew brought both challenges and advantages in spades. For one, his presence aboard the Reliant was tolerable at best, and it seemed every other day that Wicke would receive some form of complaint about his presence. "That sea monster has dragged water all across the corridors." "He's eaten all of the food in the canteen that was for the guests." "There are fish in the coffee." They dragged on and on.

But despite the complaints, Wicke quickly grew fond of her new jiaoren ally. On the days strife with boredom he provided a great source of entertainment. He was quite talented with a brush – and once that became widely known, all manner of passengers and crew sought Wicke out for a portrait, which she was more than happy to arrange for a somewhat reasonable sum. If she ever needed something: a tool, hairbrush, or everyday item, he was more than willing to create one for her using his bardic magic. He was also quite good at pranks.

"I'm going to gut that fish when I catch him!" Damian growled, as he stormed around the Reliant with a painted face that made him look like an elderly woman. Enki had even painted his clothes, dressing Damian in a shawl that he couldn't remove and even a pink handbag. Wicke howled with laughter, well aware that Enki wisely would be following the ship from the waters as they traversed the rapids of the Rockies. "You make a great babushka," Cinderlee stated, with a somewhat prideful smile. Damian scowled, throwing as many swearwords and gestures around as he could as Sabine and Morgause similarly bellowed with laughter.

"I'm going to kill him. Why me?" Damian questioned. Wicke stifled her laughs, stepping closer to him and beginning to chant. "Hold still," she told him – dispelling the magic and returning his clothes and face back to normal. "Come on, we're nearly there – save your energy for the Dungeon," she told him. "Thanks," he said quietly, his worries about the effect being permanent easing immediately.

"Attention all passengers, we are thirty minutes away from arrival. Please prepare all your items and luggage, anything left behind will be claimed. All crew prepare for docking and final procedures," came the Captain's voice across the ship's speakers. "You heard the Captain," Wicke stated to the group, turning her attention towards the bow as the Reliant emerged from the canyon and dropped out onto open water. "We'll establish a base, and go from there," Wicke told her crew.

It felt strange to be back in Caedom – the last memory Wicke had of the place was the city in flames, an inquisition laying siege to the locale. For the most part the city had been rebuilt – it was smaller and no longer had such an expansive harbour, but the sloped plateau was covered almost entirely in houses and larger buildings. The streets had been remodelled, now with a large central path cutting straight through, leading from the Dungeon at the top of the plateau all the way down to the harbour where ships were loading crates full of purple magic stones.

In fact, from Wicke's glance across the region, it appeared as if Caedom had completely altered its design to focus entirely upon the Dungeon. The buildings lining the central road were Guild owned, offering equipment for explorers, items build using magic stones, and accommodation and leisure for their employees. Caedom was a Guild city – the first Wicke had ever seen. "At least it makes it easy for us to know where to go," Damian stated, adjusting his gauntlets as he leant on the railing. Wicke nodded, her eyes locked on the lone white tower. "We will conquer it for all it's worth."

They docked and disembarked, immediately splitting into three groups. "Enki and I will get our licences, Damian and Sabine will find accommodation that we can dip in and out of, and Cinderlee and Morgause will get equipment and gear," Wicke stated to the group, as they gathered on the pier at the edge of the city. The others nodded before heading off in different directions. Wicke then turned towards Enki. "Anything you can do to make our job easier for us?" she questioned. He took out his brush, pondering to himself for a moment. "I think I have an idea."

They pushed their way through the well-varnished main doors of the saloon-like building marked as the 'Adventurer's Guild'. Immediately, countless eyes fell towards them as the floorboards creaked beneath them. Enki towered behind Wicke, the jiaoren far larger than her anyway but seemingly even larger with the body armour and cowboy boots he had painted over himself. His headtails were separated, flowing behind him like colourful dreadlocks and painted with black tribal markings that were 'as intimidating as possible' – under Wicke's suggestion. He looked more muscular – not that the mouth full of canines weren't intimidating enough – and a patchwork of scars had been painted onto his face.

Wicke similarly had been dolled up: she had taken out her duster coat and her largest hat, and had also had tattoos painted on her face, along with a large scar across her nose. She'd painted her own eyes with dark and fierce makeup – and was doing her best impression of Thalia's scowl whilst showing off the grimoire

attached to her belt. She glared at the nearest adventurer, the young man averting his gaze almost immediately. She nodded, muttered gibberish to herself and then swaggered forwards as dramatically as possible, right up to the main desk.

“Uh, um, how – er – may I help you?” questioned the young woman on the other side. Wicke pulled a toothpick out of her pocket and began to chew on it. “We want six passes for the Dungeon, babycakes,” she stated, immediately cringing at her own words. The receptionist glanced past Wicke to Enki, who sneered as menacingly as he could. “I only count two of you,” she stated. Wicke folded her arms and let out a loud and dramatic sigh. “Ugh, my crew is obviously busy. Six passes - don’t keep me waiting!” Wicke stated, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a gold pearl before setting it on the desk.

The various eyes observing her all widened and the receptionist faltered before reaching for the coin. “Uh, we will need names?” the receptionist questioned. Wicke opened her mouth to answer, only to immediately falter as nothing came to mind. But without missing a beat, Enki stepped forwards. “My name is Tim Cognito, and this is...” Wicke glanced around desperately for anything she could use. “Jenny Tail,” Enki inserted.

“Tim Cognito and... Jenny Tail?” questioned the receptionist. Wicke forced a smile. “Yes, any problem?” Wicke questioned back. The receptionist looked down at the coin and slowly slid it towards herself. “I will, um, prepare your passes right this moment – Miss Tail and Mister Cognito,” she stated before taking a step back. “Oh yes, what were the names of your other crewmates? I need theirs too.”

Damian looked down at the pass in his hands. “Tom Ato...?” he questioned in mostly disbelief and the rest confusion, as Wicke handed out the passes to her crew inside the small room they had bought. “It could be worse... at least you’re not Robin Banks,” Morgause muttered, taking hers in shame. Cinderlee smirked as she read hers whilst Sabine flushed bright red and immediately pocketed it before glaring at Wicke and Enki. “Look, it is what it is – next time we’ll think of names beforehand. You try making six up on the spot,” Wicke defended. “Anyway, this is the best you could do?” she returned, deciding to attack rather than defend as she gestured to the tiny room around them. “Best I could do with a location close to water for Enki,” Damian fought back. Wicke stared at him in disbelief. “He’s fine without water – right?” Enki nodded. “See! Besides a big enough bath would have done the job.”

Damian swore at her and she swore back, the pair throwing as many hand signs up at each other as they knew until Morgause stood up and stepped between them. "Enough! You two are meant to be leading this party, stop acting like children. We've got the gear and supplies we need. We have the passes. And we have a permanent residence," she rationalised. "Is there anything else?" she asked, looking to Wicke. "Only anything and everything that will keep you happy. It may be weeks before we return to the surface," she warned, looking particularly to Enki. A loud gulp emerged from the jiaoren.

They stocked up on fruit, vegetables, grains and other foods that would last before sealing them inside containers and then storing them inside the group's numerous bottomless bags. With enough food and water to last weeks, the group departed, beginning the long climb up to the Dungeon. Magic stones continued to be carried out of the Dungeon in a consistent and continuous manner – rolling down the slope on wheelbarrows and carts.

"Halt, only those with passes may proceed beyond this point!" declared a guard dressed in rather ordinary clothes, a shortsword fastened to his belt. Wicke glanced across the area – the guards wore no regalia, there were no golden uniforms or special equipment. They wore clothes more akin to miners and the way the operation seemed to be being handled screamed of complacency. "Here you go," Wicke stated, stepping forwards and showing off the pass. With a single authentic pass in their possession Enki could manufacture as many replacements as they needed – something Wicke had frustratingly only realised after the fact. The guard looked at it, glanced at her and then shrugged before taking the others. "Carry on," he stated – Wicke immediately grateful that they had modified the names to be more ordinary.

They proceeded forwards, following the abundance of signs straight into the Dungeon. They descended the stairs, now fitted with a conveyer belt to help ferry magic stones, passing through the familiar portal and into the Dungeon itself. Wicke immediately jumped as she found herself stood face-to-face with a bored guard. "You there," she growled, numerous scars across her chin and one eye covered by a black eyepatch. "Passes, now! I don't recognise you and I know everyone who comes in here."

Wicke showed off the passes and immediately the guard faltered. A moment of horror crossed Wicke's mind as she remembered the portals anti-magic effect. The names had reverted and now the consequence of their choices were obvious. "These scream fakes, but if your parents were truly that cruel or you were unable

to come up with better pseudonyms then that's not my problem. You're free to go on. Your business is your own - the stamps are official and who am I to mess with that," she grumbled, handing them back to an immediate sigh of relief from the group. "Follow the markings, stray off the path and your lives are your own," she warned, gesturing to an abundance of wooden signs mounted to the walls and plastered to signposts. Wicke nodded, stepping forwards without further word. "Thanking you," stated Cinderlee with a curtsy, as she followed from the rear. "Happy hunting."

It was startlingly impressive and also deeply disturbing at how efficient and well-integrated the Guild had placed themselves within the Dungeon. For the first forty floors the group marched from campsite to campsite, stopping and taking their time to stick to schedule. Each area was well-guarded, well-stocked, and often had some semi-permanent source of entertainment for the miners (a term that no one could find a better replacement for), either a somewhat well-stocked tavern, fighting pit, or even library. The miners would work in constant shifts – often four-to-six groups equipped with particular weapons to hunt and kill the fauna on the floor. Each group would be replaced every few weeks – according to the locals – with scheduled leave to return to the surface.

Couriers would then take the magic stones up to the surface, following the patrolled paths or placing the stones into machinery to expediate the process. On multiple occasions, Wicke and the others spotted miners riding the machinery to the next floor up. Beyond the fortieth floor, as the journey neared its second week, the workforce began to diminish. Signage remained, but was clearly less maintained and mostly warnings about company policy and lack of insurance to cover death. There weren't patrols, but - after ten days of walking - Morgause and Damian were both itching for a fight – not that the carnivorous goats and zombies could offer much of a challenge.

As the solitude grew, the group encountering less and less mercenaries mapping out routes or trying their luck at hunting for larger and larger magic stones, it quickly dawned on Wicke just how much of a difference Enki's presence was making. "A... Dragon?" Sabine guessed, trying to guess the creature Enki had painted – the image itself crudely drawn from the minimal amount of strokes. "Nope," Enki stated, making another mark on his canvas and pointing his paintbrush towards Cinderlee – the older woman sat enamoured on the floor like a child watching a puppet show. "A lesser-spotted ice leviathan," she answered. Enki clapped his hands together. "Yes!" he declared proudly, turning and marking a line on the canvas under Cinderlee's name. Wicke smirked as she

looked from the singular tally under Morgause and Sabine's team to Damian and Cinderlee's array.

"I give up! They are clearly cheating," Morgause stated in a huff, standing up from her rock and stepping away. "Sore loser!" Damian called after her. She turned and glared at him before pointing her nose up in the air. "I will take no note of your comments – mister-needs-to-use-a-dictionary-for-hangman," she snapped back. Damian stuck his tongue out at her and she turned away, drawing her sword and practicing her stances – the very heavy blade moving far faster than it used to. "Change teams?" Enki suggested. Damian shook his head, standing up and putting on his gauntlets before joining Morgause for a spar.

Floor fifty came and went, the journey slowing significantly but fatigue still suspiciously absent. "How are we feeling?" Wicke questioned to her crew as they sat in the cove beyond the boss room – the previous room patrolled by a trio of giant stone centaurs, each armed with either a ranged weapon, a melee weapon, or magic. Morgause winced as she applied a healing potion to her open wound – the flesh bubbling before sealing over as the crimson fluid evaporated.

Cinderlee sat to the side, a small fire under a complicated set of glassware filled with various powders that she was melting and fluids that she was boiling. She twisted a tap, dripping a glowing green liquid into a flask before swirling it around, the colour darkening to a deep blue. She then poured the liquid on the stone floor, the fluid sizzling before giving off a potent, minty, and refreshing odour that reenergised the group, along with a few brief and startling hallucinations that faded almost immediately.

Enki gave a thumbs up, a big grin on his face.

Damian pressed his dirty thumb to his tooth, which wobbled at the gentlest touch. He winced from the pain. Sabine then took a small syringe from out of her bottomless bag, filling it with a healing potion before passing it over to him. Damian looked at it in confusion. "I can knock it out," Morgause offered instead. Damian squirted the healing potion in his mouth, pressing the tooth into place before looking at Wicke. "I'd say we're good," he answered for the others. "Huh?" Sabine asked, turning and looking at Wicke. "Sorry, did you say something?" Wicke smiled and shook her head.

Sabine looked almost completely different from the last Dungeon dive: if anything, she looked more comfortable – happier. And between the walking and Morgause's workouts, she had also muscled up at a far faster rate than anyone

else in the group, likely a combination of whatever chemicals Cinderlee kept giving her and her own regenerative powers. She was still bulky, much more noticeably in comparison to Wicke or Cinderlee, but she no longer got out of breath as easily and when the fights became more challenging, she was able to remain on the frontlines protecting Wicke, Cinderlee and occasionally even Morgause, Damian and Enki.

“Wicke, can I have a haircut later?” Morgause questioned, her fringe grown out and hair now down to her shoulders. Wicke nodded, the smell of burning hair drawing her gaze towards Cinderlee – now using a pair of hot tongs to burn off the ends of her messy hair. “I can do yours as well if you’d like,” Wicke offered. “I am capable of my own styling,” Cinderlee returned. Wicke held up her hands. “Fine.”

They rested for as long as they thought they needed, giving Cinderlee time to brew some more healing potions and stimulants, whilst also taking the chance to bathe using the water fountain present. Eventually they carried on. Once again the floors seemed to drag on, the difficulty of the fifties significantly harder than the previous levels. Even after their worst battles, Enki continued to inspire and provide a constant source of energy and excitement, and - as they passed their previous record and carried on towards the sixtieth floor - it truly dawned on Wicke just how much of a difference morale had made. She could feel the exhaustion and the draining environment, but even so she still felt happy. Even Damian was tolerable.

“Hang on!” Damian yelled, the six of them tucked behind Sabine’s large shield as the giant humanoid robot on the sixtieth floor unleashed a stream of continuous red fire towards them. The flames subsided. “Go!” Morgause yelled, darting out from cover alongside Damian and charging the giant, bronze machine three times the size of Enki. Sabine pushed forwards, repositioning herself and banging her mace against her red hot shield, the noise drawing the robot’s red eyes towards her.

Damian leapt up, using his Focus to jump again on the air before slamming his metal gauntlet as hard as he could into the side of the machine’s large head. The creature staggered, it’s arms bending and exposing the tubes connected to its flamethrowers. Morgause did not hesitate, leaping and slamming her greatsword down and through the tubes: a viscous and shiny oil dripping from the damaged limb.

The sound of pumping and hissing emerged from the metal golem, the sign that it was refuelling its flamethrowers. "Cover!" Enki yelled, painting a series of large boulders for the group to dart behind. But as the others ran, Damian remained, darting beneath the monster's legs and attempting to create weak points in the joints. "Damian!" Wicke screamed, her grimoire glowing and sparking with energy as it held her ready spell.

The golem unleashed its fires downwards, igniting the fuel leaking from its limb – resulting in a large detonation that blew off the bronze limb. Damian bounced free from the blast, his arms steaming and charred, but otherwise alive. Cinderlee darted forwards, grabbing his burnt arm and throwing it over her shoulder before half-dragging, half-carrying him away to cover. "Let the darkness of the great beyond consume all!" Cinderlee yelled, giving Wicke the go ahead.

"Black hole!" Wicke screamed, throwing a swirling orb of dark energy across the room. As it travelled it quickly grew, sucking in the air and broken stone, a purple void sailing past the golem before locking into place in the centre of the room. "Wicke!" Sabine screamed, digging her nails into Enki's quickly fading boulder as she hung on for dear life. The golem stumbled backwards, the void pulling it, but it quickly toppled over, sliding across the floor before thrusting its remaining hand into the stone to save itself.

The giant metal machine dangled there, its huge, damaged legs flailing behind its large body. The black hole continued to swirl, growing larger and larger. The entire atmosphere was changing, the flesh on Wicke's face threatening to be torn off from the immense pull as she desperately tried to control her greatest spell. It was becoming hard to breath and even harder to remain standing as Wicke stood parallel to the floor on Enki's boulder. "Wicke!" yelled Damian.

"Hold on, it's nearly there!" she screamed out, the metal plating of the golem peeling away, revealing wires and cables beneath the surface. "Wicke!" Sabine screamed, her position closest to the void and her grip slipping. Wicke glanced towards her. "Fuck!" she yelled, focusing on the swirling of the magic in her spell and beginning to unravel it. A blur of metal then flew past her, Morgause diving out of her cover towards the black hole.

"Morgause!" Damian screamed. She twisted in the air, swinging with her greatsword into the hand of the golem. The metal came apart, the giant creature tumbling towards the void along with Morgause. But Morgause caught herself, leaping off and away from the golem to slingshot herself around the black hole.

The vortex swung her around, just enough for Enki to dart close enough to grab her – using his headtails to anchor himself to the floor as he held her in his arms.

The metal golem wailed as it flailed in the void, partially submerged in the darkness – its joints and plating twisting and scrunching under the crushing pressure. Its red eyes bore into Wicke before they shattered and its face inverted, the spell ending and leaving a twisted husk on the floor. They all fell to the ground in a crash, gravity reverting to normal. “Never again!” Sabine cried, her nails broken and hands torn. “Sorry,” Wicke stated, relieved that they were all alive, but overjoyed as she watched the metal disappear into white particles, leaving a huge magic stone behind. “But we did it! We conquered the sixtieth floor!”

She approached the stone, hefting it before placing it inside her bottomless bag. “Wicke...” Damian said quietly. She turned to look at him, her face falling as she saw his burns, the shock on Morgause and Sabine’s faces, and the exhaustion in Cinderlee’s eyes. Enki seemed fine. Wicke looked down and sighed. “Okay... let’s head back.”

Seize the Seas Tales: Scars

“Bjorn! Bjorn!” called out Fenn, as he, Wam and Ohno darted through the streets of Belluabella. Bjorn faltered, looking down towards Jayce and Caelie before sighing and turning. “What?” Bjorn questioned, turning to face them. “I thought you had gone to the Palace?” he asked. Fenn panted, leaning over with his hands on his legs. “We were! We saw something,” he stated desperately. Bjorn glanced from Fenn to Wam who simply nodded. “What did you see?” Bjorn asked, apathetically.

“We saw the War Hounds – they’re planning something,” Fenn said desperately. “I’m not surprised,” Bjorn said with shortening patience, turning and looking back towards Jayce and Caelie – both waiting for him. “No, you don’t understand-” Fenn stated, his eyes wide and panicked. Bjorn faltered, glancing back. “There were maps, Bjorn, of the New World. The Republic. They were planning something,” Wam reinforced.

“Did you hear anything in particular?” Bjorn asked, beginning to walk towards Jayce – the Beastly Boys following closely behind. “Uh, no, but... it must mean-” “It could be anything, but I hear you. Jayce!” Bjorn called out. “The boys saw something they think you should know about.” Jayce frowned, turning to look at them even as Caelie tugged on his sleeve. “What did you see?” he questioned.

SEIZE THE SEAS

They repeated what they had told Bjorn and he folded his arms before nodding. "Good to know, but not much we can do about it. It's not our problem," he concluded. "There," Bjorn told the trio. "Well done for coming to us, but nothing we can do about it. Run along, Magnus said he had some jobs for you once you'd done visiting the palace."

The trio looked down, standing awkwardly for a moment before accepting the outcome and stepping away. "Come on, let's go," Wam stated, the boys watching as Bjorn nodded to them and began to walk away. "It's probably nothing..." Fenn muttered. "Nothing, or something," Ohno concluded.

Chapter 186: A World Down Under

“Right, listen up!” Jayce declared, silencing his crew as they gathered in a tavern they had emptied out. The voices quickly quietened, the numerous members already settled into their familiar groups – an entire bar’s worth of drinks displayed out before them across the numerous tables. “We’re back, and by that I mean we’re leaving in two days’ time. Put your affairs in order and prepare for the Revelry. We have three months left before the deadline and I intend for us to arrive near the Sovereign’s castle with plenty of time.”

Murmurs immediately began to spread before one clear voice rang out. “Would it not make more sense to stay here - to minimise the risk of the journey? We’ve all heard the rumours of our new bounties,” Marisha questioned, to the nods and approval of the crew. “I’ve given it some thought. We’ve all trained hard these last weeks, and we’ve all had our own run-ins with fools looking to claim my head. What I’m suggesting,” Jayce stated, looking towards Red, “is that rather than sail, we dive.” An uproar of questions spread out and Jayce held out his hands, gesturing for the group to settle. “Red?” Jayce invited.

“Much of my time recently has been scouting. There are paths - routes under the seas - that we could traverse with the correct means. Tempest and I have discussed this before and the Stacked Hand has done it before – there are markings that indicate so. It would be dangerous...” Red stated, the group turning to Jayce. “It will help us to evade bounty hunters and other Pirates, and - quite frankly – it sounds fun. According to the locals, and what Red has found out personally, there is a place called Devil’s Gate. That is our heading.”

The crew wasted no time in preparing for the voyage. The warmer weather had already begun to set in, but the journey underwater was warned to be cold and dark, so the crew immediately stocked up on clothes for a variety of environments – just in case. The larder was filled, the fridges and freezers packed, and Jayce had even taken the time during their rest to have the Stacked Hand painted with a fresh coat of blues, whites and blacks and a recoat to ward against a variety of weathers. Both ship and crew had been refreshed, and a new journey was waiting for them.

“I shall see you at the Revelry,” King Crach stated, gripping Jayce’s hand firmly. Jayce nodded to him. “I... owe you for this. We wouldn’t have felt so safe, so secure, without you – so thank you, on behalf of myself and my people,” Jayce said earnestly. Crach shook his head. “Nonsense. These people like you, and that’s certainly without my help. Treat us as equals – as gratitude for allowing

me to have a family again, even if begrudgingly," Crach returned, looking towards Thalia who stood to the side with her arms folded. "Hmph," she uttered. The old lion chuckled. "Watch your back, my friend – from her and from the world," Crach warned, looking back at Jayce before turning and walking away. "Rising Aces!" Jayce called out. "Let's go!"

Bjorn released Magnus, the pair of bears looking at each other. "Take care, my son," Magnus stated, before glancing towards Marisha and the Beastly Boys. "And you, all of you. I shall await your return. We all will," Magnus stated. He embraced Marisha before shaking the hands of each of the boys. "I wish Inger a speedy recovery," Marisha said softly to Magnus. The old bear nodded, looking down with an expression of pain and grief. "I think we are beyond that now, I hope that the ancestors will protect her for a little longer – for my sake – but something inside me knows that she was waiting for your return. Worry not, it will be alright," he reassured, to himself more than them.

The Stacked Hand departed, leaving Belluabella behind as they sailed east. Even with weeks of rest, the crew settled in immediately – returning straight to their familiar duties. The two Demons - Paimon and Asmodeus - returned to their positions of comfort and relaxation. The three Dragons escorted the ship: Zhurong and Soteria from the air, alongside Wren, Taranis from the sea, alongside Red. Jayce grinned as he stood by Bjorn at the helm, taking in the salty and cool sea air – the spray soft on his face. It was good to be back.

The seas were calm and steady, the journey smooth for several days before the weather took a sharp turn. The skies remained clear, the sun warm on Jayce's skin, but the seas churned beneath the Stacked Hand. "We're arriving at Devil's Gate," Red warned, standing alongside Jayce, Bjorn and Astris at the helm. "It's a convergence point of multiple currents." Jayce looked ahead, an island sat in the distance with a considerable harbour built into it, but his attention was elsewhere – focused instead upon the colossal whirlpool nearby. "It sits on a Leyline," Falconer stated from aboard Wren, the pair gliding alongside the ship. "Explains something I suppose..." Bjorn muttered. "So how do we survive underwater?"

"Tempest!" Jayce called out, the djinn turning away from the main mast and floating over towards him. "Yes, Captain?" he asked with a buzz. Jayce looked towards Bjorn. "Bjorn-" Jayce began. Bjorn glared at him. "Uh, we were wondering how it's possible for us to sail underwater?" Jayce questioned,

partially aware of the details but not to an explainable degree. The djinn sparked with excitement.

“We will require a little time to stop at that island, such that Chalakon and I can make the necessary modifications to our vessel, but the process is rather... spectacular, if I do say so myself,” Tempest stated, without actually answering the question. “An answer please, Tempest,” Astris stated, a bit more bluntly. “Ah, apologies. We shall utilise Gaea, and some magical modifications, to create a continuous burst of air, pushing the water away. This will create a falling or rolling effect that the ship can sail upon. It is a tricky and delicate operation. Mai Lu has already warned that there are countless records of failure – with most ships utilising a special coating instead, or magical spells that are lost to us without Wicke, but I believe this will work. Although we will be extremely vulnerable in our pocket,” Tempest explained. Bjorn and Astris did not look hopeful.

“Think of it as blowing bubbles whilst you are swimming, only large enough to surround you,” Red suggested. They looked even more concerned. “Do not worry... too much – there are areas within the ocean with lessened pressure that we shall travel through,” he added. “The pressure is difficult for even us, as such we have Heralds – guides and farmers who cultivate a special type of plant that hyperaerates the waters to lessen the pressure. It is these routes we will follow so the strain on Gaea shouldn’t be too much.”

“What about light? Won’t we need light for Gaea and these plants?” Astris asked. Bolts of excitement burst from Tempest’s armour. “Ah, now this is what I am most eager to witness. Prince Chalakon has informed me that there is photoemitting life that is in symbiosis with the plants. We must procure a specimen,” the djinn stated eagerly. Astris looked towards Jayce, but he simply shrugged. “Only one way to find out, we’ll be fine – or this will be one really short trip.”

They docked at the island known as Hell’s Guard, the process of modification took a few hours, with alterations made to both the hull and the Gaea’s Tree of Oaths, but eventually Tempest summoned the crew back to the ship. “How do you feel?” Jayce asked Gaea, as she sat in a meditative stance on the main deck. Her cyan hair had grown out and lay braided across her right shoulder, her skin was still the same white bark colour as the tree, and her eyes had taken on a slightly more orange hue in recent times – as opposed to the vibrant green she had previously. Her horns had grown out, now curling around like a ram’s. The

changes had been noticeable during their time in Belluabella, but she looked different from how she had a few hours earlier – and Jayce was really struggling to tell what had changed.

“Fine – I think,” she answered. “What do you think?” she then questioned to him. Jayce didn’t really know what to say. The dryad had a habit of refusing clothing, at least in the traditional sense. She would often cover up the bare minimum with leaves she had chosen from her tree, or found whilst walking alongside the ship in its bottle. It had taken some getting used to, her shyness dedicated to anything other than modesty. She sat before him as naked as could be, his eyes glancing in every direction away from her as he desperately maintained eye contact. “Um,” he uttered. “These,” she stated – showing off her arms and legs and the new tattoos covering them. “Oh,” he realised, before flushing red and looking away. “Honestly,” she murmured. “You humans.” She stood up and took a trio of leaves from her tree before plastering them to her body. “Better?”

“Uh-huh,” Jayce returned. She rolled her eyes and gave a spin, only for Astris to throw a huge and heavy coat over her shoulders. “Hey!” Gaea protested. “Tree rights to nudity!” she declared, before realising she quite liked the weight of the coat and slipped her arms through the sleeves. “Overruled!” Astris declared, the tips of her ears bright red. “The tattoos are nice,” Jayce stated, intercepting the conversation. They were mostly dark cyan swirls and otherwise didn’t seem to have any particular meaning. “Do you feel stronger?” Jayce asked. She stepped forwards towards him and placed her palms to his chest before pushing. He didn’t move an inch. “Gaea,” Tempest buzzed, somewhat endearingly. She turned and frowned. “Oh, right.”

She flicked her wrist towards Jayce and a huge spiked tendril of wood launched itself from the deck of the ship towards him. It was instantaneous, forming out of the planks and moving to strike him in the blink of an eye, and had it happened a month or two prior it may have been lethal. Jayce’s entire body tensed as his Focus kicked in, his entire body erupting in an invisible cyan flame. He ducked, used his forearm to block against the thorny surface, before he threw a fist into the side of the bendy tendril – directing it up and away from his fellow crewmates stood behind him.

He and the rest of the Rising Aces stood on the deck in shock, none more surprised than Gaea herself. “By the great woods, Jayce, I’m sorry. Are you okay?” she said quickly, stepping forwards and helping him from his limbo-esq position. “Yeah, fine. That’s... terrifying, Gaea. Um, be careful – please. Can you

do that anywhere on the ship?" he questioned. She nodded, beaming with pride. "Anywhere, I can also... feel everything more. Little Witch is with Caelie in their hole, Arthuria and Jeanne are... ooh, uhm, but yeah," she said flushing green. "I don't think I can reach far, but from anywhere on my skin I can strike! Huyah!" she declared, swinging her hands wildly and creating a kraken-like appearance on the outside of the Stacked Hand. Jayce flicked her forehead and they retracted. "I get it, thanks." She rubbed her forehead and pouted before returning to her meditative position. "Ooh there's marshmallows in the pockets!" Jayce heard her declare, as he turned away shaking his head. "Tempest, are we ready?" he asked. The djinn nodded. "Perfect. Set sail for the Devil's Gate!" Jayce commanded.

They approached the giant whirlpool, the crew tying anything and everything down before grabbing hold on the railings and each other as the ship entered the vortex. "Three laps!" Jayce called out, as he stood next to Bjorn at the helm. "Then take us in!" They circled the outside, lowering into the vortex – the ship tilting heavily. "See you inside!" Red declared, diving off the side straight down into the circle. There was a roar, a heavy thundering emerging from the main deck before Jayce heard a splash as the hull opened and then quickly closed as Taranis jumped ship as well. They looped again, the ship practically horizontal. "Onto the next!" Bjorn declared, glancing towards Jayce with a wide grin before he span the wheel. "For glory and adventure!" they both declared, the ship turning and diving straight down.

A gust of wind blew past them as they dove, the Stacked Hand picking up speed as it descended. The water ahead of them parted, splitting in all directions as they pierced through like a dart. Jayce and Bjorn both screamed with excitement and joy, the ride exhilarating and terrifying as they dove through the ocean before eventually the bow of the Stacked Hand began to lift and the ship levelled out, gravity returning to Jayce and his crew. "Woo!" Bjorn yelled, the deck surrounded by darkness in all directions. "We're alive!" he stated, cheers spreading across the deck. "That we are," Jayce acknowledged. "But just where are we?"

They furled up the sails, underwater they contributed nothing. "Do I steer?" Bjorn questioned to Jayce, his hands locked on the wheel. Jayce could hardly see him in the darkness, forcing him to activate the nearby lamp. "Uh, I think so. Why are you asking me?" Jayce returned. Bjorn glared at him before gesturing around. The ship was surrounded by a capsule of water, a constant gust of fresh and damp air pushing past their faces. The ocean walls were dark blue,

completely devoid of any light, but as Jayce entered into Focus he could sense and see the outline of life all around them.

"Jayce," Bjorn stated, tapping his shoulder and pointing to the starboard side. There was a glow in the darkness, a small glow of electric blue that quickly grew and spread before forming a skeletal outline of a reptilian creature. The bubble was breached, an axe-like head sticking itself into the air before taking in a deep breath. Taranis stared at the Rising Aces before diving back into the waters and swimming alongside, his flat tail moving like a whale's, and his glow a reassurance in the darkness. There was another splash and Red propelled himself out onto the deck in a spray of water. "Follow the current," he called out. "Just how the hell do I do that?" Bjorn questioned.

"Not you, Bjorn. Gaea. She is moving the ship," Red confirmed. Bjorn locked the wheel and let go. "Well fuck me then!" he exclaimed, stepping back and shaking his head. "Apologies, I thought it was obvious. It would be the role of the leading Mage, or otherwise we would have made a control disk to manage the enchantments," Red further added. Tempest folded his arms, thinking to himself. "I may just make one of those. I think I shall," he stated, floating away below deck. "Gaea, can you feel the current?" Red asked, approaching her on the main deck. "I... I think so. It's warm," she answered softly, her eyes shut. He nodded. "Yes. It is. Keep looking forwards, I will guide you to the nearest route." Red then ran to the edge and dove into the ocean. Gaea turned and looked up towards Jayce: a nervous expression immediately obvious. "You're doing fine," he reassured. She pushed out a weak smile before nodding and facing the bow.

"What's that?" Bjorn questioned, moments later. The ocean ahead of them held a glow. It was small, tiny but visible - as if far away. It was a golden colour, like a ray of sunlight, and, as they continued to dive through the ocean, it grew before moving aside. Jayce frowned, another dot was visible that soon stretched upwards. It continued to change, spreading out before forming a full circle ahead of them, and then in an instant the Stacked Hand entered the ring. "Woah..." came several unconscious gasps of awe from the crew as they found themselves diving through a spiral of golden light.

"Captain, it is the photoemitting creatures! I must procure a specimen!" Tempest buzzed, as they continued forwards. "Uh, are we able to stop?" Jayce questioned in return. "Is that permission, Captain?" Tempest asked. Jayce nodded. "Gaea, full stop," Tempest commanded. The ship lurched, the wind changing to a steady and loud hiss. The walls of the water shimmered, becoming clearer and fully

transparent, allowing Jayce to see out into the ocean. They were diving through a series of colossal stone rings, each decorated with clumps of green seaweed and large round orbs of glowing sponge.

Red swam closer to the Stacked Hand, remaining outside of its bubble with a clear expression of confusion. Tempest gestured towards the plants and sponges and the jiaoren nodded before propelling himself backwards to collect a sample. It was quite something to witness the ocean crawler swim. He glided through the ocean, propelled by bursts of water ejected from the back of his head. His head tails functioned in the same manner, but they acted as thrusters, allowing him to alter and change his trajectory. It was like a dance, like he was flying, and with the terrifying speed and manoeuvrability he had it was clear why ocean crawlers ruled the depths.

There was a splash and a sample was ejected onto the main deck. Tempest descended upon it like a hungry beast, holding the sponge aloft and looking at its bioluminescent sacs. "Falconer, I require you," he buzzed, into the communicator build into his armour, before descending below deck. "I would advise not remaining here," Red voiced, through his own communicator. "The ship is very bright, and there are predators that may be drawn to it." Jayce nodded, opening his mouth to give the command only for his hairs to stand on end. "Jayce..." Bjorn whispered, his eyes wide in terror as he stared straight past him. Jayce turned, a colossal head staring straight at him.

The leviathan looked almost like a Dragon, it was serpent-like with a monstrous head but also had two sets of four tentacles spaced along its long tail. It was a deep blue colour, and decorated in a thick carapace and membranous frills, periodically were spots of bright blue light – glowing lures that increased in number as it got closer to the monsters head. A singular large lure dangled in front of its countless eyes, its mouth perpetually open and filled with countless spiny teeth. It's many eyes were all a flat grey colour, as if it was blind – but Jayce could sense its gaze directly upon him. "Nobody move!" Jayce called out, the creature clearly uncertain as to what it was seeing.

It's head jerked to the side, the creature diving before reappearing on the other side of the Stacked Hand – its body so long that the majority of it was still floating in the water where it had been. There was a pitter patter of feet and from the main deck leapt Paimon, landing next to Jayce. She stood on the aft deck, staring at the creature with curiosity. "Paimon!" Jayce snapped in a whisper. The small

Demon bear glanced towards him. "But... Captain Exarga, this thing... feels familiar. It reeks of... home?" she questioned to herself, more than anything.

The leviathan gurgled, its screech rippling the bubble around the Stacked Hand. "Defend the ship!" Bjorn yelled, the creature pushing its head into the bubble and snarling at the crew. It lunged for Zeta on the main deck, only instead to crash into a shimmering barrier as Soteria leapt to Zeta's aid – the small Dragon roaring at the monstrosity. The leviathan roared back, this time unhindered by the change in density between the water and air. The crew of the Stacked Hand dropped to their knees, their ears threatening to rupture under the unnatural screech that was both deafening and like a grinding hiss.

A heavy stomping drew Jayce's attention to the stairs, Zhurong lunging out onto the deck his mouth half open. He spewed fire immediately, several of the smaller eyes of the leviathan popping under the sudden heat. The creature writhed before pushing through its pain and lunging for the Dragon. Another barrier blocked the lunge, and immediately a heavy and barbed tentacle burst out from the other side of the bubble, smashing into Soteria from behind and sending her rolling across the deck. Several more tentacles began to strike at crew across the deck.

Jayce lunged, darting from the aft deck with Sola and Luna each in the shape of a colossal greatsword. He swung, cutting open a deep gash before using the other to cleave straight through the opening. Purple ichor sprayed across the deck, the limb retracting, along with several others that other members of the Rising Aces had assaulted. The creature then turned, locking its gaze onto Jayce. It unhinged its jaw, pulling back and preparing to strike. Jayce combined Sola and Luna into a large spear, preparing to defend himself, but as the creature lunged it faltered.

There was a clear look of fear, the leviathan writhing in pain before quickly retracting back into the water. Amongst clouds of purple Jayce glimpsed flashes of red, as the Rising Ace did his job. The leviathan tried to flee but a large dark yet glowing form crashed into it, biting its neck. The pair disappeared in a cloud of darkness and then a singular form approached. With a splash and a wet thud, the head of the leviathan splattered on the deck – Taranis emerging from the waters with glee and joy as he descended upon his new feast. His teeth revved as he tore apart the monster's flesh in a gruesome display that painted the deck. "Well, at least we know we can defend ourselves," Jayce muttered, looking out to the floating corpse of the leviathan.

Seize the Seas Tales: Family

The journey upwards through the Dungeon felt like it was taking longer than the descent had. It was partially due to Damian's whining over his burns – most of which had been swiftly dealt with through alchemical solutions – but also with the waring reminder that they were going to have to come back and do it all over again. They had made it to floor sixty, and had beaten the floor boss, but there was no telling whether that meant anything. There could be sixty-one floors, eighty, a hundred... a thousand. They didn't know. Still, the more casual ascent gave a chance for a proper conversation. Conversation that most of the time could have been escaped.

"Morgause, please, I need to rest – I can't take anymore!" Sabine begged, one knee on the floor and her mace discarded. "The enemy will not give quarter, there will be no mercy from these artificial monstrosities," Morgause returned, her knuckles bound in cloth and her sword set aside. "Again! And fight like you mean to hurt me – I assure you, you won't," she commanded. Sabine was still a lump of clay – one that was far from moulded and crafted. Wicke had said that she needed more from her, and Morgause had every intention on making sure it happened. She didn't want Sabine to be left behind... not like she had been.

Sabine lunged and Morgause stepped to the side, the girl stumbling forwards before crashing to the ground on her own. "Morgause..." Sabine whimpered, trying to push off the ground only to collapse. Morgause sighed. "Fine..." "How do you do it? H-how do you push yourself so hard, and do it so easily?" Sabine questioned, tucking into a ball. Morgause looked down, looking at the callouses on her hands, the blood under her cracked nails, the bruises on her knuckles. "I..." She turned away and began to walk towards the camp. "Morgause?" Sabine called after her.

It had been that way from their first meeting. Morgause didn't talk about her past. They knew she had been a part of the Church. They knew she had sisters. But that was it. "I have nothing, Sabine," came an unusual response. "My sisters... left me a long time ago. My father abandoned me for my sisters. My mother has a new family – one that I wasn't really welcome within. My past is a mess, I just want a better future for myself. That's all," Morgause answered quietly, her face in clear pain.

Sabine nodded, forcing herself to her feet. "I-I get that. I know what you mean." Morgause turned to face her, folding her arms. Sabine in turn gestured to a large rock, limping over to it before sitting down. With a sigh, Morgause followed.

“We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” Sabine genuinely offered. “You’ll just ask again another time. What do you so desperately wish to know about me?”

“You said your Dad abandoned you for your sisters, how do you mean?” Sabine asked. “My father is... scum. I’m the product of an affair of an affair. He cheated on Arthuria’s mother with Morgana’s mother. And her with mine. I don’t know how but they all found out and for a bit of time we lived together. I was a baby, but I’ve seen the photos,” Morgause explained. Sabine nodded along. “It wasn’t long before it became unacceptable for Arthuria’s mother – the original. She demanded he choose. He chose her, and we were left behind.”

“Morgana and I grew up as sisters, but Morgana’s mother was unwell and when she died Morgana left me behind. My mother married and... well. I wasn’t wanted anymore. I went back to visit after the collapse of the Church, but... she was happy without me. My sisters are my real family, I know they are. They... they... they have to be,” she said almost in a whimper, her body shaking as she relived her past. “I’m sorry,” Sabine stated, snapping Morgause out of it. “Yeah, whatever... Go on then, why is person like you doing this?” she asked in turn.

“Um, well... my mother left me when I was young, but I still had my dad. He was... old, but kind,” Sabine said quietly. Morgause nodded, leaning back and looking up at the ceiling. “Was?” she questioned. Sabine nodded, looking over towards the nearby camp. “I’ve come to find my mother. I know she’s out there somewhere. I know nothing about her, I have no photos or names, but my dad said she was a doctor. I’m going to find her and ask her why she abandoned me.”

Morgause chuckled and Sabine looked at her. “Then I guess we’re basically the same: both failures of a marriage, both looking for the families we still have.” “I guess we are. Ooh, we’re just liked sisters – you and me,” Sabine suggested. “Don’t push it,” Morgause returned, a small smile on her face.

Chapter 187: Several Leagues Under the Sea

Bjorn let out a long yawn as he carefully slid out from his bed. Marisha lay spawled diagonally across it, her duvet bundled mostly by her feet whilst his was neatly spread across his side of their bed. He smiled slightly as he lay his duvet across her back before turning towards their window. It was the same view as it had been for the last two-and-a-half weeks: a blur of water flooding past the outside of the Stacked Hand, as they continued to dive deep beneath the ocean in a roughly eastern direction.

The clock said it was morning, but at the depths they were diving it was almost impossible to tell without standing on the main deck and looking upwards. He dressed and stepped outside of his and Marisha's quarters, his head pounding – as it had done for some time now – likely due to the pressure and the lack of sunlight. He shook it off, it was minor and nothing worth worrying about, heading upwards to the main deck.

Immediately a wave of light forced him to shut his eyes. He held them closed and then eased them open as he slowly stepped out into the open. A cloud of golden spores decorated the deck, floating out of the branches of Gaea's tree. They were bright, like tiny jellyfish that glided on the ever-present wind that flowed from the bow to the stern. Additionally, hanging inside glass bowls were several cultivated sponges, painting areas of the ship in bright light. The deck was practically empty, with only Falconer on watch by the helm and Zeta strumming a guitar as she sat underneath Gaea's tree with the sleeping dryad's head in her lap. "Morning," she said quietly.

The journey took a heavy toll on Gaea, and even when she was sleeping she was still steering the ship. She kept them following the currents, kept them on the right path, and when predators and monsters came too close she was often the first to defend the ship. "Morning," Bjorn returned. "Anything to report?" he questioned. Zeta shook her head, letting out a large yawn. "All quiet," she stated, leaning back and shutting her eyes. Bjorn approached the helm, Falconer glancing up at him from his science-fiction book. "Get some sleep," Bjorn ordered. Falconer nodded, getting to his feet and wandering off. Bjorn then took his seat, getting comfy as he waited for the rest of the crew to wake up.

A cold feeling drew his attention down to the main deck, forcing Bjorn to his feet as an immediate feeling of panic spread through his mind. He heard a scream – a voice he recognised. Without hesitation, Bjorn surged forwards, racing back to his room only to find the door propped open. A heavy stench of blood floated on

the air and Bjorn charged inside. He fell to his knees, unable to speak, unable to scream as he held Marisha's corpse in his arms. A cold blade rested itself on his shoulder, someone stood behind him. "Bjorn," Jayce stated.

"Bjorn?" Jayce questioned again, the Quartermaster zoned out as he sat in a chair watching the ship. Bjorn turned and looked at him, his eyes wide and in a panic. He then stood up and lunged for Jayce, who quickly stepped back and caught his wrist. "Bjorn?" Jayce said a bit more forcefully, the vacant expression clearing and his Quartermaster returning. "Jayce?" he questioned, quickly pulling his hand back. "Yeah, you okay?"

Bjorn cleared his throat and stepped away. "Yeah, fine," he said coldly, an expression of anger on his face and his eyes glancing nervously in Jayce's direction. "Headache?" Jayce questioned, as Bjorn rubbed his forehead. The therian shook his head. "It's nothing, I'm fine!" Bjorn snapped. Jayce opened his mouth to speak and then faltered, deciding against it. "Okay, sure. Um, well, morning anyway. Anything to report?" Jayce questioned. Bjorn shook his head, folding his arms and turning away. "Right..."

Jayce left him to it, heading below deck straight to Tempest's forge. The sound of hammering was audible all along the corridor and, paired with the metal golems guarding the hallways, it created quite an intimidating effect, even to Jayce. The heat was extreme as he entered the workshop, the forge in full effect, but to his surprise Jayce found Tempest not alone. "Morning Jayce," Morgana stated, a durable jumpsuit tied at her waist, her tattooed upper body covered in a simple black bra. "Uh, morning. What are you doing here so early?" he questioned, glancing past the pair to the suit of armour spread across the workbench. "Well, uh, Tempest asked for some help and I've - for the most part -" she said yawning, "lost track of time. So, I was up and stayed up I guess," Morgana answered, dark circles around her golden eyes. "I see," Jayce returned.

"How is the... work coming?" Jayce then asked, looking towards Tempest. The djinn gestured around his workshop where numerous other suits of armour sat on stands. They each belonged to other members of the crew, all designed to fit them perfectly whilst also representing them through Tempest's eyes. Jayce drew his attention towards Morgana's, the helmet designed like a Witch's hat. "They are finished," Tempest stated. "But there is still work to be done. I am hopeful that they will function as intended, but - until someone is brave enough to step outside - I do know whether they fulfil their purpose."

Jayce nodded, glancing to his own suit of armour, a crown built into the round helmet. Finding a volunteer willing to step outside into the depths was not going to be an easy task. Between the pressure, the weight of the suits, and the general danger of sea monsters, it was a hard sell to anyone. "Finish them and I'll... test my suit – when we find a suitable spot to stop that is relatively safe," he stated, with an added and clear condition. "Very good, Captain," Tempest returned, continuing to etch runes into the armour before hammering away with Xander's hammer. "Are we sure it will work?" Jayce questioned more quietly to Morgana. "Should be fine," she said, with a soft, but not certain, smile.

It was several hours later that Jayce was summoned to the main deck. "What's up?" he questioned, wiping the sweat from his brow before faltering as he noticed that they had stopped. "Well, if I didn't know any better, I would say we have arrived at a destination," Bjorn stated, as he stood at the edge of the ship. Jayce approached, looking around. They were floating in the middle of a giant expanse of open ocean within a colossal crater, the walls high and dark, yet covered in foliage. But it wasn't the crater itself that drew Jayce's attention, the waters were bright and clear, the sunlight descending down upon them from above, and beneath them was a city.

At least it looked like a city. There was a clear, white palace of sorts, placed at the edge of the crater and against the stone wall. It was quite colourful, with patterned rooftops made of a golden shell that from the distance looked emerald in colour. It featured multiple high towers, each open with entrances at the top rather than the bottom, and connecting covered walkways that were held up by pillars and also completely open. There was no visible glass, instead the windows were completely hollow. Sat below and surrounding it were round, stone houses, packed closely together before spreading outwards, eventually separating into - what looked like - farms, each with large fields of seaweed and unusual crops. There was cracks in the crater wall, canyons that were lit and clearly led elsewhere – likely to nearby villages.

Almost immediately, several jiaoren came to investigate, surrounding the ship in all directions whilst holding a variety of weapons. With a splash, Red descended onto the main deck. "It's probably for the best that we move on, Captain," Red said, with a little panic on his voice. "Why?" Jayce questioned, only for several large shadows to smother the light of the Stacked Hand. "By the ancestors," Bjorn muttered, the crew staring up at no less than three krakens. The colossal octopi stared down at the ship. "Keep the Dragons below deck," Jayce ordered through his communicator, his instincts telling him that the krakens weren't their biggest

concern, that the real threat was the purple jiaoren in the middle of them. "Ura Soruk," Jayce realised, staring up at the jiaoren Betrayer as she gestured for the krakens to surround the ship. "The Despoiler," Red hissed.

With a spray of water, Ura Soruk descended, dropping to the main deck with a heavy thud. She towered over Jayce, using her multiple headtails to stand as tall as she could. "Exarga," she gargled, her voice translating through his communicator. "Why have you come to my territory?" she questioned, leaning close to him whilst glancing towards Red. "An accident, I assure you," Jayce returned. "We're simply exploring on our way to the Revelry."

She didn't look too happy with the answer, her blank green eyes boring into him. "Right..." she stated, leaning back and folding her arms. "I assure your safety for the moment, a conversation will be had within my palace. You may trade and stay, but I expect your presence – either through an emissary or yourself – within an hour," she declared, talking directly towards Red. She looked almost identical to him, only purple and with multiple frills around her neck and waist. "Fine," Jayce started. She looked back at him and then nodded, darting to the edge of the ship before diving into the waters – her krakens following after her before beginning to circle around the palace. The other jiaoren departed, leaving the Stacked Hand alone.

"Well, this is a mess," Bjorn stated. Jayce glared at him before sighing and shaking his head. "Agreed," Jayce admitted, approaching the side of the ship and looking down towards the city. He frowned, spotting several fast moving objects moving away from the city. They looked like versions of the flyers that the Guild deployed, only more ray shaped. The submersibles drove upwards, others coming down in their stead, likely carrying cargo. "The Guild are here," Jayce stated towards Bjorn. "Makes sense, a customer is a customer," he returned. "Can you stock up here?" Jayce questioned. Bjorn shrugged before nodding. "Worth a shot, why not?"

Jayce turned to his gathered crew. "Caelie, Tempest, Red and I will meet with Ura Soruk. Bjorn, Marisha and Astris will attempt to resupply the ship. The rest of you stay here. Feel free to take a dip in your armour, but don't stray far from the ship. I don't trust that Betrayer and this feels like a trap, be ready to leave at a moment's notice. I don't want to face those krakens and however many more monsters she has in reserve." The crew nodded, splitting up and gathering anything they thought they might need.

Tempest led Jayce, Caelie, Bjorn, Marisha and Astris to his workshop, pointing out their armours before helping them to put it on and then ensuring that the armour was sealed and on properly. "I can breathe?" Bjorn questioned, in slight disbelief. "I have built filters into the suit, as well as connections to extradimensional space. The air is fresh and will be continuous, provided the ship is not destroyed," Tempest clarified. Jayce moved his head around, testing the range of motion and being pleasantly surprised by the armour's manoeuvrability. "There are runes on the bracers that should provide extra functions for in the water. You should be adequately protected."

Jayce didn't like the word 'should', but he had little choice in the matter and he knew it. He and the others made their way back up to the main deck before approaching the edge of the ship where Red was waiting. "Who's going first?" Astris questioned, all of them nervous about the prospect of diving. Caelie shrugged and stepped next to Jayce, taking his hand with her gauntlet and then leaning forward, pulling them both overboard.

Jayce shut his eyes as he passed through the bubble, emerging into a wet environment that felt cold at first and then surprisingly warm. He felt dry, at least he thought he did, it was hard to tell as he opened his eyes and looked through the T-shaped visor in his helmet. Caelie swam up and in front of him, her bird-like armour had been altered in the water: the feather adornments replaced with blue fins. The feet had been lengthened and turned into flippers, and her gauntlets were webbed. She tested her movements, swimming around in a dance-like movement before disappearing through a portal and reappearing next to Jayce. She took his hand, turning over his gauntlet before pointing to a series of runes on the underside of his bracer. He pressed it, his armour changing to mirror hers and immediately feeling lighter in the water.

"Jayce, you alive?" came Astris' voice through his communicator. He turned to see Bjorn and the others in the water. "Yeah, all good," he returned, turning to face Red. "Captain, is it wise to bring Tempest along? My kind may view him as a threat, without effort he is a danger to those nearby – including myself," Red stated. "Exactly why I want him along. A show of force and a source of protection if needed," Jayce stated. Red didn't look too happy about the idea but he gave no further complaint, instead swimming ahead in the direction of the palace.

"Good luck," Marisha stated, swimming off in a different direction with Bjorn and Astris as they approached the city. The swim had taken a considerable length of time, the distance to the Stacked Hand not minor and the ship tiny in the

distance. Countless jiaoren had come out to stare, most of them looking towards Red who they bowed to or otherwise seemed to adore. Tempest floated alongside Jayce, his presence uncomfortable and the water itchy from his electricity. He carried an orb in one gauntlet, something that Tempest had reassured would limit the transference from himself, not only for his own safety but everyone else's.

They swam along the main road, approaching the palace that was much larger than Jayce had initially thought. Several armoured guards wielding tridents stared at them, but they made no moves to intercept, instead gesturing to a central entranceway on one of the towers. Caelie had other plans, already long fed up with the swim, she instead created a portal - connecting the other end to a room she saw through a window. Jayce passed through it, emerging inside the palace inside a large hall.

"I'm looking for the Betrayer!" Jayce declared, as several guards immediately descended upon him and the others. They pointed their weapons at him and he glared them down. "Cease!" commanded a voice from somewhere behind, the water rippling as a wave of Panic pushed through it. The guards backed off, bowing to a singular jiaoren on approach. "Who are you?" Jayce questioned, looking at a blue ocean crawler decorated in a red armour with matching eyes. He looked young, but it was hard to tell - he was the size of Red, if maybe a little bigger. A pair of swords were attached to his waist and Jayce got the immediate sense that he knew how to use them and use them well under water.

"Ningyo!" commanded a cold voice from further back. Jayce glanced past the blue ocean crawler to a set of open doors leading to a throne room. Ura Soruk floated in the waters beyond. "Follow me, Pirate Lord," said Ningyo coldly, Jayce's senses immediately alerting him of danger. The blue jiaoren swam forwards, Jayce and his group following closely behind. They entered the throne room, the entire area distinctly beautiful and carved more than decorated. Unlike the surface there weren't tapestries or paintings as such, instead there were built in mosaics and sculptures, most of which depicted battles between Ura Soruk and another ocean crawler. Trophies sat on pedestals, mostly weapons, and even a severed ocean crawler head mounted on a wall above the throne.

"I will take my leave," Ningyo attempted, bowing to Ura as she rose from her throne. "No, you shall not," she commanded, much to his clear irritation. "You will wait here with Exarga, whilst I have a conversation with his pet," she stated, pointing at Red and then gesturing upwards. She swam, heading to a chamber

in the roof of the room. Jayce couldn't help but be bemused by the architecture, even if he was annoyed that he was being ordered around. "So... Ningyo, what do you do for a living?" Jayce attempted, the jiaoren glaring at him.

"Prince Chalakon Lorre of the Crushing Core Clan," Ura stated immediately, the pair of them floating in a round circular room with a drinks case built into the roof. She floated up, taking out a small round sphere filled with brown liquid. It was soft in her hands, squishy and somewhat hard. There were multiple and she passed one to Red. "You know me?" he questioned, taking it and biting it before sucking out the fluid – it was a strong liquor that burned. She instead placed the orb into her mouth and crushed it. "I do. I know your family well, which is why I am most surprised to see you of all people here, with them. With that Pirate Lord."

"My business is my own, and is not for your knowledge," Red snarled, folding his arms. "Is it not? How unusual, I was under the pretence that everything under the seas was mine. Gifted to me by my lady, the Sea Sovereign herself. And as such, the details of an enslaved Prince owing his life to an islander, of all creatures, to me seems... like it is my business. Now your father blamed me for your capture, he even insisted that I was the cause of your death," she goaded.

"Personally I found it amusing. I had warned that your habits of engaging with the surface would get you into trouble, but I find it even more amusing that rather than accept the dishonour and just go home you instead thought that a life-debt to a Pirate Lord would be better for you. And Exarga of all Pirate Lords at that," she chided. "Do not dishonour him, Exarga is an honourable human who I owe much to," Red snapped, pointing at her.

"Indeed," she returned, taking his hand and bending his finger back into his fist, but keeping hold of it in her hands. "Kill him for me," she stated coldly, staring deeply into his eyes. He looked away. She was fearsome creature, older than him by at least a few years, but immensely beautiful and terrifying to boot. She leant closer. "Do it and I will be yours," she tempted. "We could rule it all, together." He took his hand back and there was a clear expression of disappointment. "You are the Despoiler for a reason," Red snarled. "A Witch! A temptress!" he declared. "Cutting words for a Prince without a home. Rid the seas of the Rising Aces, they will be the downfall of not only you, but your home as well. Seize this chance, this opportunity to turn the world upside down and make the surface fear the waters once more. I will not ask again," Ura Soruk stated, her hand reaching out

towards him. "No," Red stated, turning and swimming down back into the throne room.

"I only have need for one Prince," Ura stated, as Red rejoined Jayce and the others. "What in the abyss did you discuss?" Jayce questioned, turning to Red. "Ningyo, Chalakon abandoned his home, his people. That's why I came here, because of him," Ura stated, with a wide grin. Red turned to the blue jiaoren, his eyes wide as he shook his head. "No," Red stated. "That's not true." Ningyo drew his swords. "You're the reason for all of this!" he roared. "You doomed my home!"

Ningyo lunged at Red, who drew his own sword to defend himself, the pair darting around the room and striking at each other with their swords. "Ura, enough of this!" Jayce declared, willing Sola into a trident. The Betrayer grinned. "Indeed, enough games!" she declared, opening her mouth and letting out a screech that rippled the waters. "Captain, big problem," came Wam's voice immediately afterwards. "Krakens incoming!"

Jayce swam forwards towards Ura with his trident, but she easily backed off. "You will not touch me in my domain. But I like my prey to have a fighting chance. Die with your crew," she stated, swimming away before he could do anything. Jayce turned towards Caelie. "Portal us out of here," he ordered. She nodded, conjuring a portal to the outside. Jayce then turned to Red, a cloud of purple blood stemming from his side as he desperately avoided the blue ocean crawler. "Red!" Jayce yelled, drawing his attention towards the portal.

"I cannot flee!" Red roared back, swinging wildly only the strike to be blocked and a large cut to be drawn across his chest. "You've lost, accept it. I'm ordering you through that portal!" Jayce commanded, Caelie darting through the blue swirl. Red darted backwards, his face in clear pain, both at his loss and his injuries as he charged through the portal. Ningyo then turned towards Jayce, a snarl on his face. "You asked my profession, Exarga – I am the one that will take your throne, take your head and use that position to cleanse this world of the Despoiler. I will free my people--"

"Do you really need my head for that? Couldn't you just do that anyway without killing me?" Jayce questioned. Ningyo roared and charged towards him, but Jayce just darted through the portal, leaving only Tempest behind. "Oops," the djinn stated, tossing the orb in his hand through the portal before unleashing an underwater storm of lightning. Ningyo screamed in agony as the djinn departed, the portal closing behind him.

“All good?” Jayce questioned to Tempest, as he threw back the orb to him. Tempest nodded. “I believe so, but I doubt it will be enough to kill him. That child seemed... stubborn.” Jayce nodded, turning and looking to the expanse ahead of him, the Stacked Hand in chaos. The krakens had descended upon the ship. One was locked in battle with Taranis, the Dragon tearing the monster apart one tentacle at a time, whilst electrifying the waters around him. Gaea had warped the hull into a wall of barbs, tentacles of her own striking out at the krakens, whilst the Rising Aces fought from inside the bubble and out. “Caelie, get us close,” Jayce commanded. She conjured another portal and stepped through. “Tempest, protect the ship. Red, heal up and then fight – that’s a command,” Jayce ordered, the pair nodding and following through the portal.

Jayce began to swim towards it himself, his thoughts racing as he questioned their best move. His body then tensed on its own, something impacting him hard from the side and dragging him quickly down towards the ocean floor. Jayce turned, trying to kick free of the grip around his waist. The blue jiaoren, Ningyo, had grappled him – his body scorched and face furious. Jayce tried to swing a fist, but it was slow in the water and seemed to do nothing.

Ningyo slammed Jayce’s body into the ocean floor, backing off quickly and drawing his swords as Jayce groaned and pushed himself back upright. A cloud of sand surrounded him, the ocean crawler circling like a shark. “We don’t have to do this!” Jayce yelled out, glancing towards the Stacked Hand as more sea monsters emerged to fight. “I think you do,” Ura stated, swimming down from above with a smug grin on her face. “Stay out of this Despoiler, his head is mine for the taking and then I will come for you!” Ningyo roared. Ura cackled, before forcing a cold and steely expression. “How terrifying,” she said softly, a duo of leviathans swimming over to observe. “But I appreciate the sentiment.”

“Ura, leave my crew alone!” Jayce declared, commanding Sola and Luna into a pair of curved daggers whilst taking a defensive stance and following Ningyo’s movements. “No,” she answered coldly. “Get on with it, Ningyo, kill him.” “Jayce, where are you?” came Astris’ voice through his communicator. Ningyo darted towards him like a bullet and Jayce blocked a strike with his blade before the other sword raked itself across his chest. Jayce felt the impact, it was heavy but his armour protected him. “Ocean floor, bit of trouble,” Jayce answered, desperately blocking another lunge, his movement throwing up sand as he twisted around.

"We're coming, hold on," Astris returned. Jayce didn't like that, he only stood a chance because he was fighting on the floor and that limited the ocean crawlers attack angles. The swim to the Stacked Hand would be lethal, no matter how close it was. Jayce grit his teeth as he felt a blade find a gap in his armour. The wound was small but it was a wound. It wouldn't take long for Ningyo to realise he only had to take off Jayce's helmet to win.

The jiaoren circled once again and Jayce kicked off the ground, throwing up more sand. His eyes then widened as the jiaoren lunged, swinging not only his blades but also his pointed headtails for a multiple strikes. Jayce commanded Sola and Luna to form shields, defending himself from the strikes before pushing back against the jiaoren who circled around for another attack. Jayce waited, watching his foe as the Stacked Hand dove closer.

Ningyo surged and Jayce threw up a wave of sand, combining Sola and Luna into a spear that immediately punctured straight through the stomach of the jiaoren who was unable to see the trap. Ningyo hung there, his eyes wide in shock as he hung on the spear. He then snarled and swung with his swords, but Jayce retracted the spear, splitting it back into two daggers – one of which he raked across Ningyo's face, the other cutting straight through a headtail that had tried to strike him. The jiaoren screeched in agony, pulling back in a trail of purple blood.

He then surged forwards again, but a Red blur tackled him from the sides, this time armed to the teeth. "Cowards! bastards!" Ningyo cried, backing away. "Count your days, I will strike again when you least expect it!" he warned. "I doubt it!" Jayce goaded back, Red grabbing his waist and then propelling them both through the crowd of sea monsters straight on the deck of the Stacked Hand. "Get us out of here!" Jayce yelled, ensuring all crew were aboard before they began to flee for any of the other canyons. "We can't lose Taranis!" Ordo declared. A huge splash and a wailing screech drew all eyes to the main deck as the giant Dragon dragged a still-living kraken onto the main deck.

He then revved, lifting his head up before biting down, the numerous tentacles writhing before falling still. Taranis pulled his head out of the corpse, shaking blood and gore in all directions. "Great mother," came a voice next to Jayce, Belial standing in Caelie's stead. "The monster... it smells of home. That thing is from the abyss."

Seize the Seas Tales: A New Depth

“What floor are we on?” Sabine questioned, as she lay on the floor in a daze, her face cut and bleeding. Damian roared, throwing a heavy fist up and through the jaw of the final giant, armoured skeleton – one of a more than a dozen death knights that had ambushed them. Each skeleton had felt like a floor boss of their own, each capable of fighting without fatigue and lapse in skill, and each of them coordinating with each other in order to pincer and crush the group. Yet they’d survived, if only just – numerous large magic stones littering the ground around them. “Floor 71,” Wicke confirmed, adding the stones to her collection. “We’re heading back up. We’re nearly there, I’m certain of it.”

Chapter 188: Touch of Corruption

Several hours had passed since the Rising Aces' encounter with the Betrayer Ura Soruk and the vengeful prince Ningyo. They had hardly stopped moving since, keeping to the currents and diving further and further through the ocean. Jayce was almost certain they weren't being followed. Ningyo's threat of a further attack was almost definitely something that would not occur for some time – Jayce was at the very least confident the injuries the jiaoren had obtained would hold him off for at least a good while. Instead he turned his attention inwards.

"What do you mean the krakens and leviathans smell of your home?" Jayce questioned, pulling the four Demons together for an interrogation, alongside Yuthura, Astris, Bjorn and Morgana. Baal turned away, his host's arms folded and his expression showing clear disinterest as he manifested himself through Mai Lu. Asmodeus held a similar stance, although the large Demon bat couldn't quite manifest the expression as clearly, and paired with his diminished size it didn't make nearly as much of an impression to Jayce and the others.

"I meant what I said, Captain," Belial said with a bit more effort, likely pushed on by Caelie from within. "Those... monstrosities... they smell of home – our actual home." There was a somewhat simultaneous shudder from all four of the Demons. "And that's a bad thing?" Morgana questioned. Paimon nodded vigorously, the small bear rather bemusing. "In human terms: it's literal hell. There's a reason why we Demons took the Heavens as our prize when we exiled the Angels," she answered, the Demon bear most likely of the group to be helpful in Jayce's eyes. "Hang on, are you saying these things are Demons too?" Astris questioned.

There were a mixture of headshakes and nods, some of which changed upon seeing the opinions of the others. "Helpful," Yuthura muttered, tapping her cane loudly to recover the Demons' attention. "Apologies, Doctor," Paimon led. "We don't really know... and the topic is... sensitive in our eyes." Jayce folded his arms. "How so?" he questioned bluntly, pressing for a more definitive answer. "Exarga, please may we not continue this?" Belial requested.

There was a loud and exaggerated sigh from Baal who immediately vanished, replaced by Mai Lu. "Baal and the other Demons are afraid of the Abyss," she answered more definitively. "They're afraid because when they die, or if they lose connection to this world and go back there, they will be consumed by their mother: the progenitor of all Demons, and most likely these sea monsters as well."

"Huh," uttered Jayce, nodding in plain understanding. "So... there's a mega-Demon that's your mother?" he asked. The Demons nodded. "What does she look like?" he followed up with, drawing expressions of horror and disgust. "You do not want to know..." Asmodeus answered, a flurry of curious ideas rushing through Jayce's mind. "Picture a termite queen with tentacles, a chitinous hide and lots of teeth and horns, with a voracious appetite for her own children and a cruel attitude to simple existence. There's a reason all Demons fled her," Paimon answered.

Astris and Bjorn shared a glance, the pair of them silently acknowledging a shared disinterest in ever encountering it. "I think I get the idea. So how are these sea monsters escaping the Abyss?" Jayce questioned. The group shrugged. "We've already seen a portal to Heaven, is it too farfetched to believe there could be one to the other side?" Yuthura proposed. Jayce pondered for a moment. "I suppose the jiaoren would know. Could be worth asking them?" he suggested. "We've kind of burnt that bridge as of today," Astris reminded. "Besides, to what end? This doesn't help us with the Revelry." Jayce couldn't help but agree. "Fair enough."

The crew fell back into their travel routine. Bjorn and Marisha had been successful collecting supplies from the jiaoren city and the Guild representatives there, and the fresh food and cargo certainly helped to improve the mood amongst the crew. But it became clear to Jayce, as time went on, just how much the claustrophobic and dark environment of the ocean was taking a toll on the crew and, before long, a clear breaking point emerged.

"By the gods," Jayce muttered, staring at Bjorn as he shuddered within the living quarters with a jug of coffee in his hands. "Go away!" Bjorn growled, his eyes sunken and rabid in both human and therian form. He was curled into himself, hunched over and feral. "You've not been sleeping, you need rest," Marisha inserted cautiously from the kitchen. "No!" Bjorn snapped. "I'm fine." Jayce and Marisha glanced at each other.

"What was that?" Bjorn demanded, getting to his feet and throwing the metal container at Jayce. The coffee burned, but Jayce ignored it. "You're conspiring against me? You-you-you've be-betrayed me?" Bjorn half-growled, half-whimpered in Marisha's direction. "You're against me! Both of you!" Jayce held up his hands, Sola and Luna dripping off his wrists onto the table under his telepathic command. "No one is against you," Jayce eased, circling around

towards the sofas and sitting down. "Let's talk it out. Me and you, buddy – just us," Jayce attempted.

"He's tricking us," whispered a voice in the back of Bjorn's mind. "He's waiting to toss you aside, to bury you in this damned sea."

Bjorn turned away. "No! I won't fall for your tricks! You're a liar!" he roared. The door to the living quarters opened, Astris and Ordo peering inside. "You're all against me!" Bjorn roared, picking up a chair and throwing it at the door – the chair and door breaking on impact. Astris and Ordo both stepped inside, glancing towards Jayce and Marisha for advice. "Leave us," Jayce said softly, gesturing with his hand for the pair to remain nearby.

"He's betrayed us, he's waiting for the Revelry to toss us aside," continued the whispers, the woman's voice cold and pressing and growing louder by the moment. "He'll doom us all. Your wife, your boys, your tribe – they'll all die at his hands. We can't beat the Sovereign, it's doom!"

Bjorn grabbed his head. "Let me think!" he growled, Marisha rushing forwards to grab his hands. "Hey," she said softly. Bjorn snapped his gaze onto her, his therian form melting away. "He's going to get us killed, we can't beat the Sovereign," he whispered, his voice breaking and eyes tearful. "No, he won't. We're safe, we're all safe, and Jayce has a plan. The Captain always has a plan," she soothed. He shook his head, pulling back and away, before he turned on Jayce and turned back into his bear form.

"Sit," Jayce commanded, putting Panic into his voice. Marisha turned her head towards him, her eye wide and questioning his action. "We'll be fine, check on the boys," Jayce stated. If he couldn't sort it without her then whatever was going on would only continue. The Beastly Boys had drawn Jayce's attention to Bjorn, and in the process Bjorn had nearly killed them. "But," Marisha attempted. Jayce shook his head, saying nothing further. She met Bjorn's gaze, and forced herself away, his hands – that had been clutching onto her arms - trailing after her as she walked away with tears in her eyes. "Don't leave me..."

"He's going to kill you..."

"Bjorn!" Jayce said assertively, remaining relaxed in his seat on the sofa. The therian turned towards him, his expression flitting between terror, rage, and confusion. "Sit, please," he offered, gesturing to the seat opposite him, his arm red from the hot coffee. Bjorn faltered, glancing towards the broken door and the

seat opposite Jayce – his eyes cold and menacing, shadows covering his face and a... a soft smile that broke through it all.

Bjorn sat, holding his head in his hands as the voices continued to bombard him from inside and out. “Ask me anything you need to know the answers to. What’s bothering you, Bjorn?” Jayce offered, remaining with his arms spread and his body vulnerable as he maintained his gaze on Bjorn. “I-I...” Bjorn trailed off. “It’s the Revelry, isn’t it? That’s what’s bothering you?” Jayce questioned. There was a pause as Bjorn let the words sink in, tears silently dripping to the floor. “We can’t win...”

“Bjorn, that’s not true. You know it’s not true. We’ve already got the seat, we just need to hold it – and that’s how it was before,” Jayce returned. Bjorn shook his head. “No, not that... Vexx... the Sovereign...” he said with a hushed whisper, glancing around as if to check no one was listening – a barrage of images from his nightmares warping his vision. Countless bodies of his friends and family filled his mind, their corpses grotesque and brutalised in a montage of violent ends. In some he saw Jayce doing the deed himself, his already scarred form turned into some monstrous marauder kneeling before the Sea Sovereign herself.

He flinched as he felt the sofa shift. Jayce sat next to him and somewhat mirroring his hunched over form, only with his hands clasped rather than on his head. “There is time... lots of time, before we need to worry about Vexx and Scáthach. I will do everything I can to bring him home without a fight, but if we do need to defeat her then we will, and we can – I know it.” Bjorn looked at him. “What if we can’t?” he whispered.

“Then I will do everything to protect this crew - you included, big guy. I won’t let anything happen to you, or Marisha, or anyone else. We will get stronger, all of us, and we will face the Sea Sovereign and the Betrayers together,” Jayce reassured. Bjorn looked down at his hands. “Wh-what if I fall behind? I’m not like everyone else – not like you.” Jayce pat Bjorn’s shoulder, a single gesture that shocked Bjorn. “You steer the ship, command the crew, you do a far better job than I ever could. You’ll never fall behind, I’m still desperately trying to catch up to you. To stand proudly alongside you, and be the Captain you deserve.”

The whispers began to soften.

“What if we lose?” Bjorn questioned. “What if the Revelry is a trap?” he asked. “Should we pull out? Head home? We can do so - it’s not too late,” Jayce offered, genuinely. “Say the word and we’ll go home. We’ll find Wicke and leave the

Sovereign for the rest of the world to deal with. I trust no one more than you to tell me we're not cut out for a fight. I will always punch up, but you see the world in a more grounded way than I do. Should we throw in the towel?" Jayce questioned.

Bjorn looked down at his hands, the voices gone. He concentrated, willing a cold feeling across his palms. Tiny shards of ice began to form, that he promptly crushed. "We'll be fine... most likely," he answered, forcing a smile and turning to look at Jayce. The darkness around his eyes had vanished and he looked healthier than he had. Jayce nodded, standing up by pushing down on Bjorn's shoulder. "Then we carry on, but - as always Bjorn - tell me when I'm leading us astray. Talk to me, I'm here for you as I know you are for me, my friend."

Jayce stepped outside, his nervous crew waiting for him. "He's fine. Morgana, Marisha, Yuthura - a moment, please," Jayce commanded, stepping aside. The trio looked at him. "Someone cursed him, I don't have proof, but I can feel it. That wasn't Bjorn behaviour. Marisha, does he have any new items?" he questioned. She shook his head. "Nothing that makes me think it was cursed," she answered. "I want a full check-up on everyone," Jayce ordered. "Morgana-" She held up her hands and nodded. "Yeah, yeah, I'll do what I can to find and eradicate the source. But Jayce, if it was a curse - I'd have noticed. If it's magical and not just a nervous breakdown - no offence - there'd be more signs. Magic has rules, it doesn't just..." Morgana stated, trailing off as she and Jayce both turned and looked towards the Demons. "It's Demonic magic," they both realised. "Someone with a Demon cursed Bjorn at some point."

It was as if a switch had been flicked, the old Bjorn returned almost immediately, along with a considerable feeling of guilt about his behaviour, but the incident had opened Jayce's eyes to a new and unknown threat. Someone had messed with Bjorn, and from Morgana's estimates pretty much the entire crew had been modified with the same magic - yet Bjorn had been the only one affected. To Jayce that screamed that he had been targeted, someone had targeted the person closest to him.

Jayce braced himself as the light above the ship grew brighter and brighter, the Stacked Hand rapidly rising from the depths - before, with a loud crash and a heavy splash, the ship burst out of the ocean back to the surface. "Oh my gods, that feels good!" groaned Zeta, immediately laying down in the sunlight. "Sun, fresh air - real fresh air - birds!" she cried. Astris hissed as she darted for cover, stepping inside Jayce's quarters to put on her hat. The light hadn't hurt her as

much underwater and she had taken the chance to ease back on her blood consumption – clearly an error on her part as she emerged sipping a blood pouch.

“We have two months to the Revelry, and, if I’m not mistaken, that’s part of the southern continent over there,” Astris stated, pointing ahead to a mass of land covered in white buildings. “So, what’s the plan, Captain?” Bjorn questioned. Jayce smiled. “Let’s first find out what we missed,” he stated, conscious of the isolation they had experienced underwater. “Then set a heading for Diasta’s Capital: Novalis.”

Jayce was relieved by the absence of news on Alara and her fleet. The papers mentioned mysterious attacks that occurred across the Old World – one of the more recent ones taking place in Novalis itself. But it was the somewhat consistent mentions of Jayce’s own name that drew most of his attention. The bounties placed on his crew had been raised again. The leading value coming from someone called the Machinist. “Let’s pay them a visit,” Jayce suggested. “About time we had some action,” Astris stated, checking the chambers of her pistols.

Novalis came into view several days later, after sailing through a maze of wandering islands that drew the most intrigue from RK-227 of all crew members. The rokken was clearly enamoured by his ancient kin, but it was hard to tell whether that was because he wanted to eat them or because he was impressed by them. It did raise multiple queries as to just how big he would continue to grow with the food they were giving him. He was already getting a bit too large for the ship.

The city was beautiful, a mesh of industrialisation and antiquity blending harsh grey metals and white marble. Red roofs, large gardens, streams and fruit trees painted the region in colour and the locals wore robes, togas and gold – lots of gold. The constant stream of traffic in and out of the city drew Jayce’s attention elsewhere. Almost all ships heading to and from the city’s main harbours were heading north, but out of the hundreds sailing Jayce glimpsed one ship sailing south.

“Falconer, can I borrow Wren for a moment?” Jayce questioned. Falconer nodded, whistling and summoning the giant bird down from the air. Jayce climbed onto her saddle and she took off, soaring high into the air to grant him the view he wanted. His eyes widened almost immediately. A few kilometres to the south by south-west of the city was another island, one far smaller and

populated by what looked to be only a single colossal building: a giant stone mansion. The Sea Sovereign's home.

"There it is," Jayce stated, pointing to the island as they entered the traffic. "That's where the Revelry is taking place, that's the Sovereign's castle." Astris and Bjorn stared at the island through a pair of binoculars. "Doesn't look like a castle to me," Bjorn stated, passing the binoculars to Falconer. Astris nodded in agreement. "Looks like one of my old homes," she stated, both Bjorn and Jayce looking at her with judgement. "There was an old plantation we went to live in the summer. Hey, don't look at me like that! My father was an Admiral, so was yours!" she protested towards Jayce. He shook it off, turning his attention back to the task at hand. "Well at least we know where we're going," he stated.

They docked the ship, the crew splitting up to restock and do a little shopping before gathering again once their presence had drawn the correct attention. "Where's the Rising Ace?" demanded a small woman, covered in rough, spiky metal armour and holding a short rifle with a thick barrel. "Hmm?" Jayce questioned, stepping to the edge of the Stacked Hand only to leap to the side as the weapon roared and spat a burst of shrapnel his way. "Rude," he grumbled, returning to his position as she began to reload. "Are you part of the Machinist's crew?" he questioned down to her, the rest of crew similarly nonchalant. "Yes!" she yelled. "We've been waiting for you, and now you've finally shown yourself! It's just my luck that I found you first!" she declared, aiming and firing again – the recoil knocking her off her feet.

"Jayce, stop toying with her," protested Astris, the shot going wide and impacting in the hull. She got to her feet and reloaded once again, this time charging the ladder built into the hull and beginning to climb. Jayce waited until she was right at the top before he nudged her screaming back over the edge. She crunched into the deck of the pier, her spiked armour nailing her to the wood. "Okay," Jayce said with a sigh, dropping over the edge and landing next to her. "I'll get you! Your head is mine!" she screamed.

"Are all of you like this?" he questioned, concentrating his Focus into his finger before flicking the bucket-like helmet. It rang like a bell, a dent left behind where he had flicked. He pulled the helmet off her, the girl somewhere in her mid-teens, with curly brown hair and very dark skin. Her eyes were glazed over, her head clearly ringing as she groaned. "Where's your leader? I want to meet your boss," Jayce told her clearly, waiting for her eyes to refocus. "You... want to meet the

boss?" she questioned. He nodded, picking up her shotgun and tossing it up towards Astris. He then pulled out a golden pearl. "I'll pay."

"Deal," she said immediately, sensing little choice in the matter.

Seize the Seas Tales: Footsteps of Parents

Alara grit her teeth as she and her squad marched through the rain. They had arrived back in the Capital of Brunxchume, the city known as Chull. "Captain," Wulf said to her softly, her hands shaking as they made their way towards their target. "I know," she stated, softly and angrily. They had followed her father here, to this city, before, and now they had come back. But they'd arrived too late, once again.

Her father's ship burned in the distance, the exhibition it had been placed within now completely destroyed. Instead, Alara turned her attention to the Fortress Ship in the shadow of the storm. The vessel was colossal, distinctly deadly and far too impenetrable for her crew to assault now. But she didn't want to turn away from it, she didn't want to leave empty-handed and return back to her ship alone.

The Betrayer, Barca Khallid, had used her father as a trap for her mother. In that fortress, in that vessel, were her parents – she was certain of it and now had the physical proof to convince those she needed to. Wulf placed a hand on her shoulder, her tears masked by the rain. "We'll come back for them with an armada. We'll rescue them," he reassured. She stared at the floating fortress, at the colossal cannons covering its surface. It held the power to contain two Admirals. "Yeah," she lied to herself. "We'll come back for them."

Chapter 189: The Machinist

“Just this way,” stated Marsia, the young woman the Rising Aces had bribed to take them to the Machinist. Of the entire crew, Jayce had decided to only take himself, Astris, Arthuria, Mai Lu and Caelie – a decision most of his crew had protested against. But given it was his first meeting with someone that most people were referring to as a new Pirate Lord, Jayce felt it appropriate to set a clear understanding.

Marsia held her left arm as they walked, a consequence of her unwieldy shotgun and her inexperience at using it, and her armour shuffled with every step – the metal too large for her small body. “Do you think the boss will reward me?” she questioned aloud, Jayce and Astris glancing towards each other. “Uh, sure,” Jayce returned, only for the bucket-like helmet to turn and glance towards him with confusion. “Never mind,” he muttered.

She led them through the city of Novalis, away from the pristine marble city towards the more grimy and metallic factories spewing black smoke into the sky. The streets began to close up: the wideness remaining but an abundance of overlooking metal walkways and pipes blocking off the sky. They passed numerous carts carrying ores and slag, most of them pulled by large animals but some instead moved by giant humanoid automatons. The metal golems towered over Jayce and his crew, each one lumbering and clanking along, or otherwise standing guard.

They looked almost comical, each one shaped like a headless man with long arms and legs and a bulbous torso, with a burning furnace in the middle. Large pipes stuck out of their backs, bellowing smoke that felt acidic in Jayce’s nose. The automatons rumbled as they stood still, vibrating as fuel burned inside. Astris paused and analysed one, the faceless machine staring down at her. “Hmm,” she pondered to herself, turning away and hurrying back to Jayce’s side. He glanced towards her and she simply nodded back with an expression of confidence.

They continued their march into the Machinist’s territory, and it wasn’t long before Jayce noticed the sheer volume of attention he and his crew had brought. Armoured guards surrounded him, leering and jeering down at him from walkways and railings – all armed with a variety of guns. Some even held flamethrowers, their backs covered in large canisters of fuel. “Shouldn’t we have brought more people?” Mai Lu questioned cautiously, a small demonic grin on her neck. Caelie shook her head, confidently striding ahead before lowering her mask over her face.

They were led to the largest of the factories, the colossal building dark and imposing apart from the orange glow that illuminated the windows – creating a monstrous expression on its front. They walked through the monster’s mouth, the heat immediately overwhelming and the sound of clanging and machinery deafening. A channel of automatons guided their path through the middle of the factory floor, countless guards stood on walkways – all armed with rifles and aiming them at Jayce. “Bit overkill, don’t you think?” Arthuria questioned, her hand on her swords, her armour concealed for the moment. “We’re with Jayce Exarga, Pirate Lord, if anything it’s not enough,” Astris returned, with a mocking grin. “Shush,” Jayce told them, as they both giggled. “We need to look serious and intimidating.” Caelie, Astris, Mai Lu and Arthuria all rolled their eyes.

They came to a connection of rail tracks, all meeting on a circular metal disk that could clearly rotate, so as to change the pathing of the numerous carts moving between forges. Before them, on an elevated platform five-or-so metres above them, sat a large man. His skin was a corpse-like white, but held multiple black, tribal tattoos across the left side of his exposed torso, chin and face. His eyes were cold and glowed a deep red colour. Black and red dreadlocks hung down his back and shoulders, and he had countless stud-like piercings across his arms, chest and chin. His teeth sparkled, his mouth full of metal. A colossal metal hammer on a huge pole sat next to him within arm’s reach. “Welcome, Pirate Lord,” he growled, remaining sat in his metal throne, the back of which was actually on fire.

He looked huge from their position below, the man certainly a giant and rippling with muscle. He wore black samurai armour on his lower waist, and clearly had no fear or concern about Jayce. “I heard you put a bounty on my head, I’ve come to collect as I’ve brought it to you,” Jayce called up. “So pay up, before I take it from you.” A wave of clicks spread around the room as the numerous gunners aimed their weapons. The giant paused, before he burst into a bellow of laughter. “Outrageous, even with heat such as this you remain cold and steeled. Greater men than you have broken before me,” boomed the figure.

“Why would I fear you? You’re not the Machinist, are you?” Jayce questioned, glancing up past the throne to a walkway high above it. A young woman stood leaning against the metal railing, her red eyes wide and visible even from the distance below. A big grin sat on her face, her long, blood-red hair tied up and held back by a bandana. A pair of huge metal gauntlets sat on her forearms, her upper body otherwise exposed apart from a black tube top. She had tanned skin, and similar tribal tattoos across her right shoulder and neck. A metal and leather

skirt covered her waist, a pair of steel-toed black boots over her feet. Numerous metal piercings filled her ears.

"Impressive, not that it will serve you much," she stated, her voice coming through her puppet. "I sincerely hope that you haven't come all this way just to tell me off for putting a bounty on you? The entire world wants your head, Exarga, I'm just the one with the deepest pockets to get it done for me." Jayce nodded. "I get it, I also want to make it clear that the bounty ends here. Now. If I have to come back..."

"If you have to come back?" laughed the machinist. "There's no leaving." She clicked her fingers, her gauntlets making a loud clink that echoed across the factory. The automatons that had lined the path to the throne all moved, spreading out to block the way to the exit. "I want your title, and the Sovereign wants your head. So I intent to take the latter to her to get the former - got it?" she questioned from above. "Uh, Boss, I brought them to you - does that mean I get a reward?" interrupted Marsia, a clear expression of irritation crossing the Machinist's face. "Sure, here you go," answered the Machinist, the puppet standing up from his throne and leaping towards Jayce with his greathammer in hand.

He swung downwards mid-leap, splattering the young woman into the metal floor before turning his blood-covered body towards Jayce. "He's taller than I thought," Arthuria stated, cautiously stepping back, the puppet around Bjorn's height. A bloody golden pearl rolled across the floor, bouncing off Mai Lu's foot. She reached down and picked it up, smearing Marsia's blood with her thumb before pocketing the coin. "Bring me his head!" screamed the Machinist, turning and walking away.

Baal emerged from Mai Lu, immediately turning the blood covering the puppet into his weapon. The giant screamed in agony as a thousand glass-like shards pierced his body, yet he didn't go down. The crystals cracked and shattered as he forced his body to move, hefting his hammer up and preparing to swing it down upon Jayce. But before he could strike, Jayce swung with Sola and Luna decapitating the puppet in a pair of sharp slashes. The body toppled, but not before Jayce spotted machinery inside the giants neck - his entire spine seemingly made out of a bronze metal.

Astris vanished in a splash of blood, a series of screams ringing out as a pair of railings fell from the roof. She then reappeared amongst the automatons, darting between them and systematically dismantling them with precision shots to their

joints or by throwing explosives inside of their furnaces. The machines could hardly respond as she apparated from one spot to the next, periodically launching herself through the hail of gunfire to find a feast to refuel before returning to her dismantling.

Caelie wasted no time, the second combat begun she threw out a pair of teleportation portals. Arthuria surged through one, darting along the railings against the gunners whilst dressed in her armour, cleaving them apart and using their bodies to protect herself from their gunfire. A periodic arm, leg, or head would drop from the ceiling with a splat before eventually the entire railing gave way as she cut the supporting cables and leapt at the next group of enemies. Caelie used the other portal to protect herself, Jayce and Mai Lu from the barrage of bullets, turning the projectiles back on their owners as she began to walk towards the exit.

Between Caelie's portals and Mai Lu's walls of blood crystal, Jayce felt no threat as he slowly walked towards the exit. The automatons fell apart before him and the ceiling collapsed behind him. The second he crossed the threshold, Astris and Arthuria dropped back to his side – the group of them turning towards the army ahead of them. "I think the message has been clear - get us out of here," Jayce commanded. Mai Lu erected a wall of blood in front of them and Caelie conjured up a portal, the group stepping through.

They fell out of the sky above the city, Caelie immediately creating another portal to bring them closer to the Stacked Hand. They landed without issue, the lounging crew immediately getting to their feet as they noticed the blood covering Jayce, Astris and Arthuria. "I see it was a peaceful encounter," Bjorn said sarcastically. "Everyone back to the ship," Jayce commanded. Caelie immediately ran to Falconer's side, the pair of them climbing aboard Wren before taking to the sky. A series of portals appeared, the rest of the crew emerging through them. "That's everyone," Bjorn confirmed, walking to the helm. Jayce nodded, glancing out towards the factories – a different kind of smoke rising from them. "Good," he stated, "because we're about to have a fight."

From the smoke emerged a quintet of sailing ships, each lifting into the sky by means of a giant balloon. But descending from the sky above the factory was something Jayce had never seen before. It was long and tubular, absolutely colossal and at least three times the length of the Stacked Hand. It looked a lot like a giant balloon, only stretched out: an airship, one that was at the very least armoured and covered in so many guns it looked like a cactus. A series of giant

propellers pushed it forwards, fast, and a continuous stream of flyers began to fill the skies around it. "Just what did you say to him?" Bjorn questioned in disbelief. "Her," Jayce corrected, "and only that I preferred my head attached to my body."

"The plan, Jayce?" Astris questioned, as the crew gathered on the main deck. "We only have a few minutes before they're upon us. So no time for big speeches," he stated, leaning on the aft-deck railing. "Bjorn, take us away from the city – as far as you can – I don't want their falling ships to crush any civilians, and I don't want the blame for any damage either. Zeta, Yuthura, Marisha – harness the winds, get us some real speed. We follow the usual strategy: an away and a stay team."

"Captain, could we use the main cannon on that giant airship?" Wam questioned. Jayce glanced towards Tempest. "We do not have much ammunition Captain, we have not yet encountered a magic dense region where I can restock the ore. My synthetic substitutions are not yet ready, and will not be ready for at least a year," warned the djinn. Jayce looked at him. "We have a dozen shots," Tempest assured.

Jayce looked towards the rapidly approaching airships, a single good shot would heavily swing the advantage in their favour, but he was equally aware of just how accurate that shot would need to be. "It exposes us too much, Jayce," Ordo advised, Jayce nodding in agreement. "Both in the future and now. I believe the Boys can hit the shot, but we'd need to let them get closer to us and I suspect those guns have a larger range than we do," he added.

"Captain, five minutes at most before they're in range of us," Falconer warned, Wren by his side and waiting. "Enemy count?" Jayce asked, folding his arms and thinking. "Sixty flyers, five carriers, one airship," warned Astris, Falconer and Marisha, all with their eyes on the enemy and the number pre-counted. Jayce couldn't help but smile: he could trust his crew to fill in his gaps – always. "Okay, right! Arthuria, Astris, you two will be engaging the flyers alongside Morgana and Falconer. Aim for the pilots, ignore the crews, knock them out of the sky. Thalia, Ordo, Caelie you will be engaging those carriers – Alara fought them before, aim for the cables and cut them free; the Machinist will have reinforced them since then so do whatever you can to drop those ships."

"Caelie, you're on support, not attack," Jayce commanded. She stomped her foot in protest. "Just because we can travel through the air doesn't mean we have to, that's energy that's better served to defeating our enemies," he told her swiftly.

“Zhurong, Taranis, Asmodeus and I will handle that airship. We will bring it down. Home team, keep the ship away from combat – defend it however you can. Feed Paimon the reserve magic stones, use her foresight to keep an advantage and feed that information back to us. Bjorn, you have the ship,” Jayce commanded, summoning his plate armour out of his enchanted bracer before flicking Sola and Luna out into a pair of flaming longswords. “Give them hell!” Bjorn declared.

Caelie opened up a portal on the main deck that Thalia immediately launched herself through, with Ordo close behind. The enemy fleet immediately burst into disarray. There was a pair of loud roars and the ship shook before lurching as two of the three Dragons launched themselves out of their hatches in the hull, the two giant beasts immediately flying in the direction of their prey. “Good luck,” Astris stated to Jayce, placing her hand on his arm and drawing his gaze. He nodded to her, watching as she and Arthuria lunged through their own portals to join the skies with Morgana and Falconer, both flying on broomstick and roc respectively. Jayce then turned down to the small bat Demon by his feet.

“You’re becoming quite a serious cost to me, you know – these magic stones aren’t cheap,” Jayce stated, placing several of the purple stones onto the floor. “It would be easier if you accepted my bargain, both Paimon and I offered a fair deal for your body,” the Demon countered, picking up a stone and consuming it with a series of loud crunches. Jayce couldn’t deny that the offers hadn’t been tempting, foresight or wings and the ability to conjure magma were both very tempting. “My own voice is irritating enough in my head, I couldn’t stand anyone else’s,” Jayce returned with a grin, stepping back as the bat ballooned in size, ending up even larger than the Dragons. “I would understand that comment with Paimon... I’m not that bad, I don’t think. I think we both share an appreciation for art,” Asmodeus continued. Jayce rolled his eyes, reaching out with his containment orb towards RK, dragging the rokken inside before tucking him inside his armour. “Shut up and fight,” Jayce commanded, leaping up into the skies before darting through the air with his Focus towards the enemy.

It was mayhem, a sea of flames and bullets as the Machinist’s fleet desperately tried to handle the offensive power of the Rising Aces. Long unhindered by the limitations of gravity, the Rising Aces surged through the air using their Focus – an image that Jayce still found himself struggling to believe, as he remembered not too long ago seeing only Admirals and Pirate Lords fight on the scale that his crew now could.

The flyers tried to bring themselves around to shoot at Ordo and Thalia, the pair working their way through the first carrier – slaughtering the crew with their heavy weapons and destroying the numerous tethers holding the metal and wood ships up to their lifting balloons. Instead they found only devastation, a blur of movement bringing death to the numerous pilots as they were either boarded in a splash of blood by Astris, sniped with a devastating arrow from Falconer aboard Wren, detonated by a spell from Morgana, or de-winged in a single strike by the winged angel of death known as Arthuria.

Those enemies that found a moment to breathe, a moment to plan and coordinate an attack, found themselves assaulted instead by Dragons as large or even larger than the flyers themselves. Zhurong spewed flames, sometimes enough to obliterate the flying machine in a single blow, other times the Dragon spat just enough to ignite the canvas and wood of the vehicles. Taranis, on the other hand, held no issue with grappling the vehicles in his claws, throwing them into other flyers or even towards the main airship. Their hides were resistant to the hail of bullets, but not impervious.

A boom deafened the skies as the Machinist's airship came about, unleashing its arsenal of heavy guns onto the battlefield. There was no care for who the explosive shells caught, foe or friend alike were caught in the array of devastation. There was a roar of pain and Zhurong dropped from the sky along with Arthuria, the pair sharing in the agony as a large wound was opened in the Dragon's side.

Morgana dove through the sea of explosions, darting towards the flailing body of her sister through smoke and fire as her Dragon similarly plummeted. Zhurong twisted as he fell, the Dragon's eyes full of fear and panic. "Brother!" came a voice through the battlefield, unheard but anyone other than the Dragon as Taranis launched himself off the flaming carrier he had shielded himself behind. Morgana angled her broomstick low, the wind warping around her as she tucked into her broomstick, pulling up at the last moment to catch Arthuria half-across the wood and half-across her body. "Lose some weight, meathead!" Morgana groaned, a rib cracked at the very least from the impact and the sharp change in weight angling them both towards the sea. She screamed as she failed to pull them up, a blue portal sending them crashing into the main deck of the Stacked Hand instead. "Medic!" Morgana groaned, as she rolled across the ground. Her eyes then immediately widened as the sun was blocked out and a wide wave of water crashed across the deck as Taranis dragged Zhurong back onto the Stacked Hand before launching himself back towards the battle.

The explosions continued, the heavy guns of the airship unrelenting and firing in all directions. "Everyone pull back," Jayce ordered, the two remaining still intact carriers pushing forwards towards the Stacked Hand along with a dozen surviving flyers. He darted upwards along with Asmodeus, the pair of them observing the battlefield from above. Thalia and Arthuria had both been injured, Wren had caught some flak as well. The main airship was untouched. "Only one way for it," Asmodeus stated. Jayce nodded in agreement, darting up and into the clouds to better position himself before he pulled out RK's orb from within his armour. "Sorry my friend," Jayce stated, releasing the rokken to fall like a meteorite.

Jayce darted after RK, the rokken grumbling in what Jayce perceived was confusion, anger, or excitement. The well-fed meteorite then slammed into the giant airship, tearing straight through the metal and then the canvas below into the super-structure before carrying onwards and through the bottom. Alarms rang from within as Jayce dropped through the hole, landing on a walkway before surging forwards towards what he guessed was the control room. Asmodeus landed on the surface, tearing the giant hole open even more before dropping through and vomiting out a stream of molten magma in the other direction. He then ignited his body, the flames spreading rapidly out and along the airship. "Captain, this thing appears to highly flammable – you don't have long," warned the Demon, through his personal communicator.

Jayce danced along the walkway with his swords, the few guards onboard offering little resistance as they surged towards him. He pushed through the final group, arriving at a sealed metal box near the middle of the colossal vehicle. He pulled open the hatch and dropped inside, expecting to see the Machinist. Instead he found only machines. They were golden, much like the other automatons the Machinist had created, but they were smaller – made to be human-sized. They were like golden skeletons, and one in a large, funny sailor's hat turned to face him. "Dissappointed?" questioned the machine in a familiar voice. "I'm not so stupid as to risk my own life for a title as small as: 'Pirate Lord'. Still, I expected better of this dirigible. Perhaps it needs more guns, or not to face you. Here's your prize, I'll see you at the Revelry," stated the Machinist, the automaton gesturing towards a large crate on the floor with a large red bow wrapped around the top.

Jayce glanced towards the nearest window before he approached the crate and lifted up the top. A flashing timer stared up at him, the countdown less than five seconds. He turned to move towards the window, but the automatons had

surrounded him, attempting to block him. Jayce lunged, shoving the closest automaton over before darting forwards as the countdown dropped to zero. "Fuck!" he screamed.

Astris staggered as the wave of heat hit her, the enemy dirigible exploding in a colossal fireball that painted the skies orange. "No," she realised, the shockwave slamming into the carrier she was stood on and sending the vehicle lurching out of the sky. She rode it down, apparating off it and landing back on the Stacked Hand as it crashed into the water. "Where's Jayce?" she questioned, looking around the main deck as the remains of the away team returned. She locked eyes with Bjorn, the pair of them turning towards the falling wreck of the dirigible. "He wasn't... he wasn't on that thing when it blew? Right?" she questioned. Bjorn's face darkened. "No," he stated in shock, reaching up to his communicator. "Jayce, where are you? Jayce, come in?" Bjorn questioned, receiving only silence in turn. "Red, Taranis, Morgana, I want search and rescue now!" Bjorn commanded, turning and angling the Stacked Hand towards the debris. "Bjorn, it is imperative that we remain clear of the debris," Tempest stated. "We cannot just leave Jayce," Bjorn returned.

The djinn shook his head. "We protect the ship. Our home. That was the Captain's orders," Tempest responded - the crew glancing between the two before looking towards Astris to mediate. "Bjorn..." she said quietly, shaking her head. If Jayce had survived that blast then the Stacked Hand would put him at risk by shifting the debris or bouncing into remaining explosives. "Look!" Zeta yelled, drawing the crew's attention to a giant bat flying through the smoke. Asmodeus approached, a charred form in his claws that he gently lowered to the main deck. Jayce was breathing, just about, but his skin was burnt badly and he was bleeding heavily. "Stand back!" declared Yuthura, getting close to him along with Morgana. "Doc, you're already hurt," Morgana told her. Yuthura shook her head, she had no intention on letting Jayce die. "I can start with the worst, you can handle the rest," Yuthura stated, looking from Morgana to Astris. "I'll be fine," she stated, taking his worst wounds before immediately slumping over from the pain.

"Bjorn, we need a plan," Astris stated, turning towards him as he stared at Jayce's body in horror. "...Right," he stated, snapping himself back to reality. "There's, um, the rokken islands. We'll head there, hitch a lift on one of the islands. We'll be safe there," he suggested. Astris nodded in agreement, looking back at the mess that was her Captain. Caelie stood over him, tears in her eyes and her hands pointing towards the two Demons. "Them, he needs them," she stated.

Seize the Seas Tales: A Connection Beyond Blood

Wicke faltered, stopping in her path and then turning and looking back in the direction they had come. "What's wrong?" Damian questioned, seeing an expression of dread on her face. She was clutching her chest, her heart racing and a cold sweat spreading across her. Wicke shook her head: she didn't know, but at the same time she did know. "I-I... something's happened. Something's gone wrong."

Damian shook his head. "I'm sure it's nothing. Come on, we're nearly at our old record. I have a feeling this is the one. We'll find the end soon, I know it," he stated, placing a hand on her shoulder and turning her in the right direction. Wicke remained where she was, the dread fading. "Be safe," she said quietly into the wind.

Chapter 190: Contacts and Contracts

Jayce couldn't remember what had happened. He only remembered fire and then falling before he found himself floating in a void. "Not again," he immediately stated to himself. "Am I really dead, again?" he questioned, looking around for anything familiar. He floated in an endless expanse of darkness, periodically he spotted near-translucent lines – rings – that surrounded him in every direction. As they stretched further away from him, they appeared to get closer to each other, eventually collapsing into a white horizon in the darkness.

No, he thought, not dead. This is different. A border between life and death. But I've died before, and I've also nearly died before, so what's different this time? "The Demons," Jayce realised, feeling something observing him. He twisted in the void, spotting two creatures floating in the aether with him. "So am I dead or not?" Jayce questioned to Asmodeus and Paimon. Asmodeus looked monstrous in the void. The giant bat normally looked rather cute in Jayce's eyes. He typically looked like a small fruit bat, only radiating a considerable amount of heat, smelling of smoke, with glowing lines amongst his black fur, like embers in a fire. Here, he was colossal, dripping with magma and with a pair of red and orange eyes that glowed in the darkness. Paimon's crown of golden horns also seemed to glow in the void, her brown fur looked fuller and the golden patch on her chest shone. Her flame-like black and orange eyes were alert and watchful.

They both watched him curiously, before seeming to take note of each other. "I thought I was doing this?" Paimon questioned to Asmodeus. The bat shook his head. "No, I care not for what you have foreseen – of either of us, Jayce and I are the best match," Asmodeus stated. Paimon shook her head, turning instead to look at Jayce. "You have not yet died, however the wounds you have sustained are... intense. It may be time before you are healed... if you are healed. You were not the only injured amongst the crew so resources are divided," Paimon stated.

Jayce glanced between the two. *Even with some of us injured... there should be enough to keep me alive. Yuthura knows what she's doing and, if not her, then Morgana and Astris are capable of keeping me alive until resources are freed up.* "So you're here to offer me a contract?" Jayce presumed, looking between the pair. "Yes," both Demons stated. Jayce folded his arms, glancing between the two. "You have a choice to make. One of us, or risk your crew with your absence," Asmodeus laid out. *Cunning bastards.*

"So what's the situation? Did we win? Are there more enemies on the horizon?" Jayce questioned. Both Demons remained conveniently silent. "Ah, I see," he

stated. "It is nothing personal, Captain, but an evolution from pet to Captain is hard to pass up," Paimon stated honestly. Jayce nodded, thinking up an expansive string of swear words. "How much time has passed?" he questioned. "As humans go, you're stubbornly clever. I will say nothing, nor will Lady Paimon. Pick between us. As far as your crew are aware – this was Caelie's suggestion."

Jayce looked between the two Demons. They had both asked him already, and he had been tempted before, but the risks were unknown – despite the benefits. *Look like a bat or look like a bear?* He shook his head, frustrated, curious and mostly angry at getting into this situation to begin with. "What can you offer me?" he questioned. At the very least he was going to get the best deal out of it. "Raw destructive power," Asmodeus stated bluntly, but Jayce was looking towards Paimon – his choice already made.

"You know my gifts, you know my magic. I hold the power of foresight," she stated plainly. "I offer much more than-" Jayce dismissed the Demon, Asmodeus vanishing from his body in an instant. Paimon looked surprised, but her expression quickly changed as she realised that Jayce had accepted her offer. "How does your power work?" he asked plainly. She thought for a moment, thinking about how best to explain it.

"You have spoken of your girl, the Mage, who has dabbled with the future before. She saw a glimpse of what was to come and acted swiftly to change it. Time, as I understand it, is a river. It flows and is continuous, but it can be dammed or redirected, yet it will always reach its natural conclusion. I can reach into these conclusions to leave a moment there. I cannot change the past, only tamper with the future. But it may not be enough to have a permanent effect. I could not stop you capturing me. I could not stop myself falling from the Heavens. I cannot prevent the war that will come, but I can put myself in the best position I can be: with you. So, I ask you, Captain – what are your terms?"

Jayce thought for a moment before nodding. "Show me everything that you can about the future. Everything. I will remain in control but you will have a say and - when the time comes - we will part ways and you will leave with your kind. You may not be able to change the future, but I can. So show me the worst of what is to come, and I will show you the best outcome that we can reach together," Jayce bargained.

His eyes fluttered open and Jayce found himself in his bed. The room was not empty, far from it, with Little Witch sleeping on a nearby pillow, Caelie curled

up by his feet at the base of his bed, and Astris snoring away in his chair. Jayce immediately looked down at his body: he was wrapped in bandages, some stained with blood. *Paimon?* Jayce thought. A moment passed and he questioned whether it had all been a delusion. *I am here*, returned the Demon in his mind.

A soft purring drew his attention elsewhere as Little Witch noticed his stirring and curled up into his neck. He pet her and then slowly sat up, failing to not disturb Caelie as her eyes shot open and she bolted upright. "Jayce?" she questioned, faltering before deciding against caution and diving into his chest. "Hey, hey!" he told her as she cried with relief into his chest. "I'm okay, I'm okay," he reassured.

"Gods," muttered Astris, waking and standing up before approaching Jayce. She unconsciously reached out and placed a hand on his cheek, staring intently at him. "I'm not a bear, am I?" he asked with genuine concern. She cracked a smile, placing a reassuring hand on Caelie's head as she pulled back and wiped her tears before laughing. "No, and don't say that to Bjorn – he's been half-hoping you would be. Your... eyes – they've changed," she stated. Jayce stood up and immediately rushed to his bathroom, Caelie and Astris both following. "Not bad," Caelie said softly, her own demonic hazel and gold eyes full of hope and relief. "I'm going to miss the blue," Astris stated, her heterochromic white and obsidian eyes full of caution and concern. Jayce's eyes radiated like fire, the irises orange and black.

"So where are we?" Jayce questioned, unsticking the bandages from his body before hopping in the shower. Astris leant next to the slightly ajar door of his bathroom whilst Caelie played with the black cat on Jayce's bed. "Somewhere quite special in full honesty," Astris stated. "After we annihilated the Machinist's fleet we sailed north a little, finding refuge amongst the Rokken islands. We're on top of one, but it seems to settle every couple of days before marching onwards. No one is going to find us here and there is a surprising amount of natural resources we can use."

Why do you use so many hair products?

"Quiet," Jayce said assertively to the Demon in his head. A noise of curiosity came from the bathroom door. "No, sorry, not you," Jayce quickly clarified. "Right, uh, I guess you now know what two voices in one head is like," Astris stated with a small smile. Jayce rolled his eyes, stepping out of his shower and grabbing his towel before emerging into his quarters. Caelie turned and looked away, whilst Astris struggled to do the same. "Ahem," Jayce uttered. Astris

flushed red and stepped towards the door. "I'll tell Bjorn you're up, come on Caelie."

They both departed, leaving Jayce a moment to change before he felt an uncomfortable stretching feeling in his neck. "Perhaps I underestimated just how much attention you receive from the crew. Here I was hoping for mostly peace," Paimon stated from a mouth on his neck. A horrific thought popped into Jayce's mind of how Alara would react to his new addition, before an even more horrific thought of having a Demon copilot whilst he was with her. "Ugh," came Paimon's voice, reminding Jayce that she now shared his thoughts. "Oh Gods, what have I done?" he muttered.

Bjorn was waiting for him outside, a clear look of disappointment on his face. "What?" Jayce questioned. "Where you hoping for another bear aboard?" Bjorn chuckled. "Is it so wrong that I was hoping we could be brothers in looks too?" Bjorn responded, placing a firm hand on Jayce's shoulder as his smile faded and an expression of concern and guilt crossed his face. "I'm okay," Jayce stated, wincing a little as a spark of pain crossed his mind as a future event flashed though his memory. He shut it away. "Okay, just let me know if that changes," Bjorn stated.

"Oh, uh, so Caelie can make portals, Asmodeus controls magma, Baal controls blood – what did Paimon give you?" Bjorn questioned. Jayce faltered. "A... small bit of foresight," Jayce lied. Bjorn nodded, folding his arms. "Lucky for some. Does it show you how the Revelry is going to go?" he questioned. Jayce shook his head. "No, only big events," he stated. Bjorn frowned. "How is the Revelry not a big event?"

Jayce dismissed the question, turning his attention to their surroundings. He was immediately surprised by how high up they were. The island was only a few hundred metres wide but from the stationary position the rokken was sat in they were nearly a hundred metres above the ocean. The sun was beautiful as it lay just above the ocean, the morning coming to a close. The horizon was mostly empty, bar a few other rokken marching in the distance.

"So what's the plan then?" Bjorn questioned, stepping forwards and leaning against the aft-deck railing. "We stay here for a while and prepare for the Revelry. I'm going to send out some letters to our allies, try and get in contact with them. I think we're overdue a catch up with Tim and Kitty," Jayce stated. Bjorn nodded in agreement. "Tempest put in a request for more resources. He has an idea of where we can restock on energised alloy for the main cannon but will find out in

a few days if that's for real," Bjorn stated. Jayce smiled, looking towards the forward cannon. "Then that's the plan."

It was several days before Jayce received a response from Kitty, and after scanning the letter for anything inappropriate Jayce sat down in the living quarters with Bjorn and Astris to go through it.

My dear Jayce,

I am so so happy to receive your letter, I was beginning to worry someone had sunk you or taken off with your head. I apologise for my own inability in making contact, I have been dealing with my own problems: a Dragonlord to be precise. She's been a real pain in my... but that's beside the point. I am sorry to say I will not be able to meet up with you, I really, really, really wish I could, but this hunter is tricky and she's obsessive and I do not want to put you (or your crew) in harm's way.

I would advise wearing contacts over your eyes. Although my own little friend is bemused and excited to hear you have your own headache, it would be an advantage to keep it hidden. Some fool has been filling the Guild papers about having a headache of their own and people are starting to take note. It's not too much of a problem for me, but for both our sakes it's an advantage you shouldn't waste. I am also in agreement with Commander Kai about the loss of those blue eyes of yours.

I saw your better half not too long ago and she's looking well, and strong (not us strong, but... maybe someday). I wish you both well.

Say hi to your crew for me.

Much love,

Always,

Pirate Lord Kitty Deliver of the Delivery Kats xxx

P.S. Keep your eyes on the skies for the bitch known as Dragonlord Thákane, kill her for me if you come across her. The boys say hi.

"She doesn't change, does she?" Bjorn stated, glancing over the letter as he leant back in his chair before passing it over to Astris. Jayce smiled and shook his head. "No, but it does raise some fair points. Who's she talking about?" Jayce questioned, looking to Astris. "Marisha, could you come to the living quarters?" Astris questioned into her communicator. "Only one real expert on world affairs aboard this ship, and it's not me. Which of the two are you referring to?"

"Either," Jayce returned, "there's more she's not saying but she wouldn't mention them without reason."

The door opened and Marisha stepped inside. "You called?" she questioned. Jayce gestured to a chair and she walked over to Bjorn's side before sitting in his lap. Jayce passed over the letter and she read it quickly. "The Demonlord or the Dragonlord? Which do you want to talk about first?" Marisha questioned. "Start with the Demon," Jayce stated, standing up and retrieving their mugs from the kitchen before taking some beers from the fridge. He slid them across the table before sitting back in his chair. "He calls himself the Piper."

"A Bard?" Jayce questioned. Marisha nodded, but there was some ambiguity amongst her expression. "I think so... it fits Zeta's description and the arrogance and bombastic nature of his actions would account for it. He charms people, a thief, but also... I've no other better word for it – an amateur Pirate Lord. He's said loudly and clearly that he has a Demon within him: Byleth," Marisha explained.

"Byleth? That's one of ours, we must retrieve him," stated Paimon in Jayce's head. "A loyalist of Baal's," Jayce stated. "We should try and get the Demon out." "If he's looking to become a Pirate Lord then odds are he will come to us if we try," Astris stated. "It might be a good chance to see if we can pull the Demon out of him without killing the host," she added. Jayce nodded. *Forget the host. No,* Jayce thought back. *We may need this in the future.*

"And the Dragonlord?" Jayce questioned, shutting out the Demon. Marisha faltered as she read Jayce's expression, but she ignored his clear annoyance. "Thákane, a princess of some tribe. Supposedly she has a water dragon of sorts bound to her, a giant flying snake of sorts. She's a rumoured replacement for one of the empty seats. People like her, and she's powerful - we'll probably see her at the Revelry unless Kitty kills her," Marisha concluded. Jayce nodded. "Sounds simple enough. Three Dragons to one shouldn't be a problem." They concluded their meeting a little while later.

It was a few days more before Jayce heard from Tim Kane and the response came in a very different way from what he had been expecting. He was sat on the deck, enjoying the spring sun when he heard a whooshing sound next to him. Jayce immediately sat up, setting his romance novel down and looking towards the portal that had manifested. It swirled in a mixture of pink and green before eventually the inside shimmered into a transparent window. On the other side was Mirabelle Delyth.

"Howdy Jayce, how you doing?" she said, her high-pitched voice immediately irritating. "Mirabelle? What? Why? Uh, hi," Jayce stammered, confused by her sudden call, the portal only showing her upper body. "You messaged, right?" she questioned. "Uh, for Tim – yeah?" Jayce returned. She sighed and pulled a face. "Fine, I'll get him. Tim! Call!" she yelled out, somewhere behind her. "Just a moment," she stated, holding up a finger before turning and walking away.

Jayce stood up and leaned forwards towards the portal, the inside showed a castle of sorts, or at the very least the inside of a dark stone tower. He could see a laboratory of sorts, and a large pink bed. Tim swiftly emerged to block the view, his face flustered. "Jayce, hey, sorry, I was going to call later," he said to the side with clear frustration. "All... good," Jayce returned. "Did you get my letter?" Tim nodded.

"Yeah, I did," he stated. Tim didn't look particularly different from before, he'd grown a little bulkier, with more muscle on his frame. He had light-brown skin, had grown out his messy black hair, had grown a thick mess of a beard, and his eyes held an adult level of fatigue to them. "You look... different," he stated, his eyes locked onto Jayce's – reminding him once again to ask Yuthura to make him contacts. "You too, you look older – you alright?"

Tim nodded, letting out a weary sigh. "It's been a trying few months. Too many fools have come for Mirabelle, we're set up in the east waiting for the Revelry." "Are you two...?" Jayce questioned. Tim nodded, and Jayce chose to ignore the blatant age difference. "Good for you," Jayce stated. "So are you in her crew?" Tim laughed. "No, she's in mine. After a bit of duelling, she admitted I'm the better Mage-"

"That's a load of crap, don't listen to him, Jayce," came Mirabelle's voice, from out of the view. Jayce laughed as Tim dodged a glass vial thrown at him. "Anyway," Tim stated. "I'm glad to see you're still alive, I was worried after seeing the images of the battle near Novalis. I'm guessing you'll be at the Revelry?" Jayce nodded. "Good, we're staying put, but things have eased up after we made our point to the hunters."

"Made your point?" Jayce questioned. Tim nodded, turning and looking in Mirabelle's presumed location. "People won't give up unless they understand the danger a Pirate Lord presents. We made that point very clear, you should too. Establish yourself as something not worth touching, as long as fools think they have a chance, they will try you - and with time running out people will be getting desperate."

Jayce nodded. It made sense. "I need to go, I've got duties to tend to before bed. I will see you soon. Stay alive, Pirate Lord. Good luck!" Tim stated. Jayce nodded in appreciation. "You too," he stated, the portal disappearing. Jayce sat back and thought on what Tim had said before eventually he got up. "Bjorn, it's time. Let's get that alloy and then we're going to make a stand."

Seize the Seas Tales: Eighty-Four Out of Unknown

Damian lay face down in a pool of his own blood and drool. Sabine let out a scream as she popped her shoulder back into its socket. Enki lay slumped against a toppled and cracked stone pillar. Cinderlee knelt next to Morgause, nursing her with healing potions, one after another. But Wicke stood tall, and - for the most part - proud. They had made it to the eighty-fourth floor, and had found the stairs to the next level. They had beaten the cyclops, outsmarted the sphinxes, and now had killed the werewolves. There was little mythology left for the Dungeon to pull from – they must have been nearing the end.

Wicke turned and looked at her crew. They had gotten stronger over the last few months, and with every push they came closer to the end. "We'll be back, Dungeon, just you wait. One last time. One final push. The last and final run," she stated.

Chapter 191: God of War

There was a nervous, fearful, yet excited energy to the city of Novalis. Everywhere that Silena walked she could see people waiting, all gossiping to each other about what the upcoming Guild announcement could be about. The other street urchins were all taking bets on it; an announcement this big could only mean one thing: a Pirate Lord had something to say. That or the Sea Sovereign herself.

She approached a stall gently. For once the teller didn't scream at her or tell her to run to her parents – as if that was possible. "Excuse me, can I watch from here?" she asked carefully, patting out her rag-like dress and fluttering her eyes to the elderly man. He observed her cautiously: she wasn't yet old enough to flaunt herself in a way that would allow her into the places she wanted to go, but that didn't mean she didn't have other tricks she'd learnt. "A pearl cost," he stated.

She faltered - that price was extortionate to watch something he was going to watch himself. "Half," she countered, sacrificing the next couple of meals. If one of the legends from the strange northern realms was going to make an announcement, and with only a month to go – twenty-eight days – until the Revelry, she couldn't miss it. It could be world changing. "Deal," he stated. She reached for her drawstring purse but he held up a hand. "Pay after, come round here," he stated, inviting her around the small stall to where he had set up a small display screen that was currently rolling through the daily announcements.

He stood up, letting her hop up onto the rickety wooden stall he spent the day sat on. The screen changed. "It's starting!" clamoured a series of voices in all directions. "Good afternoon, welcome to this special broadcast. A little under an hour ago we received a special message from Ex-Pirate Lord Jayce Exarga. We have just verified its validity and permission has been granted from her Supreme Excellency, the Sea Sovereign herself, to share it with you. Please listen closely."

The screen shifted, changing to display a bounty poster of a scarred and dark-haired man with piercing blue eyes and a not-so-serious grin. Silena gasped at the amount displayed beneath it. She could hardly count that many zeros. "Hello world!" came a deep yet soothing voice from the device. "Now, I'm more than certain most of you know of me, or at the very least have heard of me. Some of you have even tried to kill me. So let me introduce myself to the rest of you: I am Jayce Exarga, Pirate Lord of the past and Pirate Lord of the future."

The screen changed, showing the bounty poster of a giant, polar bear therian. 'Bjorn,' it read. Silena was again surprised by the image shown: it showed the bear from afar, towering over people around him - children like her that looked miniscule next to him. They clung to him and he was laughing, happy. He had one less zero but the amount was still more money than she believed any one person could have.

"Time is running out," Jayce stated. "The deadline to stop me from reclaiming my title is ticking away. I will be making my way to the Revelry. I will be there." The screen changed again, this time showing a woman with pointy ears, and long canines. Her eyes were different colours: one white, the other black - but the insides seemed to glow a bloody red. She was stood leaning against the wall in the shade of a building, one hand on her large hat, the other hand on the holster of a large pistol. She stared directly at the camera, in a way that caused Silena to shudder unconsciously. 'Astris Kai'.

"But for my sanity, and the safety of everybody on that route, I invite everyone wishing to try to stop me to come straight at me now," Jayce continued. The bounty poster changed again, this time displaying a young girl with flame-like orange hair, amber eyes, and large glowing book floating in the air before her. She was saying something, her arms outstretched and blue flames flowing around her. 'Wicke'.

"You will find us just north of Novalis. On top of an island with a split peak. The island will move every five days, but will remain in roughly the same region, amongst the other rokken," Jayce stated. Immediately voices of excitement spread around. Crews that had been lying in wait rushed to their ships. And all around the world, Jayce's allies grew wide grins and shook their heads, their thoughts uniform on his strategy: it was very Jayce.

The screen shifted, rolling through the rest of the crew's bounties. "So," Jayce finalised. "Come and find us. We'll be waiting for you. But put your affairs in order first, and don't waste your lives without thought to your loved ones. Happy hunting." The screen changed, immediately showing a map of the Old World and a red cross marked in the location Ex-Pirate Lord Exarga had mentioned. "We will now resume with normal programmes," stated the Guild presenter. Silena hopped off the stool and reached into her coin pouch, but again the old man held up his hand. "What are you buying? Fruit, vegetables?" he questioned, turning his hand towards the produce across his stall. Her eyes

widened as she glanced from him to the people rushing to their ships. Perhaps not everyone was as evil as she thought.

"We've really done it now," Bjorn stated, as he and Jayce rushed around the Stacked Hand making their final preparations. Jayce's heart hammered in his chest, both out of excitement and with the heavy weight of grief over the blood they were about to shed. "Better now than on the way," Jayce rationalised, coming to a stop outside of Tempest's workshop – the djinn hard at work. "Are they ready?" he questioned. "Soon, Captain. These alloys are not as refined so it is taking longer to forge the weapons, but they will be ready. I have sent the first batch up." Jayce nodded appreciatively.

"Status?" Jayce questioned to Bjorn, as he returned from his own inspection. "Ready," Bjorn stated. "Shifts are assigned, the first combat crew is ready. The ship is concealed, thanks to Gaea, and Falconer is taking note of the first wave as we speak. Medical supplies are beyond capacity, food and drink stores are filled. Golems are on guard, on and off the ship. The Dragons are fed enough to follow orders, but still hungry for a fight. And I'm ready to give those idiots one hell of a beating," Bjorn concluded. Jayce nodded in agreement. He'd given a fair warning. Only scum would show themselves. "Captain, they are here," came Falconer's voice through the communicator. Jayce and Bjorn looked at each other. Jayce extended a fist and Bjorn bumped it. "Let's send them to the abyss." "Good luck, Captain."

Jayce stepped out onto the main deck. Even the crew that weren't due to fight for a few hours were stood waiting, eager to see just how many ships had come. There were several fleets of foes, dozens of ships in all directions. "Target is not here," confirmed Falconer. Jayce nodded to himself before looking towards his first combat crew: Astris, Mai Lu and Thalia. "Do we get to go all out?" questioned Thalia, practically salivating as she looked at the foes in all directions. "We do," Jayce confirmed. "But first, let's send a repeat of our warning. Boys! Caelie!" Jayce called out. Caelie conjured a portal in front of the forward gun, creating the other side of it in front of the closest fleet. "Fire!" yelled Fenn, Ohno pulling the lever.

The entire ship shifted on the dry dock that Gaea had made as it launched a sphere of death through the portal. The sound was awesome, deafening and animalistic in its ferocity. "How's the barrel?" Jayce questioned, as an explosion consumed the north, the entire ocean folding beneath the tear in existence that the blast had ripped. Ships that hadn't been obliterated on the cannonball's path

to its destination found themselves dragged into the canyon that the wave of air had created, before the rest found themselves reeling from the swell created from the detonation. "At least two more before repairs are needed," Wam returned.

"Send another - same type, different fleet. Then keep the last in reserve, but get Tempest to do some maintenance," Jayce commanded, turning to find Thalia missing. "Where'd she go?" he questioned, only for Astris to pull a face at him. "You told her to go all out, did you honestly think she'd wait?" she questioned. He rubbed his forehead, he should have known better. "Right, try not to hit-" The cannon roared once more, a feeling of dread crossing Jayce's chest as he questioned whether Caelie had looked before they fired. "Oi!" came an immediate response from Thalia. "They were mine!"

Jayce sighed, turning to Astris and shaking his head. "I've got this," she stated. "Dragons, go!" she commanded, the hull clanging open as Taranis and Zhurong surged forwards. "About time!" came a voice that Jayce didn't recognise. He turned to Mai Lu. "Was that you?" he questioned, a boom of thunder silencing Mai Lu's response. He shook it off and turned to the mayhem that had been unleashed. The Dragons had immediately set their eyes on the flyers and ships in the air, a considerable amount of them dispatched by the Machinist, based on the reddish colours they had been painted. From their initial ferocity, it was clear they wanted payback for the last time.

"Our turn," Jayce stated, turning towards Caelie. "I'll take the west," he stated, a portal opening in front of him that he immediately leapt through. He found himself a few hundred metres up in the air above one of the fleets. *You asked for a ringside view.* Paimon laughed inside his head. *Not what I had in mind.* Jayce's clothes disappeared beneath his suit of armour, Sola and Luna both extending outwards into a copy of his mother's greataxes. They sparked with red lightning, the crews below immediately pointing upwards in desperate panic as he tucked and dove faster before slamming the weapons down in a ship shattering strike.

"Ugh," Red stated, a week later as he wandered up to the Stacked Hand from his shift. "Are you injured?" Morgana questioned as he collapsed onto the main deck. "No, but the ocean is filthy. It's like swimming through a broken house. So many bodies, so many scavengers, so much debris!" he protested. "How much longer, it's been a week?" he questioned. Jayce nodded with sympathy. There had been a definite drop in activity, but ships were still arriving. Most turned away upon seeing the smoke-filled, corpse-ridden, and apocalyptic scene that

surrounded the Stacked Hand in all directions. But a few were still foolish enough to attempt navigating the flotsam.

“Are those ships over there just waiting for something?” Zeta questioned, pointing east. Jayce shook his head. “No, Astris dealt with them the first night. They’re dead ships,” he stated. Zeta shuddered, imagining the terror those crews had experienced with a blood-gorged vampire unleashed upon them in the middle of the night. She faltered. *Could make a good song, or at the very least a good painting.* “Right,” she stated. “Well, how much longer are we going to wait for that Demonlord? He may not even be coming and we do need to start making our way to the Revelry soon. I’d also like to do some shopping in Novalis.”

Jayce opened his mouth to respond, but Falconer’s voice interrupted him. “Captain, I believe the Piper is here,” he stated. Zeta’s eyes widened and she beamed. “See, I’m just that good at manifesting,” she stated proudly. Morgana shook her head. “Sure, you are. Jayce, I’m still not sure if it will work. It’s still a longshot,” she stated. Jayce nodded in agreement. To forcefully pull a Demon out hadn’t been attempted yet, but if it worked... “Mai Lu, Caelie, I need you both on the main deck.”

Jayce looked at his assembled squad and then at the secondary squad. “Follow the plan,” he stated clearly. Zeta began to chant before silence filled everything but Jayce’s mind. Caelie opened a portal and he, Ordo and Mai Lu marched through. They landed on the main deck of an unfamiliar ship, the crew freezing in place as Jayce unleashed a wave of Panic. Mai Lu transformed, revealing Baal from within herself before she pointed at the Piper – a tall and skinny man dressed in an extravagant dark purple suit, with a dark goatee, pale skin and long greasy hair under a top hat. “Kneel, Byleth!” Baal commanded, his words silent to Jayce and Ordo. The Demon emerged from within, confused and surprised before he was forced back in by his host, but by then it was too late. Jayce and Ordo grabbed the Piper, forcing a gag over his mouth before Mai Lu severed his legs with a sharp shard of black-red crystal.

He screamed as Jayce and Ordo dragged him back through the portal, throwing him down onto the ritual circle Morgana had painted on the floor. It matched the one that they used to get Paimon and Asmodeus into their doll forms. The portal closed before the crew could attempt to rescue their Captain, Bjorn holding down the man in the circle before Mai Lu impaled him from above with a large and brutal shard of blood. His pleas were voiceless, his magic useless, as they fell on

deaf ears. He writhed beneath the shard, his body trying to regenerate the lost limbs and the gaping hole in his shoulder.

The circle glowed a bright red, blindingly so. "I command you, Byleth – accept this new body!" Baal commanded. The magic faded and the circle disappeared, the Piper laying limp on the floor with his eyes glazed over – he was still breathing and his wounds had healed. The small clay doll next to him wriggled and writhed before gaining shape. There was a burst of long orange fur that spread out in all directions. It grew a tail, whiskers, and then pointed ears on top of its head. The cat stood up on his hind legs, stretching before turning to the group. His eyes were a brilliant green and blue mixture, and, bar standing on two legs, he didn't look particularly demonic. He said something, pointing to his previous host before folding his arms.

The Piper sat up, staring at the crew in terror. Jayce stepped forwards holding out his hand but a shard of red-black crystal flew past, decapitating the powerless man. In an instant, Zeta's magic disappeared and Jayce rounded on Mai Lu. "He was defenceless!" he snapped, a hiss coming from Byleth as he scratched Jayce's leg. "How dare you speak to the King like that, mortal!" Byleth snarled. Jayce reached down and picked up the cat by the scruff of his neck. "Put me down!" protested the Demon. "I'll get to you in a minute!" Jayce commanded, Byleth silencing immediately.

"Lord Exarga, the host retains its abilities – even without the Demon inside. He was a danger and would have realised it quickly. After a week of death, one more cannot weigh on your conscience," Baal countered. *It's true, it's in our pact.* Jayce grit his teeth before letting out a sigh. "There was more we could have learnt. We don't know for certain if the process is lethal or not," Jayce stated. Baal, or Mai Lu, shrugged. "Byleth's return is all that mattered. Welcome, my friend, there is much to fill you in on."

Jayce tossed the cat to Mai Lu, turning to the corpse of the Piper. "Caelie, open a portal back to his ship, please," Jayce stated. She did so and he tossed the corpse and its head through. "At the least it should deter any others from coming at us. Once word spreads that even the Demonlord was killed by us, I think most people will turn away," Bjorn stated, wiping the blood splatter off his chest. Jayce hoped so. He really, really hoped so.

It was few hours later before the word truly spread about the Piper's demise, and the result was immediate. Anyone who had thought the risk was worth it now had undeniable proof that it wasn't – especially once the Piper's crew started

speaking of how their Captain had died. As the survivors fled, the Rising Aces took their first breaths of true freedom. It was over, truly over, and now no one would mess with them. No one would try to stop them on their journey to the Revelry. They had won.

They let the peace sink in for a few days, letting the smoke fade and the debris sink, and during that time Byleth was brought up to speed. The walking, talking cat settling in quickly amongst the crew. His first action was to remove the rats from the hold. The days on dry land had brought numerous critters aboard, and Jayce couldn't help but feel pity for them as the Demon marched them out – their wills taken away from them by panpipes that the cat played. It was a trick that Zeta immediately grew curious about.

With the crew rested, the way clear, and the days counting down, Jayce turned his attention to the south. "Onwards to the Revelry!" he declared to the cheers of the Rising Aces.

Seize the Seas Tales: Once More Into the Breach

Wicke looked across her crew as they nursed their bruises and egos with good food in one of the best pubs in Caedom. The last run had hurt, it felt like they had come so close, yet it all felt like they were still so far. The Dungeon seemed never-ending, and perhaps it truly was. There were no records on its true size, no notes, nothing they could ask for or bribe to obtain. It was a mystery and they were, as far as they knew, the closest people had ever come to the truth. It was waiting for them. The Dungeon was waiting for them.

The night ended early, all of them aware of the task they were about to undertake once more. They had agreed this was the last one, and Wicke couldn't help but feel like she was failing them. She sat there in the darkness of her room, hugging her knees and looking towards the stray strand of moonlight peering through her curtains. *What would Jayce do?* She questioned to herself. There wasn't an answer. She didn't know.

She could feel it, as much as the others could, that time was running out. Their endurance was fading with each failure, and without a significant breakthrough it was all going to be over. "Less than two months," she told herself. "Less than two months until the Revelry. Until Jayce comes home," she stated naively. She lay back in her bed, looking up at the ceiling. "Once more. Once more and we

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will have done it. I swear. Once more into the breach and I will have the Dungeon's secret."

Chapter 192: Fool's Game

Alara was frustrated, she was furious, and everyone at the Old World headquarters knew it. "No," Commodore Kai stated once again. "Alara, I cannot permit you to take a ship and a crew on this mission. It's too dangerous, too risky, and there's too much at stake to risk on unknown information. We can't prove that your parents are in Khallid's fortress. And by all accounts, there's little reason for him to keep them alive, even if they were there. I'm sorry, truly. But the answer is no, and if you respect me not only as your friend but as also as your superior – you will listen."

The words repeated over and over again in Alara's mind. It had been weeks since they had found out about her mother's capture and nothing had been done. Her ship had been put in reserve, kept as little more than a supply ship for the new base they were building. It was nearly ready, and so far the Republic's presence had gone undetected. Every Commodore had said the same: "No." "No." "No." "No." Alara had had enough.

"What are you doing?" questioned Riley, as she entered Alara's quarters without a knock. Alara glanced over to her, zipping up her spare clothes and shoving them inside her bottomless bag. "Nothing," Alara stated quickly, finishing what she was doing before standing up and making for the door. Riley stepped into her path. "Liar," she said plainly, her brown eyes locking onto Alara's. Alara looked down at her Commander. "Step aside, please," she requested plainly. Riley shook her head. "You're being naughty, aren't you?" Riley asked childishly.

Alara held her tongue - the less people knew of her plans the better. "You're going to that Fortress Ship, to try and find your parents. Aren't you?" Riley questioned more assertively. Alara hesitated and Riley's expression changed immediately. "Let me grab my things," she stated, turning and beginning to walk away.

"No!" Alara snapped, grabbing Riley's shoulder. The Lieutenant Commander turned and looked at her. "I can't ask you to do this for me, it's too much, too risky. I could get court-martialled for this."

"Could," Riley returned. "All the more reason I go with you, to share the blame. Besides, if you're done following rules and regulations I'm joining the Rising Aces with you," she stated with a big grin. Alara glared at her and shook her head, only for a shadow to quash any hopes of a subtle escape. "No," Witchford stated plainly. "Captain, think for a moment. Your absence will go noticed if you're away for such an extended period, for certain. Hold off a few days and on

our supply run, that just happens to go near the Fortress Ship..." Witchford trailed off, smiling and nodding to a nearby patrol watching them.

Alara looked up at Witchford, her heart fluttering. "You'd do that?" she questioned. "I will do nothing other than what my orders are. There is nothing wrong with having my Captain observe my temporary command of the Courier. Provided all crew were accounted for on the way there and back, then there is nothing to report," he stated, with the tiniest of smiles. "I will await you at cast off in a few days," he reiterated before walking away. Alara looked towards Riley. "I didn't say anything to him," she promised, holding her hands up. "That's all Witchford." Alara shook her head. She was getting predictable.

Alara really didn't like feeling predictable, but couldn't help but wonder whether that was a consequence of her position. She leant on the railing of the Courier, watching the Navy sailors cast off. But her eyes quickly wandered away from the port, locking onto a figure watching her from afar. Cyrenna didn't look happy, her eyes bore into Alara – the feeling physical, even from a distance. She said something into the empty wind, her head shaking as she turned and walked back into her office. "Good luck, fool," Alara said aloud, reading the lips. *Great, just great. She knows.*

"Of course she knows. She's Commodore Kai – arguably the person running everything in the New World," Wulf stated, as Alara's squad convened in her quarters, temporarily being borrowed by Witchford as he handled supply runs. "That and she practically knows you inside and out," Brett added. Alara did not approve of the expression or the insinuation he was making. "Enough," Witchford commanded, taking control. "You will have a few hours to make contact. If the opportunity arises then get them out, otherwise you will have to leave them behind. This is the route the Courier will be on. It shall not deviate unless something drastic has happened. For the moment most of the world is focused on Pirate Lord Exarga and his bloodbath. So you should go unnoticed."

Alara nodded appreciatively before looking at Riley. "More of us should come with you," Wulf inserted, stepping forwards. Alara shook her head. "No, our presence has gone unnoticed so far – if we get caught and the Null Legion realises we have an organised fleet in the region, then that puts all the work we have done this year in jeopardy. Riley and I are running a risk that I can't have anyone else undertaking - I'm sorry," Alara stated. There were several looks of hurt and glimpses of jealousy. But the truth was that Alara didn't trust anyone else to do this job her way and to her standards other than Riley, and

perhaps Artemis. The only exception would have been Astris. "Okay," Wulf conceded. "Just... be safe."

The Fortress Ship came into view a little while later. It was still docked at the Capital of Brunxchume, its seemingly eternal position. The Courier wasn't actually docking at the city. It was just heading past, so Alara and Riley leapt over the edge – using their Focus to race across the waves. It was late evening, and they had chosen dark clothes that bore no association with the Republic. "Plan?" Riley questioned, as they raced towards the city, rather than the Fortress. "We sneak in."

They stuck to the rooftops of the city of Chull, using Riley's rifle to observe the Fortress Ship. From what they could tell Null Legion guards patrolled the walls of the ship and the main drawbridge entrance, but there didn't seem to be any particularly vigorous checks on the way in. "Should we take some uniforms?" Riley questioned. Alara shook her head. "Not until we're inside – we don't know their schedules and that could kill our time."

"So how do we get in?" Riley questioned. Alara pointed to one of the countless cannon arrays. There were large walls of guns, each sitting in large open spaces built into the ship. "Those weapon bays are likely less guarded. We can climb up and then in through there," Alara suggested. Riley nodded before faltering. "Climb up? What do you mean climb up?" she questioned, only for her face to fall. "Let's go for a swim."

It was cold, very cold for almost summer, but Alara shut the uncomfortable feeling away. They dove deep, holding their breath for as long as they could before refilling using their tubes connected to their bottomless bags. It wasn't infinite, but it was pretty close. Riley tapped Alara's foot, pointing up to the underside of the Fortress Ship. There was colossal propellers underneath, a mess of churning blades that likely would suck in and mince practically anything, or anyone attempting what they were doing. Alara made a mental note that there was no point assaulting the ship from beneath – if it ever came to that.

They swam to the edge of the colossal ship, before slowly beginning to climb. Darkness had fallen, and large spotlights periodically panned across the ship, but mostly on the side facing the city. They reached the first bay, but Alara pointed upwards. "They probably patrol more regularly closer to the bottom," she whispered. Riley sighed but nodded in agreement. Eventually they reached a bay they were happy with and climbed through the open cannon ports. To their immediate relief, no one was inside. "Right, stand guard whilst I change," Alara

stated, stripping off her wet clothes before switching and letting Riley do the same.

"I'll scan for anyone nearby," Riley stated. Alara immediately shook her head. "No, minimise Focus. The Null Legion will sense it. Pretend we're one of them. Basic to advanced only," Alara commanded. It was difficult to conceal a person's presence, but fortunately she'd had an assassin on her ship for the last year, so now it was almost second nature to her. "Lead on," Riley stated, drawing a pistol and a large knife.

They crept through the cannon bay towards one of the doors leading away from it. The area was massive, with guns larger than any Alara had seen before – with the exception of the Stacked Hand's forward cannon. A near endless supply of cannonballs and powder lay locked behind grates, ready for use in an instant. The dark, grey, and large area was also immaculately kept – there was no wastage, no real dirt, and nothing that would get in the way of the cannons from doing their duty. Alara couldn't help but be impressed. It was crude and efficient.

That crudeness faded in royal gold as soon as they stepped out of the ring of cannon bays into the inner circle of the fortress. Oil lanterns lit the stone and metal passageway circling a series of huge elevators running upwards in the centre of the ship. The walls were mounted with decorations and banners: artwork, golden embellishing, images of General Barca Khallid and the Sea Sovereign. The corridors were huge, designed so the massive cannons could be wheeled through to one of the elevators and presumably carried to another floor for maintenance. "Let's find some stairs," Alara stated, looking for a map.

"Someone's coming!" Riley warned in a hush, ducking behind a structural pillar as Alara dropped into a thin alcove within the wall. "The Quartermaster says we might be leaving in a few days," said a Null Legion guard dressed in full uniform. "Good, it's about time we leave this place behind. Perhaps we'll even get some real action. The Pirate Lords of old have been kicking up quite a fuss – maybe we'll get to stomp them back into line," said another guard. The first chuckled. "We can hope. I call first blood on Exarga, did you see the reports of the destruction he caused?"

Alara met eyes with Riley, the pair of them stepping out from cover behind the Null Legionnaires. "What the—" cried one, as Riley stuck her blade up and underneath the skull-like gas mask of the other. Alara grabbed his head, kicked his knees out and wrenched hard and fast to the side. Both guards dropped. "In

here," Alara stated, dragging her corpse into the nearest cannon bay. "Strip them and change," she commanded, Riley nodding in confirmation.

The uniforms were surprisingly heavy. They wore grey trench coats, adorned with numerous pockets and a thick metal chestplate over the top. They had rather comfortable and manoeuvrable puffy trousers, with armoured knees and tight wrappings that tucked into simple leather shoes. They had darker grey leather gloves and durable metal helmets that the skull-like gasmask clipped into. The eyes of the helmet were a visored black that seemed to adjust automatically depending on the darkness of the room. They had large backpacks filled with supplies and air-filters, that had a hose that connected to the mask. The guards had theirs disconnected so Alara didn't bother with hers. She took out her own glaive, substituting it for the guard's. Riley took his bayoneted rifle, holding it tight. "What about the bodies?" Riley asked, pushing hers behind a cannon. "They'll be fine here. More importantly we should be fine to wander around."

"I'm betting the control centre will be up. If I was in command of designing this place I'd put the cells as close to the bottom as possible – to limit chance of a rescue. Khalid will also want a personal view of his enemies as he crushes them." "So let's go down then," Riley stated, the pair of them straightening up and stepping back out into the corridor. They followed the ring until they found a continuous staircase spiralling around the outside of the elevator.

They began the long descent, taking their time and ensuring they took in their surroundings. Unsurprisingly the majority of the ship was designated to the outer cannon rings, storage areas for those cannons, onboard forges, crew accommodation, and mess halls. They came across no one for most of the journey until they eventually bumped into a lone Null Legionnaire. She faltered and looked at them both. "Where are you two going?" she questioned, in a firm and assertive manner. "Prisoner cells, for aid in an interrogation," Riley lied immediately.

"Ah, well I'm impressed you've already managed to get blood on your mask already, did you forget to clean it from last time?" she questioned. Riley laughed nervously. "Why are you taking the stairs?" the Legionnaire pressed. "Getting our steps in, been a long shift of nothing," Alara quickly covered. The Legionnaire nodded. "Me too, glad to see I'm not alone in that mindset. Peacetime is... too much idle time for my liking. Carry on, enjoy," she stated, stepping past them both as they stood to attention. A moment passed and Alara

felt like she could breathe again. "Too close," she stated, Riley nodding in agreement.

They carried onwards into the bowels of the ship eventually reaching a point where the elevators stopped. The stairs continued, but Alara guessed that led to where the engines were kept. They stepped out next to the elevators, taking in their surroundings. There was a single passageway leading forwards: a narrow path into darkness with a sole lamp on the horizon. Alara and Riley both edged forwards into the pathways.

Prison cells sat on either side, all holding someone or even something. "Must be a guard station here, somewhere," Riley suggested. Alara nodded and they continued onwards towards the lantern hanging on the wall at the edge of the passage way. The path split but both of them froze as they looked in opposite directions. There were three lanterns above the one on the wall that had been concealed, and more in a large circular route ahead of them – in either direction. "Gods," Alara muttered, realising, as she saw the expanse ahead of her and the walkways above her, just how big the prison was. "There's got to be hundreds," Riley muttered. "Stay together," Alara commanded, the pair of them moving forwards.

A few guards patrolled above them, but Alara and Riley ensured they did a full loop before they did anything. There were four separate passageways leading from the elevators, each enclosed and narrow before opening up into the four-story prison ring built within the base of the Fortress Ship. With the area mapped in their minds, and an emergency escape planned – one mostly involving fighting and shooting their way out – they headed up towards the guard station they had spotted.

"Evening," Alara stated as she stepped inside, the lone Legionnaire turning away from his dinner to look at her. "Where's the prisoner manifest stored?" Alara questioned. "Huh? What do you want that for?" he questioned. Alara pulled a face that clearly translated through her body language as he sighed. "Who you after?" he questioned, groaning as he got to his feet. Alara held her breath. "Vanathur," Riley inserted. The guard paused and looked at her before glancing at Alara. "Which one? For what reason?"

"Victoire Vanathur," Alara said, her voice croaking as she said it. "Interrogation," she added. He sighed, grabbing a set of keys and trundling past her. Riley pinched Alara's arm as she followed the guard, a silent warning to get it together. Alara simply nodded, steeling herself and waiting for the worst. They were led

back and down the way they had come, but eventually the Legionnaire stopped, a set of keys in his hand. "Here," he stated, turning to look at them but keeping the door locked. Alara practically rushed at the bars, the Legionnaire faltering as she peered inside the darkness.

A single figure was inside: a skinny woman with her arms shackled to the wall behind her. After more than a decade, and in the darkness, Alara recognised her immediately. She had the same olive skin as Alara, was of similar height and build, but that was where the similarities ended. She sat slumped over, her hair slightly wavy but silvery-blond. She looked skinny, and weak, but as Alara hovered at the doorway she stirred, lifting her head up defiantly and looking through her long hair. Her hazel eyes locked onto Alara's, her expression cold and sinister. A moment passed as Alara felt Panic push through the anti-magic chains, and then an unconscious word squeaked through Alara's mask. "Mum?" she whimpered, the eyes of the woman in cell widening as her mouth fell. "Alara...?" she questioned, almost wordlessly.

"Hang on," stated the guard that had escorted them. "What's going on here?" "Indeed a good question," came a cold, deep voice from behind the guard. Alara and Riley immediately raised their weapons, taking defensive stances as the guard jumped out of his skin and stood at attention. Alara immediately recognised his voice - it had been there on the day of the Sovereign's invasion - and his face had been plastered all over the fortress.

General Barca Khalid stood alone. He was a stern but handsome man in his late forties, with light-brown wrinkled skin, and military-style salt-and-pepper hair. His eyes glowed in the darkness, both a reddish-brown colour. He wore a uniform not too dissimilar to what Alara was wearing, only his was a red-brown colour with gold markings and medals plastered across it. He held a warhammer in his right hand, the weapon styled like a judge's gavel and made of a silver metal with gold embossing. He was surprisingly short, by no means not of average height, but shorter than Alara.

"General, uh, these two - uh - I think they're intruders," stammered the guard. Barca Khalid stepped forwards to stand next to the guard, Alara instinctively backed away from the cell door towards Riley. The guard drew his weapon and pointed it at Alara. The General then swung his hammer, splattering the guard's head into the metal wall. The corpse fell with a crash and the General immediately took out a handkerchief to wipe the gore off the weapon. "You don't say," he said coldly, before looking up at Alara.

"I must apologise for not providing a better welcome for the two of you. I would have prepared cells of your own had I known I had guests coming. And not just any guest at that! The final piece of the Vanathur line, if I'm not mistaken?" he stated, Alara's blood running cold as she and Riley continued to edge backwards up a stone incline leading towards the next level. "Take your mask off, Alara, I know it's you," he stated.

Alara hesitated. "I gave you an order, soldier," he stated, a fearsome wave of Panic dropping Alara to her knees. She reached up and wrenched the mask off, staring the General down with an expression of utter hatred. "Ah, so the rumours are true: the New World couldn't resist invading the Old one. But I suppose this could simply be a daughter attempting to see her parents. The world would be better off with that story, it would be a more peaceful world – wouldn't it? One that I think you would prefer."

Alara held her tongue. "Apologies soldier, I know not your name," he stated, taking a medal off his chest and throwing it into the air. The golden token melted away. "Lieutenant Commander Riley," Riley stated without thought. She turned to Alara in disbelief. "Riley, ay, well – I apologise to you. Alara, kill her, or else I will seize this chance to start a war," he threatened. Alara raised her glaive and unleashed a bolt of energy from the end. He batted it aside with his hammer, but Riley seized the opening for herself, unleashing a shot from her borrowed rifle.

Khallid fell backwards onto the floor, a hole left in the wall behind him. "What?" Riley and Alara both questioned in disbelief. "Ow," Khalid said from the floor, beginning to sit up. "Run!" screamed a voice from inside the cell. "Run!" it repeated, Alara and Riley both turning and racing along the walkway towards the nearest passageway leading to the stairs. "I got him, I swear I got him!" Riley stated, looking down at the rifle. "Piece of shit!" she yelled, tossing it aside and drawing out her actual rifle. They leapt from the walkway, dropping in front of the passageway.

The passageway was full of bodies, a large group of Null Legion waiting for them. "Oh hell!" Alara stated, shoving her fingers in her ears as Riley placed her rifle on Alara's shoulder before firing. The bullet passed straight through the group, hitting a cable within the elevator that snapped with a loud crash. Alara tore her way through the few Legionnaires remaining before they came to the elevators. "Stairs?" Riley suggested, as shouts in all directions indicated more guards on their way, as well as the Betrayer. "No, I have an idea," Alara stated,

using her glaive to leverage the doors of the absent elevator. Riley helped and they stepped to the edge. "The cable, hold onto it!" Alara commanded.

"Vanathur!" yelled Khalid behind them. Alara swung and cut the cable, grabbing onto the metal for dear life as they were both launched upwards by the rapidly descending elevator car. The huge metal block passed them, several screams coming from within as they shot upwards. "Prepare to jump, and don't stop running!" Alara stated, the pair coming to the end of their ride. "Now!" Alara yelled, the pair letting go and grabbing onto anything they could as the cable smashed into the top of the elevator shaft. Alara pushed off, using her Focus to force a footing as she aimed her glaive at the doors of the shaft and blew them off their hinges. She and Riley then surged forwards, gunning and cutting down anyone in their path as they ran.

"This way!" Riley stated, the pair of them emerging out into the darkness of the night as they stepped out onto a viewing platform. "Jump!" Alara stated, leaping onto the edge of the balcony before leaping forwards as far as she could. Riley leapt after her, the widening edge of the Fortress Ship growing beneath them. They leapt once more with Focus, the splattering impact of water rushing to meet them instead.

Alara screamed as she fell, forcing a platform beneath her to lessen her momentum before she rolled off it and broke into a sprint across the surface of the water. Alarms screeched behind her as she ran as fast as she could with Riley close behind. Her eyes grew blurry, and before she knew it tears surged out from within her as she abandoned her parents once more. They ran into the darkness of the night, only collapsing once they were on the safe and hard wood of the Courier. "They're there! They're there!" Alara cried, as Witchford stood before her. "Take us back home, and inform the Commodores of what we've discovered."

Seize the Seas Tales: Glory For Another Day

The alarms continued to sing across the Ironclad: the two intruders had escaped but that didn't matter. "General, your orders?" questioned Captain Fell, immediately marching towards Khalid as soon as he entered the command centre. "I want them tailed. Find their nest but do not engage!" he ordered. "Yes General!" echoed numerous voices around him. He then turned away and rubbed his forehead. "What trouble..." he muttered. "Hail the Sovereign, and tell her I have news on the Republic."

Chapter 193: Where the World Resumed

“Morgause, cover me!” Damian yelled out, darting between breaths of acid, fire and lightning from the colossal hydra in front of them. “Always!” she roared, following closely before leaping and slashing upwards with her sword to sever the neck of one of the heads as it slammed downwards towards Damian. The creature reeled backwards, steam bellowing from the severed head as the neck began to split and divide. But Damian charged forwards, focusing everything he could into his metal gauntlet before he struck the body. He felt bone crack and then crunch beneath the impact, the hardened scales over the creature’s torso breaking. An opening had been made.

They had made it all the way to the ninetieth floor. It had been a marathon, one which they were leaving nothing behind for. “Wicke!” Damian yelled, making large backwards leaps to weave away from the thrashing beast. She chanted loudly, a huge pile of magic stones at her feet. “Hellfire!” she screamed, unleashing a burning plume of blue fire. The stones melted away at her feet. “Echo!” she screamed, another eight plumes of fire spreading around her and blasting at the multiheaded serpent. The creature writhed in the flames before its eyes snapped towards Wicke. “The chest! There’s a hole!” Damian yelled, as he, Enki and Sabine all lunged to defend Wicke.

Morgause held her sword firmly in both hands. It felt lighter than it ever had, and throughout the last months she had swung it thousands of times. She felt the blade vibrate in her hands, her exhaustion rampant, but her adrenaline coursing through her veins. She felt one with the sword, and a small whisper echoed in the back of her mind. “It’s time,” she told herself, surging forwards with the sword low by her side as she locked her eyes onto the gap in the creature’s torso. *For my sisters.*

“I vow to let no evil escape my sight. To let no foe push me aside. To let no glory fail to fall upon me. I will be the greatest, the strongest on the battlefield. And I will protect my friends and my family until the end of days! I will leave a legacy like no other! Divine Smite!” she yelled, leaping and lunging forwards with the greatsword through the flames and the thrashing of heads. The tip of her sword bounced off a neck, reangling before entering the crack in the scales. She yelled as she pushed with all her might, the blade pressing deeper and deeper into the creature’s flesh until it staggered backwards and began to topple. She kept pushing, a golden glow around her blade, the flesh parting beneath her, until – with a crash – she found herself stood atop the corpse of the hydra. She panted

heavily, reaching up and taking off her helmet before throwing it aside. The corpse bubbled and then burst into a shower of white particles as she fell to the floor.

Cheers spread around the arena. "We did it!" Wicke screamed, dropping to her knees – her hands steaming and tears in her eyes. "We actually did it," she said more softly to herself. They had made it through ninety floors. The end was in sight – it had to be. They collapsed one after another as exhaustion set in, the battle long and fearsome, but injuries minor. "Come on," Damian said at last, offering a hand towards Wicke and helping her to her feet. She took it with a groan, looking over to Cinderlee as she checked over the others before making her way over to Wicke. She took the young girl's hands, pouring a healing potion over them before bandaging them up.

Wicke approached the magic stone on the floor. It was massive, larger than any she had seen before, and amongst the purple crystal were swirls of gold. With help she put it in her bottomless bag before the six of them turned their attention to the door leading to the next floor. "Onwards," Wicke stated, leading the charge with the others following cautiously and closely behind her. "Nice one," Damian said softly to Morgause. She nodded appreciatively, a small smile on her face and her hands on the hilt of her sword as she awaited their next battle.

But there was no next battle. For multiple days and seven more floors they encountered nothing. It was expansive, empty, and, to all their surprise, they found what looked like old outposts. There were ancient forts of stone that had been half-built, as if to guard in one direction – in the direction they were coming from. "Wicke, what is this?" Damian questioned, as they continued walking onwards.

"I-I-I don't know," Wicke returned, pausing to take in her surroundings. She looked towards Cinderlee. "Little is known about the end of the past," she stated. Wicke nodded, reaching into her bottomless bag to pull out a notebook. "A little over five hundred years ago there was an apocalypse. One that sent the people of the New World into the Dungeons, and led to the creation of the Frontier," Wicke recited. "Nothing is known about the apocalypse but it happened." "Perhaps all those exposed to it perished, it would explain the sole perspective of the past," Morgause suggested, glancing around for anything that looked hostile. "Then these forts are checkpoints against anything trying to force their way into the Dungeons. The monsters are guardians," Wicke theorised.

"Hey, I see light ahead," Sabine stated, pointing onwards and hurrying forwards. "Wait up, who knows what it could be! Sabine! Sabine!" Wicke called after her. "She'll be fine," stated Cinderlee. "I've packed enough explosives in her bag to end her quickly if not," she added. Wicke stared in horror at Cinderlee before looking down at her own gear out of worry the same had been done for her. "You'll die slowly I'm afraid," Cinderlee said, in a most unsettling manner.

They broke into a run after Sabine darting out of the cave into the light. It took several moments for their eyes to adjust but when it did Wicke let out a large gasp. They were outside, underneath a bright blue, sunny sky. The breeze was strong and cool, and endless expanses of farmland lay ahead of them. The crops had grown wild, and were dotted with all manner of greenery amongst the wheat, corn, and vegetable patches.

"Are we... are we outside?" questioned Morgause. Wicke crouched down and picked up a clump of dry dirt. It felt real, but there was something off. "What's the time?" Wicke questioned to Cinderlee. She looked at her wristwatch. "Midday," she answered. Wicke looked up towards the sun. "Oh, midnight," corrected Cinderlee. "That answers that," muttered Enki, wandering over to a running stream and laying down in it. "Oh that's nice."

"So we're still in the Dungeon? This is all an illusion?" questioned Morgause. Wicke approached the field, reaching down and taking a piece of wheat. She chewed it before spitting it out. "No, it's real. Look there's tools over there. Someone made this," she stated. Several pieces of rusted farm equipment lay amongst the fields. "Well," Damian said cautiously, "let's carry on. See what we find."

They spent several hours walking, passing ruins of houses and an old town. Eventually they came to another floor. "Wicke, we should sleep, search the next floor properly tomorrow," Damian said cautiously to her. She turned on him in disbelief. "Stop? Now? We're here Damian, everything we've been searching for. This is what my sisters wanted me to find! What Jayce wanted me to find!" she stated. Damian pointed past her: Sabine was already asleep on the floor, her head in Cinderlee's lap as she stroked her hair with one hand and read a book with the other. Wicke looked down, her fists clenched. "Tomorrow. We've done it, okay?" Damian settled. Eventually she nodded, resigning herself to rest.

Wicke was the first on her feet after approximately eight hours of rest. Damian could have sworn she'd counted the minutes, but he vaguely remembered stirring in his sleep and seeing her snoring away with her grimoire over her face.

“Come on,” she ushered, shoving jerky into her mouth and stomping forwards along the tunnel. “Can I tie her up?” Morgause questioned to Damian. He shook his head, dragging his feet after her.

The five of them all crashed into her as they stumbled forwards, unaware that she had stopped. She turned at them with a look of frustration. “What?” Damian questioned. She then extended her arms outwards. They were stood at the top of a plateau, a giant city in front of them. “Woah!” Damian exclaimed, stepping forwards and taking in the view. The city was entirely white, each cube-like building made of a white stone not too dissimilar to the outside of the Dungeon. It sat in a colossal ring, circling another Dungeon built in the middle. There were gardens, a river that ran through the middle, playgrounds, a large forest on the outside with its own lake. And just like the floor above there was a sky above, only now there was a bright moon.

“I don’t believe it,” Sabine muttered. “We’ve actually found the city of the ancients. This is where they took refuge. It has to be.” Wicke pointed to a long and wide path leaning downwards. “This way,” she stated, surging forwards down the path. The others looked at each other before following. They passed through the surrounding forests - eerily there was no life other than plants - then through the open gates guarding the city wall before splitting up.

Damian pushed open a door to a house. The door was unlocked and the inside was covered in dust. He checked the bedrooms, finding clothes still in a cupboard, toys on the floor. There was even the traces of ancient food in what must have been a fridge. It was strange, creepy, and he quickly stepped outside. The others found the same, only to almost immediately notice the absence of one member of the group.

Wicke had left the others behind. She hadn’t meant to but they were so slow and had ignored the most interesting part of the city: the tower at the centre of it. She approached it immediately, her heart hammering away in her chest. She touched the stone, it vibrated the same as the Dungeon’s outer tower. It felt like the same material, it even had the same shell-like engravings buried within the rock. Yet something felt different. She turned her attention to the main doors, both of which lay wide open, a set of stairs leading inside. Wicke didn’t hesitate.

With every step the world seemed to get cooler and then colder, before outright freezing. She descended into darkness, before a blue glow illuminated the path ahead of her. She stepped forwards with baited breath, her eyes and then mouth widening as she entered into a large circular chamber. Before her lay a large

machine, a huge glass chamber of a round metal base covered in buttons and dials. Mist flowed off the glass, the outside frosted over and the inside a glowing ice cyan.

Wicke edged forwards, her eyes locked on the chamber. She walked right up to it, carefully reaching forwards to touch the glass. She wiped the frosted surface, the inside becoming clear and revealing a brown-haired man floating in the ice. He wore long orange robes, and his arms were outspread – as if he was still casting a spell. Beneath him lay an orb, a crystallised ball of shadow contained wisps of purple and red.

“Wicke!” came a voice from the entrance, but she ignored it, instead looking down at the buttons and dials. They all looked the same, but a lever drew her attention. She grabbed it and pulled it down, her hand locked onto the lever as the entire room began to shake. “Wicke!” yelled Damian once more, dashing forwards into the room. She turned and looked at him, but then he froze in place and everything turned white.

“Oh,” said a soft voice behind her, “hello?” Wicke snapped around, turning to find the man who had been in the chamber in front of her. He was taller than she had been expecting, his beard well-kept but medium-length hair messy. His eyes bore down at her, both a soft brown, but also merged with a curious red colour. “Who are you?” Wicke immediately questioned. He frowned, analysing her closely before bursting into laughter. “It has been a long time since anyone asked my name. Called me Porthos,” he stated. “And you are?”

“Wicke,” she returned. “Are you a Mage?” she questioned. He nodded and she folded her arms. “I am the Archmage of Fire, young girl. Do you not know of me?” he questioned. She shook her head. He faltered for a moment and then held up a finger. “You’re not from here, are you?” Wicke shook her head. “The inhabitants have left the Dungeons already?” questioned the Wizard. She nodded. “Some time ago?” She nodded again. “Ah, how long ago?”

“Five hundred years, give or take,” she answered. His eyes widened and then his face darkened. “Ah, I see – then that doesn’t give us too much time,” he stated with a hint of regret. “What do you mean?” Wicke questioned. He looked her up and down. “Too much time has passed and I am too spent to answer too many of your questions. So please, little Wizard, ask quickly what you desire of me before I am released from my mortal bindings.”

“Oh, uh, I need guidance. My sisters asked me to reach the end of the Dungeon, they wanted me to find something but I don’t know what. Any ideas?” she asked. He shook his head. “I’m sorry, I do not know. However, my colleagues may have the answers you seek – I was always the weakest amongst them so they may be in a better state to answer your questions. Anything else?” he questioned, a genuine look of wanting to help on his face. “The Dungeons, how were they made?”

“These things, oh simple. Well, from a certain point of view. They were created from a unity of divinity and the arcane. You may have noticed my friend: the Demon inside the chamber. She sacrificed herself as a raw conduit to protect her people whilst I, a Wizard, channelled the magic to create the life that protected the people within the Dungeon,” Porthos explained. Wicke nodded along. “I am rather disappointed I wasn’t able to sense the doors had opened and people have left, but I suppose that’s part of my duty.”

“But what of the magic stones?” Wicke questioned. “How do you make them?” “The stones? They’re just raw mana. Can you sense your mana fountain within you?” he questioned. She nodded. “Visualise a bit of that coming out of you into your hands, then condense it like your squeezing it with all your might.” The empty space they were in began to shake, the white space beginning to crack. “Damn and blast. So fast, well that’s life for you. I’m guessing my apprentice is long dead, so better you than no one,” he stated, reaching out to his side. A huge, orange tome flew into his hands. He pressed it into her hands. “I’m sorry we couldn’t talk more, you seem like a sweet girl. Find the other Archmages, they’ll help! Run through the portal before everything collapses, I’ll try and get everyone out! Good luck, goodbye, don’t forget me – it’s Porthos, fire guy!”

The vision faded but the room continued to shake. “What did you do?” Damian questioned, pulling her away from the machine. She looked down, the orange grimoire was in her hands – the grimoire of an ancient Archmage. “I spoke to him,” she stated, her eyes lighting up with excitement before she turned back to the chamber and heard a loud crack. The ice cracked and then shattered, the Mage and Demon inside both certainly dead. “Portal!” yelled Sabine, pointing to the stairs leading out of the chamber. “Go!” Wicke yelled, the six of them running for the technicolour swirl. The others darted through, but she faltered, turning and taking one last glance. There were paintings on the walls, images of shadows with red eyes that looked exactly like the numerous people and animals in front of them. “Mimics?” she questioned, before a hand grabbed her shoulder and dragged her through as the ceiling collapsed.

Wicke coughed dust as they emerged out into the morning air. There were numerous other adventurers emerging through portals, and the entire region seemed to be shaking. "My gods, the tower!" called out a fellow adventurer, the white tower shaking before cracking apart. "Move! Move!" yelled Morgause, grabbing Sabine and Cinderlee and pulling them away as the Dungeon fell apart. Damian, Wicke and Enki raced after them. "Don't stop!" Wicke told them once she caught up to the trio, racing past them with the grimoire still in her arms.

They didn't stop until they made it back to their accommodation, the six of them collapsing through the doorway onto the floor. Almost immediately the numerous eyes fell upon Wicke, who had set upon devouring the magic in the tome for all it was worth and was flicking through pages one after another. "So many spells..." she muttered, half drooling over the book until a hand slapped her leg. "Ouch!" she protested, returning to reality. Damian glared at her for an explanation. "Oh," she said softly.

"Oh? Oh! You collapsed the Dungeon! What do you mean 'oh'?" he exclaimed. "Wicke, what did you see? What happened in there?" Sabine said more gently. "There was an ancient Mage – an Archmage – a Wizard. I asked him about my sisters and he didn't know. I asked him about the Dungeon and he said it was made from him and a sacrificed Demon. Uh, he told me to find the others. His lifespan was spent so we didn't get much of a chance to speak," she rattled off. The others seemed to deflate, sitting back on their spot before all slowly huddling up into balls. "So it was for nothing..." muttered Damian.

"Nothing? Nothing! What do mean nothing? I got the grimoire of an Archmage – do you not know how big this is?" she questioned in disbelief. The others all slowly looked at her. "Could we sell it?" questioned Sabine. Wicke almost lunged at her. "Come on, we saw an ancient city and solved the mystery of the Dungeon. The next one should be easy-" Sharp anger crossed the numerous faces. "You want to do that again? We nearly died!" Damian stated. "The Guild is also unlikely to take to the loss of the Dungeon well," Cinderlee said softly. "Fair."

Wicke bit her lip and then sighed. She shut her eyes, focusing on the pool of magic within her before she dragged a bit of it out of her and squeezed in her hands. When she unclenched, a small purple stone sat in her hands. Damian, Sabine and Enki all leapt to their feet, their eyes wide, mouths open and fingers pointing at the stone. "How did you do that?" Damian questioned in sheer shock.

Wicke took a breath and settled her heart before she put on a smug expression and looked at the disbelievers. "He taught me how to, and I can teach you how to as well," she offered. Damian and Sabine both got down on their knees and bowed their heads in apology, as Enki sat down more casually. "Teach us!" they both said. "Teach us how to make infinite money," they stated, almost pleadingly will praying to her.

Wicke glanced towards Morgause. "You could destabilise the entire Guild economy with this knowledge. This must be shared with the Republic," she stated sensibly. Wicke bit her tongue before eventually nodding. "When the time comes, I will. But first, I need you all to agree to continue travelling with me. We've beaten one Dungeon – we can do the rest too." The group looked at each other. "Sounds good," Enki said casually, for the most part unbothered.

"Of course," Cinderlee stated, analysed the magic stone Wicke had made for any imperfections. Wicke looked towards Damian. "Need you ask?" he responded. She smiled at him and looked towards Sabine. "Teach me how to make money." Wicke rolled her eyes and looked towards Morgause. She nodded. "Great." "We should leave promptly," advised Cinderlee. "The Guild will want answers and it would not be wise to be here when they start pointing fingers at whoever they believe ruined their bottom-line."

"Agreed, pack your bags and let's get out of here!" Wicke stated, swapping her grimoire for Porthos' and standing up. "Hey, uh, what's the date today?" she then asked Cinderlee. "Today? The eighteenth of Fragaria," she stated. Damian and Wicke both looked at each other. "Shit! It's the Revelry!" they both exclaimed.

Seize the Seas Tales: Difficult Positions

"I warned you how risky this was and you did it anyway!" Cyrenna scolded, as Alara and Riley sat in her quarters. "You've put us all at risk for this, and you didn't even get your parents out!" Alara opened her mouth to speak but Cyrenna glared at her. "If there's anything other than an apology... Alara, I mean it – this is a bad look for you and one I do not want to deal with right now." Alara looked down at her feet. "I'm sorry. I've put you in difficult position and I will accept any and all punishments. I take responsibility for Riley's actions, she was coerced."

"Bullshit," Riley inserted. "Sorry, Commodore," she immediately followed with as Cyrenna glared at her. "Don't worry Lieutenant Commander, I know you well

enough to know you aren't coerced into anything. It's hard enough getting you to follow orders as is." Riley muttered something under her breath. "Sorry?" Cyrenna growled. "Nothing..." Riley said wisely. Cyrenna nodded, stepping away. "Riley, get out."

Riley needed no further words, practically running for the door and leaving Alara to her fate. Cyrenna walked slowly towards the door, locking Alara in before returning to her desk and sitting behind it. She glared at Alara but eventually the expression softened. She sighed. "What was their state?" she asked, mostly from professional stance, but also as Alara's friend. "Alive..." Alara said quietly. "Okay. I'm... glad to hear that. I'm sorry we can't do more for them, but until the situation back home is resolved we're on our own."

"I've compromised us..." Alara said weakly, her eyes brimming with tears as she came to terms with her mess-up. "You have, but you're not the only one. Our supply runs have not gone unnoticed, there was... a brush with the locals." Alara looked up at Cyrenna who was sat casually biting her nail. "How bad?" Alara questioned cautiously. Cyrenna shook her head. "I can only hope this base is defensible. I'm hoping the Revelry takes the heat off us. Jayce and Astris will undoubtedly do something that draws the world's gaze, and hopefully the Sovereign's too."

A silence fell across them both, neither of them certain. "My punishment?" Alara questioned. "A demotion," Cyrenna said bluntly. Alara's heart dropped in her chest, her eyes widening. "Fortunately, I was going to recommend you to the rank up. You found your parents, survived an encounter with the Machinist, and an unofficial encounter with a Betrayer – all whilst training Witchford and others on your crew for further duties. Truth be told, Riley had requested to go on your unofficial mission without you. I almost let her because of how well you've managed her and the assassin."

Alara smiled. "Wipe that smile off your face. I now have to deal with all this upcoming shit as your CO not as your colleague," Cyrenna stated. Alara forced a frown. "Sorry," she said softly. Cyrenna rolled her eyes and gestured to the door. "Come back for drinks this evening. We can talk about the results of the Revelry then." Alara stood up and nodded, slowly walking to the door before unlocking it. "I owe you."

"No you don't. I would have done the same in your shoes if it was Beo or Tris. Just... don't force my hand again – trust me to handle things." Alara nodded and stepped outside. *Commodore... Fuck!*

Chapter 194: The Revelry

Jayce heart raced as he stood at the bow of the Stacked Hand, feeling the waves break beneath him as they sailed south as quickly as they could. It had been an entire year since the war came to an end. An entire year since the Sea Sovereign had seized the world. An entire year since he had had his title taken from him. Ships lined the horizon, all curious to see the arrival of the New Pirate Lords, but he ignored the prying eyes, locking his gaze onto the lone island ahead of him: the Sea Sovereign's lair.

The island was shaped like a huge cleaver, with a handle jutting out to the north on the east side of the island. A series of large piers sat in front and beneath of the main body, just in front of the colossal mansion that was the Sovereign's home. It was a soft eggshell colour, and looked like a mansion or a plantation house. It looked like two stories on approach, but as the Stacked Hand came to dock amongst the other ships, Jayce realised just how big the house was. It was at least thirty metres in height and about a hundred metres wide. Each floor had to be about ten metres high from the colossal windows placed along the front and the huge set of main doors.

Outside and around the island were numerous Null Legion, all patrolling or manning gun emplacements. They were guiding the guests towards the back, heading around the side of the mansion to the gardens beyond. One Legionnaire approached the Stacked Hand before calling up to Jayce. "Exarga, right?" she questioned. "Yeah," he called down in response. The Legionnaire nodded and beckoned over another soldier. Jayce ignored them and turned towards his anxious and excited crew.

"We're here. We're actually here," Zeta said in slight disbelief. Jayce nodded, struggling to force away his grin. "We are. I don't know how long this will take, or if it will go peacefully – so I need all of you to be on your guard. Bjorn, Astris and Caelie will be coming with me," he stated. The crew nodded, apart from Arthuria who looked distinctly disappointed. "Captain," she said quietly. He looked at her. "Can I come along? My sister may be here and this could be a good chance to talk to her," she stated.

Jayce thought for a moment before nodding. "Caelie, you'll stay here. I can't take everyone." She stomped her foot in protest. "I need you to get us out if something goes wrong," he reassured her. Jayce then pointed towards the handle of the island. "That looks like a perfect escape point to me. The Stacked Hand can fling past it and we can leap aboard from there. Be careful, all of you. Who knows what

games are being played." Jayce placed a reassuring hand on the top of Caelie's head. She grabbed him in a tight hug in response. "I'll be fine," he reassured, looking towards his lieutenants. "Ready," they all stated.

They disembarked, following the guards around the side of colossal mansion. The rear of the mansion was decorated with a huge flower garden and hedges, a huge variety of colours arranged in neat rows. But it wasn't the garden that they were being led to. A large circular building had been built in the middle of the area, a stone path leading up from it to the mansion. The building was made of a black-red stone and seemed in direct contrast to the mansion. It was massive in itself and countless guests were pouring inside, all eager to see the event for themselves.

"Jayce!" called a voice from the side, amongst the surrounding pillars that held up the wide conical roof. He smiled as a familiar face waved him over. Her tabby-coloured hair had been cut short and had the top tied up into a small ponytail, the bottom still over her neck. The small bell attached to her green choker rang as she waved to him. "Kitty," Jayce stated with a big grin, as she hugged him tightly. "It's good to see you!" he added earnestly, relieved to see her alive.

"And you! Bjorn, Astris... uh, who are you?" she questioned towards Arthuria. "Arthuria Pendragon," she answered. Kitty raised an eyebrow but pushed her thoughts aside. "Here I was thinking you'd dress up for the event," she stated, pouting as she looked at his simple shirt, trousers and combat boots. "At least you've done your eyes," she added, looking intently at his blue contacts before pulling back.

She wore a simple grey leather jacket, a white tank-top, a short plaid pleated grey skirt, and large heavy black boots. She had done her make-up, her green and yellow eyes adorned with a layered green finish. "Anyway," she stated, gesturing behind her to the shadows. Somme Ankor nodded to Jayce, stepping forwards to shake his hand. He looked larger than Jayce remembered; the muscled man had put on considerable bulk – his arm even larger than before. He had light-brown skin, a bald head, and a black eye patch over his left eye. Jayce immediately noticed the upgrades to his metal left arm. "Good to see you," he stated. "You too," Jayce stated, before looking past him to Rebel Red.

He had a shaved head, his auburn hair barely more than a short fuzz on his scalp, but he had grown a considerable beard. He looked gaunt, almost ill, and his face had dark rings under his eyes. He had numerous new tattoos that immediately reminded Jayce of the fallen Delivery Kat – Anne Muerte. He didn't smile, he

simply nodded to Jayce from afar. "Good to see you, Red," Jayce stated before looking at Kitty. She couldn't hide the anxious expression on her face from him. Jayce glanced back to Bjorn, both of them sharing the same worrying thought.

"Red, I think you should sit this one out. We'll be fine without you, rest up," Kitty suggested. He shook his head, stepping forwards. Kitty opened her mouth and then seemed to change her mind. "Right, well we should probably go in – don't want someone sitting in our seats," Kitty said with a grin, turning to Jayce before linking her arm with his. "Onwards then," he said reassuringly to her, leading on.

They passed through the extended entranceway, immediately taking note of the twin stairs leading upwards to a second floor and the ring that seemed to surround a central chamber. "Gods," Bjorn realised. "This is the old Pirate Lord hall, just rebuilt in a different way." Jayce's widened as he made the same connection. He looked towards the outer ring, deeply curious whether the monuments to previous Pirate Lords were there as well. "Later," Kitty stated, her demeanour hardening as she released Jayce's arm and pushed forwards to the main doors.

They were large, and carved from black wood, with imagery of the seas, swords and skulls. Kitty pushed the door open and headed inside with Somme and Red following closely behind. Jayce waited a moment before looking to his crewmates. "We're with you," Astris stated. Jayce nodded in acknowledgement and then stepped forwards. There was an eery silence inside, countless hushed voices all staring down from the gallery above.

The ringed room was dark, with numerous pillars full of concealed shadows for the Lieutenants to stand within. The centre of the room was lit with beams of light from above, landing on a long and colossal stone table. Eight throne-like chairs sat around the table, with four on either side. A final, more grand chair sat at the head, furthest from the door. A large wall with maps of the Old and New World sat behind the Sovereign's throne.

Jayce walked with deliberate confidence to the final empty seat, sat between Tim Kane and Kitty Deliver on the left side of the table. Tim nodded to Jayce, Mirabelle Delyth and another Lieutenant stood behind him. Jayce nodded back, sensing Bjorn, Astris and Arthuria taking their own positions behind him. Tim sat to Jayce's right, with Kitty on Jayce's left and Crach on her left, closest to the Sovereign. Crach's son Xerxes and the owl therian stood behind the old lion.

Jayce glanced across the table: directly opposite him was the Governor – his face hidden by the Engine’s mask. Two Engines stood behind him, one bald male and one female with long black hair and white skin. The Governor nodded to him and Jayce was uncertain whether it was the Governor or the Engine greeting him. To the Governor’s left sat the puppet of the Machinist, now with stitching around his neck. The true Machinist was between two automatons behind him.

To the Governor’s right was a young woman Jayce didn’t recognise. She had long braided brown hair and light-brown skin with narrow brown eyes. She wore strange clothes, animal hides of sorts with multiple colours and feathers decorating the edges. A hooded woman stood behind her, her face completely obscured. She twirled a knife in her hands and stared at Kitty with an expression of aggression. *The Dragonlord*. Jayce guessed. To her right sat a blue ocean crawler, whose eyes had not left Jayce’s face since his entrance. Ningyo stared at him with a similar aggression, one of his headtails cut short and a few new scars across his body. Jayce faltered. *Where’s Ruyn?* He was the only Pirate Lord not present.

A crying drew Jayce’s attention to the head of the table, his eyes widening as he saw the Sea Sovereign nursing a small child in a bundle. His entire body reacted, and he could see amongst the expressions of the others in the room looks of hunger. A weakness. The Sovereign had a weakness, came the unified thoughts of the room. The child was small, perhaps only a few months old. Jayce then withdrew, questioning the horrific thoughts running through his mind. It was a baby, not a weapon.

He looked past the infant to Scáthach. She had a wide and crazed grin on her face, her brown eyes glowing purple. Moments of silence continued to pass before she took the infant off her breast and placed it on the table, between Ningyo and Crach. No one moved, no one dared to breath. She then lunged, drawing a knife and slamming it down onto the infant. “No!” Jayce and Crach both stated, reaching forwards.

But the infant had vanished. The Sovereign had vanished. Instead they saw a malicious grin from Sétanta as he sat sideways across the throne, his long brown hair dangling over the side. “What is the meaning of this?” Crach growled. “Where is Scáthach?” he demanded. Sétanta gestured lazily across the table, all heads turning and looking towards the door. Scáthach stood leaning against a pillar and Jayce could have sworn she hadn’t been there when he first came in. He’d have walked right past her.

She'd grown out her messy dark orange hair, but looked no different than when he last saw her. Her brown eyes were almost invisible in the darkness, but a faint purple glow was visible within them. She wore dark clothes: a padded jacket and waterproof trousers, with boots underneath. She'd replaced some of her piercings, and had removed her lip ring, opting instead for a bull-like nose ring. The eldritch tattoos on her neck remained, and her dark makeup matched the attire. She tilted her head to the right and Sétanta immediately stood up before moving to the side.

She stepped forwards, walking up to the table before leaping up onto it and walking across the surface. Jayce watched her walk before he turned his head back to where she had been. He squinted, trying to use his Focus, but he saw nothing. Begrudgingly he looked back to the head of the table as she sat down cross-legged in her throne. "Right, go on then. Where's the proof you have a right to claim these seats?" she questioned.

Jayce, Kitty and Crach all instinctively sat up in their chairs. The Governor mirrored them, his breathing laboured and raspy beneath the mask. Ningyo then reached down beside him, grabbing something before dropping it onto the table with a splat. Jayce's eyes widened as he stared at familiar orange hair. Ruyn's last expression was one of horror – his partially rotting face staring at Jayce. "That's more like it," Scáthach said plainly, before looking beyond towards Thákane and the Machinist's puppet. Both of them simply shrugged, looking around for any challengers. Scáthach then turned to Tim, looking curiously at Mirabelle behind him. "Does it matter who sits in this seat?" Tim challenged. Scáthach shrugged and let it go.

She turned and looked across the room, at the Pirate Lords before her and their Lieutenants beyond. "You have all chosen to take these seats, is there anyone else here who believes they should have the seats instead?" she questioned with a sadistic grin. "This is-" Crach began, before Xerxes stepped forward and slammed his head into the table hard enough to send a crack throughout the stone. Crach pulled his head back, dazed and confused before Xerxes pulled him up to his feet. He threw a punch into the old therian, dropping him to the floor before throwing another and another. The heavy hits changing from thuds to wet impacts. Xerxes then reached down and pulled, a tearing following before with a heavy thud, the lion's head was placed – dripping – onto the table.

Jayce and Kitty stared in horror as a blood covered Xerxes sat down. There was then movement from across the table as the Governor stood up. "No," he said

softly. “No?” he questioned, his mask glowing as he stepped back before he reached up and placed both hands to his mask. He groaned, in severe pain as he pulled. The fused flesh tore underneath as he slowly tore off his new face, his body gargling underneath as huge metallic tendrils were pulled out of his eyes, nose and mouth with a sickening and wet sound. He pulled it free and dropped it, his faceless form staring directly at Jayce before he toppled over – most certainly dead. The female Engine then stepped forwards and sat down.

Tim, Kitty and Jayce stared in horror, mortified by the deaths of their Old World allies. Jayce looked towards Kitty, her eyes widening as she sensed movement behind her. Rebel Red stepped forwards. Her face darkened, her eyes going cold before she shut them, accepting her fate. Somme Ankor then lunged forwards, grabbing the back of Red’s head with his metal hand before slamming it down fast onto the table. With tears in his eye and a look of grief, he raised his right arm before dropping his elbow as hard as he could down onto Red’s neck. There was a loud and audible crack as Red dropped limp to the floor. Somme then stepped back. Kitty didn’t look down, her lip trembled and eyes were blurry but she forced it aside as she turned and looked defiantly towards the Sea Sovereign.

A silence fell as no more moves were made. Blood dripped from the edge of the table and the room waited on edge, but eventually the Sovereign let out a sigh. She turned towards the Machinist, looking not at the puppet in the chair but at the actual Machinist. “I asked for Pirate Lords to sit in the thrones,” she said coldly – the head of the puppet exploding suddenly and violently before the corpse was tossed out of the chair by invisible hands. The entire room sat up, terrified by the sudden violence out of nowhere. The Machinist edged forwards before sitting down.

“Good. Well, the eight of you are now my Pirate Lords. Congratulations, I’m very proud of you,” Scáthach stated. She then stood up and grabbed her throne, dragging it aside to show a better view of the map wall. “Now, as your Sea Sovereign,” she stated, pulling a gold crown out of thin air and placing it on her head. “Everything in this world is mine. However, I can’t be everywhere at once and ruling isn’t quite as fun as it initially sounds. So, I suggest you all divvy it up into territories that you all own. You can do whatever you like to those regions as long as it doesn’t cause trouble for me. If it does cause trouble...” She clicked her fingers and the doors opened, the Betrayers other than Sétanta all stood beyond. The doors then closed. “So, who wants what?”

"I take the centre line of the New World," Jayce stated immediately, urgently making his point. "I take the left of Jayce's territory," Kitty immediately followed up with. "I take the Right. The New World is ours," Tim declared, the three agreeing to an immediate and silent alliance. "I disagree with that," Xerxes growled. Jayce leant forwards to look directly at him. "Tough. Take your new kingdom and the west. Pirate King Xerxes," Jayce growled back. Xerxes nodded in begrudging acceptance, looking towards Scáthach. "I will take the Frontier," Thákane stated quickly.

"Beyond the Frontier is my territory, I will not accept chaos in the New World," Jayce laid out plainly. "Same here," Kitty and Tim mirrored, the three of them presenting a united front. Thákane held up her hands. "Understood, won't be a problem for me as long as you leave the Dragons be." Jayce nodded. *Already got mine, thank you very much.* The Engines, the Machinist and Ningyo all looked at each other. "Oceans are mine," Ningyo stated, the other two nodding. "You may have the centre, as that is already your domain," stated the Engine. "Thank you, you may take the rest," the Machinist said civilly, but with layered threat.

"That was smoother than I expected, good," Scáthach stated, retaking the room. "Now, on the note of the New World, it has come to my attention that some rats have crossed the Frontier. The Republic has been intruding, getting into my business and that's something I cannot tolerate. So, my Pirate Lords, you have an assignment. Your first of many, I'm sure," she stated. Jayce's blood ran cold, his eyes widening as he realised what she was saying, who she was talking about. "Wipe them out, send a message about intruding into my domain. Do whatever you see fit, I don't care for the details, but do not test me." There was a moment of silence. "Go."

The Pirate Lords immediately got to their feet, most heading towards the door. Jayce looked instead towards Scáthach who stared back at him before sticking out her pierced tongue. She winked at him and then vanished, further adding to his concern that she hadn't been truly in his sight from the get-go. "Come on," Kitty stated, unwilling to look at Red as Somme carried him in his arms. "Tim, let's talk outside," she stated.

"One moment," Jayce stated, stepping slowly towards Crach's abandoned corpse with Bjorn. "I'll take him to the ship," Bjorn said softly, "give Thalia a goodbye before we bury him at sea – it's what he'd want." Jayce nodded with approval, leaving him to it before following after Kitty and Tim. He walked around the

back of the hall, finding Kitty wailing loudly as she knelt over Red's corpse. Mirabelle was sat next to her with her arm over her shoulder.

Jayce looked down before looking towards Somme. He was looking away towards the horizon, silently shedding his own tears. Jayce approached him and placed a gentle hand on his arms. The big man nodded before wiping his eyes. "Kitty..." he said softly. She nodded and took several deep breaths before looking towards Jayce and Tim. "What the fuck was that?" she questioned. Jayce and Tim shook their heads. "I don't know," Tim answered.

"We have a theory that the Sovereign can use curses. She targets those closest to you and tries to turn them against you," Jayce stated. Tim nodded in agreement. "Something like that happened to Dorn," he stated, looking towards Mirabelle. She nodded in agreement. Kitty looked down at her fallen friend. "Red never recovered from Anne. He was still mourning her, even now. She must have used that against him."

"I'm sorry your man betrayed you," Tim said earnestly. Kitty and Somme both shook their heads. "He would never betray Kitty," Somme said softly. "It was suicide. He killed himself to protect us from his own perceived weakness." Jayce nodded, uncertain of the truth, but not willing to disregard their perspective. "What about the Pirate Lord attack on the Republic? Alara, my siblings," Astris inserted, changing to the topic.

Kitty and Jayce both looked to her. "She's right," Jayce stated. "We have to stop the Pirate Lords from wiping out the Vanguard Fleet. I'm going to send them a warning, hopefully that will be enough," he stated, looking towards Kitty and Tim. Kitty sighed. "You've dragged us into it now, if word gets back to the Sovereign we'll be in trouble for not stopping you. Guess I might as well help." They looked towards Tim. "Was there ever a doubt?"

Seize the Seas Tales: The Scourge

Falconer watched Bjorn, Astris, Arthuria and Jayce depart for the Revelry from above. He flew through the skies aboard Wren, enjoying the peace of the winds and the warm sun. They circled for a bit before Falconer turned his attention towards the south, a red haze on the horizon. "Come on, Wren," he told her, the pair of them flying onwards. A buzz filled his mind, his lungs starting to clog up as they approached. His arm ached, the wood twisting uncomfortably as they flew. Wren cooed. "I'm okay, keep going," he stated, reaching up to touch Horus' gemstone, still tied to a string around his neck.

SEIZE THE SEAS

They flew closer, the green tinge of Leylines to the north blending into the red haze ahead as Falconer looked around. Eventually an island came into view, although it looked more like a huge crater in his eyes, with high walls and a barren pit inside. "How odd," he stated, sensing beyond the crater the makings of a Leyline, one that was weak and flickering. Wren let out an alarmed screech as they passed, promptly turning to angle away from something. "What is it?" he questioned, his eyes widening as he saw the ocean end.

It was like nothing he had ever seen before. The ocean stopped just past the island, falling straight into a huge waterfall that fell straight down onto an expanse of red sand as far as the eye could see. There was nothing, no visible life, only a scourge on the world. A land of death, where the Leylines had been killed. Falconer stared at the sight in horror, his entire being repulsed by the sight ahead of him. He stared at the necrotic part of the world before turning away. "What could have done something like that? What could have killed part of the world?"

How can I fix it?

Chapter 195: Biting The Hand That Feeds

The Rising Aces gave Crach a brief funeral. A few of his loyalists came to see, but the sudden betrayal of Xerxes revealed just how quickly Crach's people would move on from him. "I will kill him," Thalia said softly to her grandfather's corpse before pushing him overboard. He sank quickly, his body becoming one with the ocean that he had made his home for so long. The loyalists departed and Jayce turned to Kitty and Tim. "Let's go rescue the Republic."

Alara sat back in the seat, her mouth half-open as she and Cyrenna listened to the news. "Crach, the Governor, Ruyn... all dead?" she questioned in disbelief. "Good riddance," Cyrenna said coldly, shooting the rum in her glass before refilling it from her collection. Alara shook her head. "Perhaps, but I'm more concerned about who has replaced them. Xerxes is a nasty piece of work, let alone the Machinist, an ocean crawler, the Engines..." Alara said, looking over towards her friend. "A problem for once we're established, for now we--"

A swirling portal appeared in-between them, the technicolour surface shimmering before she saw a face in it. "Pirate Lord Kane?" Alara questioned, Cyrenna rounding to her side. "Vanathur, long time no see. I've got a message from a friend of yours," he stated curtly before stepping aside. Jayce appeared instead, Cyrenna dropping her glass on the floor as she saw her sister beyond. "Sorry for the interruption in girls' night, you've got a problem. A big one. The Sovereign has dispatched all Pirate Lords to your position, with orders to wipe you out. I don't know what operations you have going, but get out of the Old World. Get out now!" Jayce warned.

"No," Cyrenna stated. "That's not possible, we've worked so hard to establish a foothold. We can't just up and run now. There's too much--" Jayce stared at her in disbelief. "Are you insane? None of that matters, it's over – the Pirate Lords are coming with the Betrayers after them if we fail to stop them. We'll try and hold the Pirate Lords off as much as we can but they're much more mobile than we are. You need to get out."

"Exarga, you misunderstand me. We can't leave now because we have ships away from our base. They are weeks away and if we leave, we leave them to die!" "You need to mobilise everything. With Crach gone the therian ships are under Xerxes' command. The Machinist has her own fleets, the Engines are everywhere and Thákane and Ningyo are highly mobile. They're coming, and they're coming for you fast. Alara, get out!" Jayce stated, an unnerving level of panic to his voice that Alara didn't recognise. "How much time do we have?" Alara questioned.

Jayce turned behind him and then turned back with a map in hand. "This is your location, right? This is what we received," he stated, pointing to the map. Both Alara and Cyrenna swore loudly. "We have a new toy that we're going to use to get closer to you. Kitty and Somme are going to lure some of the others away. Tim and I will reach you in a week or so. But I would expect the first wave to arrive before us. You have a month at most before your location becomes indefensible."

Alara and Cyrenna looked each other. "Less than that," Alara stated. "We pissed off Khalid, he's got a Fortress ship – the second it becomes known that you and the others have rebelled, he's going to be on his way." Jayce grit his teeth. "We'll handle that. Get your pieces moving, and moving for the border. Don't stop, don't stop until you see the Republic. We're on our way," Jayce concluded, the portal disappearing. Cyrenna looked towards Alara. "Rouse everyone, I want this station defensible until our people get back to us," Cyrenna ordered. "Yes, ma'am!" Alara stated, rushing off.

"Are we sure this will work?" Jayce questioned to Tempest, watching as Kitty and Somme sailed off to distract Xerxes. "In theory," Tempest stated, writing down a series of symbols on some paper before handing it to Tim. Tim nodded and raced off to his own ship. "Theory is not reassuring," Jayce stated. The djinn shrugged. "It will work then. We do not have any teleportation circles near to our target, but we will get close enough," he reassured. Jayce sighed and nodded. "Better than nothing."

A loud whizzing and whining built up to the starboard side, a large purple circle surrounding Tim's ship - the Old Librarian. There was a flash of purple lightning and it vanished. Jayce looked to his crew, who looked to him and then Tempest. "All crew brace," the djinn warned. "Sudden movement could send you elsewhere." Jayce didn't like the sound of that. Tempest began to chant, lightning sparking off his body before Jayce felt the entire world lurch around him and they landed with a splash in a completely different environment. Zeta ran to the edge of the ship and threw up. "All okay?" Jayce questioned, receiving a reassuring series of responses. "It worked," Tempest said with relief. Jayce looked at the djinn in horror before shrugging it off and giving the 'okay' symbol to Tim. "Bjorn, get us moving!"

"Incoming!" Alara yelled, a barrage of rockets raining down from the skies above as the Machinist's flyers unleashed their latest wave. She twisted her glaive, slamming the weapon down in the ground to emit a large protective bubble

around herself and the Marines with her. The assault landed, detonations occurring all around her. Screams came from those caught in the blast, her gunners unleashing their own return fire to the flyers in the sky. Death lay all around her, friends and foes alike. "Captain, how much longer?" questioned Ashton Braze, the others around him looking to her.

She glanced out towards the Courier, unleashing it's ordnance upon the skies and the ships on the waters. "Soon," she reassured. "Help is coming, and our forces are on their way to us. We just have to hold on a little longer." A Marine pointed in horror, a fresh wave of enemies on the horizon. More flyers were coming, as well as what looked to be some kind of giant carrier in the sky. "Captain, I don't know how much longer we can hold this," Braze stated to her.

She shut her eyes, a bright blast consuming the horizon. A moment later the explosion reached them, knocking several Marines off their feet. The horizon was consumed in flame in an instant and from the flames emerged two ships. She breathed a sigh of relief, the familiar blues, whites and blacks telling her that help had arrived. A moment later a blue portal appeared behind them and a friendly face stepped out. "Lower your weapons!" Alara ordered as Jayce looked down at her bunker. "Captain. I heard you needed some help," he said with a smug grin. She wanted to punch him - that or kiss him.

"Situation?" he questioned, as she escorted him to the main bunker. Her face must have answered for her. "That bad, huh?" he questioned. She nodded trying not to think of the casualties they had already suffered. "It's bad, Jayce, and you say this is just the first wave?" she questioned in sharp disbelief. He nodded, letting her escort him through the guards until they came across a reinforced room. "Commodore," he greeted, an immediate sigh of relief emerging from Cyrenna as she turned to face him. "You're here, good," she stated, looking to her advisors who quickly stepped back to show Jayce the main table.

"I've ordered our forces to head straight for the Frontier, but we can't leave this position until they have all crossed this line," Cyrenna explained, showing markings on the map and the rough current position of the almost dozen ships away from the base. "Otherwise they will be locked behind us. I have no doubt in my mind that the Sovereign has ways to find out just how many ships we have, and once she knows that, she'll know what to look for. They're good people, I can't doom them." Jayce nodded in understanding.

"That's a long time to hold out," Jayce stated, estimating the numerous days it would take for them to cross the line and then the further month or so it would

take to reach the Frontier. Cyrenna looked down and then towards Jayce. "We have no choice." Jayce took a step back and thought for a few moments. "Okay, we can hold the line for a few days, but you have to use that opportunity to close shop. That Fortress Ship will now be on its way. Once that gets here you're leaving regardless of your thoughts," he stated. Cyrenna nodded appreciatively and he then gave one longing look towards Alara before departing. "He's not wrong..." Alara said softly. "Beo... he'll make it in time – I'm sure." Cyrenna didn't look certain.

"Days? They want us to defend them for... days?" Tim questioned, as they stood together amongst the island's bunkers. "Jayce..." he said softly, glancing towards the Marines and Navy watching them. "It goes from plausible deniability to this will outright get us killed. The Sovereign is going to be pissed." Jayce nodded, looking out towards the horizon: the combat had lulled ever since they had arrived. "I know. Days is ambitious, but they've been caught off-guard and they can't do much for their people. I think giving them the best chance we can is the least we can do. I will take the heat, tell whoever is sent your way that I coerced you. That I-"

Tim looked at Jayce sternly. "I could never do that to you. I'm only here because of you. In more ways than one. Jayce, I will follow you into whatever hell you run towards, so tell me there is a plan? A strategy. Anything more than stepping in between those guns and these ones," he questioned. Jayce didn't have an answer. "My hands are tied. I'm not in command here. We can only react to what comes our way."

The combat seemed to diminish over the following days, changing from a continuous stream into clear and definitive waves of ships and flyers – a predictability that Jayce, Tim, Cyrenna and Alara continued to exploit in turn. It also opened up cautious periods of downtime that Cyrenna seized upon to slowly dismantle the base, whilst Jayce seized upon the time in a different way – mainly with Alara.

"This is wrong," she said, dressing quickly as Jayce lay under the covers of his bed. "You're allowed time for rest, right?" he said in response, laying back on his pillows and quietening the Demon chirping idly inside his mind. "Yes, but there are better things I could spend my time doing," she stated, with a hint of irritation. "Better?" Jayce questioned, raising an eyebrow. She snapped her head towards him and pulled a face, his demonic eyes glowing in the darkness –

something she couldn't help but find unnerving. "You know what I mean – you're fine."

"Fine?" he questioned, with a soft and subtle layer of hurt. She glared at him. "You're great, this whole world is fucked! This whole mess is fucked!" she said with increasing volume, her shoulders shaking. "Hey," Jayce said more carefully, getting up and immediately placing his hands on her shoulders before cradling her. "I've ruined this, Jayce! I gave our position away, I've killed all of those we've lost. We'll flee, abandon the Old World and my parents – they may already be dead. There's no value in them as hostages, why would Khalid keep them alive?" she sobbed.

Jayce faltered before he gave an answer. "As a means of taunting you and the Republic. They're trophies, prizes, he won't kill them unnecessarily – he has no need to," he answered honestly, the volume of her tears increasing as she sobbed harder into his chest. "It's okay," he said softly. "This isn't your fault – it was always a bad idea to send you. To send all of you against a threat and a world you never stood a chance against."

The sorrow disappeared in a flash, her head raising and eyes staring at him with an intense anger. "What is that supposed to mean?" she questioned, pushing him away. "Alara..." he said softly. She stamped her foot and shook her head, pointing at him. "You have no grounds to stand on! No right to belittle us! Those rules you trample over to get your way nearly got you killed – hell, I'd argue they did from those eyes in your thick skull that aren't yours. We were doing fine, we succeeded!"

Jayce held his tongue, but her anger only seemed to grow. "Speak. Say it," she ordered. "Alara, it's not an attack – you categorically were outgunned. A group of Commodores never stood a chance. You wouldn't have stood a chance against me... let alone the Betrayers, least of all the Sovereign – she's..." He shook his head and sat down on his bed, looking up at her. "That's what it comes down to, doesn't it? What it always comes down to? Power. Personal glory. Strength and broken ideals. You. The great beacon, Jayce Exarga – Pirate Lord – and me... his little mistress who always needs saving."

"Alara--"

"No! No... just... without you we'd all be dead already. And I'm grateful for that, Jayce, I am... but it's not enough anymore. I'm lost... I can't be like you – I can't break rules and shrug off the consequences. I can't rush across the world to-to..."

to save the ones I love. I can't protect you, and I think I've just killed my parents." "Alara, I don't need protecting," Jayce stated, immediately regretting his answer from her immediate expression. "That's not the point!" she screamed, through tears and frustration. She looked at him with disappointment. "Perhaps we just don't understand each other anymore..." she said quietly.

He shook his head, extending a hand towards her. She looked at it before cautiously taking it. He pulled her in to his side and sat her next to him. "I have consequences too," he said uncertainly, staring at her through unfamiliar eyes. "I make mistakes. I pick fights unnecessarily and I have... I have so much blood on my hands. So much blood I could drown cities in it. The world looks to me for answers to problems I barely understand. My crew look to me to provide them not only safety for the now, but a world that they can live free within. A world where my family is safe," he said, gesturing towards the photos of his crew on his walls, his eyes looking towards the photo of him, Wicke and Caelie. "A world where you're safe. A world where our children can live without fear. And I have that vision, I see that future, but I don't know the path there anymore than you do. I can only take the next step in front of me. The same with you."

"I can guide my crew, give them orders, but they still exist without me and I'm not always there. The Rising Aces are more than me. The Republic is more than you. We can't do everything. We can do what we can. Nothing more. Nothing less. This isn't on you. You can't take responsibility for the whole Republic." "But I broke the rules..." she said quietly, her eyes on the floor, her fingers over her face. He placed a soft hand on her back and rubbed it gently. "And there are consequences," he said truthfully. "But with or without you – this would have happened eventually. It would have happened inevitably – trust me on that."

She looked at him, her eyes mingled with curiosity and enlightened worry. "I've put you in so much danger," she realised. He shrugged, forcing a cocky smile to his face. "Different level of danger, a different playground of enemies. My game to play, yours to survive. We'll get through this – together – like we always do. But I can't bring you to my field of play, I can't put you in that level of danger without preparation. So trust me, Alara, I will get you to the north and from there you will forge your own route to your parents. One where your people, your crews, stand a chance against Khalid. Okay?" he questioned.

"Am I speaking to you or the Demon?" she asked, sensing he wasn't being fully open to her. "Me," he answered. "Just with a bit of information I can't share yet." She shook her head and leant back into him. "You're an idiot," she said softly,

shutting her eyes and listening to his heartbeat. "Definitely. Doesn't stop you from loving me though." She looked up to him and leaned forwards to kiss him. "Sometimes it brings me close. You better have a plan to survive all of this." "Of course I do. It's you."

"I want all communications running through me," Cyrenna stated, her eyes giving one last glance to the world map and Beowulf's last position – still behind the line. "Aye, Commodore," came her communications specialists as she stormed out of the main bunker. "All eyes, what do you see?" Cyrenna questioned as the island shook, the latest wave hitting hard and fast. "Commodore," came Alara's voice, a slight tremble to it. "It's here. Khalid's Fortress Ship is here."

It sat on the horizon, tiny in the distance but distinctly visible behind the waves of local Navy ships ahead of it. "What is it doing?" Cyrenna questioned to Alara, the pair of them stood in the forwards bunkers assessing the situation. The other Captains were moving their ships to form a perimeter, preparing for the incoming onslaught as Jayce and Pirate Lord Kane mopped up the Pirates. "It appears to be holding back, ma'am," stated Riley, scanning the enemy through her sniper rifle. "What of the ships in front?" Cyrenna queried. Riley lifted up her rifle. "They're continuing onwards. We've got time before they're in range."

The Fortress Ship flickered, its surface flashing red in a wave-like pattern. Alara froze before her eyes widened as her body went cold. "Evasive manoeuvres! Get down!" she screamed into her communicator, dragging Riley and Brett down into the bunker as a barrage of explosive shells rained down across the ocean in front of them and then the island. The noise was devastating, the blasts threatening to shake the flesh off Alara's bones as she ducked beneath a wall of metal, rock and mud. "How the hell is that in range?" Cyrenna questioned, her expression a mixture of horror, fury and jealousy.

The shelling lasted for several minutes before it suddenly vanished. Alara and Cyrenna looked towards each other before Alara darted forwards to get a better look. A bubble had enveloped the island, a shield catching the shells in the air before they harmlessly detonated. She half-hoped to see Tempest floating in the air, but instead she saw the large and magnificent robes of Tim. "You're out of time!" he yelled down.

"Pirate Lord Kane is shielding us," Alara stated into the bunker, Cyrenna emerging a moment later. "Indeed he is, but look – the shelling has stopped," Cyrenna stated, the bubble clearing as the explosions faded. Tim kept the bubble

up, turning and looking down towards Cyrenna. "Your fleet is in ruins, Tempest and Jayce's Dragon protected what they could. It's time." Cyrenna looked down and shook her head. "We have to hold out. We have-"

A cyan light illuminated the skies, three arcs of energy flying from the horizon from three different directions. "Get back!" Tim yelled, the first impact dissipating against his shield before the next sent large cracks across its surface. The final arc tore straight through, hitting another bunker and atomising it in an instant. "Alara! Get out!" came Jayce's voice through her communicator. Alara turned towards Cyrenna – her obsidian eyes wide in terror. "Commodore, orders?" Alara questioned. Cyrenna had frozen up. "Commodore? Cyrenna!" "Retreat..." Cyrenna whispered, before regaining control of herself. "All forces retreat! Do not stop until you have made it to the Capital of the New World!" she ordered, all Marines and Navy grabbing anything and everything they could as the few remaining ships came closer to the shores – the Courier amongst them.

"Jayce?" Astris questioned, as Bjorn yanked the wheel of the Stacked Hand and angled them away from the Republic forces – towards Khalid's Fortress Ship of death. "Jayce, we can't!" Astris stated, stepping in front of him and grabbing his shirt – his eyes glowing a flaming orange and his expression full of blatant rage. "We have no choice, this is the only way they survive!" he growled. Astris glanced towards Bjorn, hesitation on his face but his willingness to follow Jayce to the end unwavering. "This is a direct attack on the Betrayers! They'll come for us!"

"Since when have we ever been afraid of that?" Bjorn stated to her, his eyes locked ahead as the enemy fleet turned towards them. Jayce glanced towards the ruins of the Republic base, the fleet sailing quickly away. There was a large flash of purple lightning and Tim disappeared along with his ship. *We're on our own now.* "Boys, fire on the Fortress Ship – hit it hard!" Jayce ordered, looking towards Astris. She bit her lip, tasting her own blood before she forced a nod. "For the Republic!" she screamed, as the world turned white before a black ball carved its way through the sky.

The front of the Fortress Ship tore open, cheers erupting amongst Alara's crew. She felt her knees wobble, the weight of Jayce's actions crashing down upon her as she watched the Stacked Hand turn away – the enemy fleet following closely and Khalid turning his ship to return fire. Several bolts of cyan energy appeared on the horizon before impacting around the Stacked Hand, sending huge blasts of steam into the air. "They did it," Cyrenna said softly, as she stood next to Alara

– her own flagship destroyed. She reached to Alara’s neck and grabbed her pearl necklace. “Astris, if you can hear me – thank you,” Cyrenna said softly, before releasing it as no response came. Cyrenna nodded to Alara and then began to bark out orders.

“Jayce... thank you,” Alara said quietly, uncertain if she’d ever hear from him again.

Seize the Seas Tales: Money Talks

The return to the oceans brought both an immediate boost in Wicke’s mood but also a great sense of ease as she and her group left the ruins of the Dungeon and Caedom behind. She felt like she could finally breathe, like she was free to leave her worries behind and just be. “Wicke, look!” Sabine stated excitedly, bounding along the main deck towards her spot by the Recluse’s bow. She held a tiny purple stone in her hand, showing it to Wicke like a proud mother. “I made this,” she said with a big grin. Wicke placed a somewhat patronising hand on her head. “Well done,” she said half-heartedly, not that Sabine seemed to notice nor care – herself too proud out of her own achievement. Wicke had taught the entire group the process, something they had almost all struggled with – the exception being Cinderlee. “So, uh, did you hear?” Sabine questioned.

“Hear what?” Wicke questioned, turning to face her fully. Sabine reached into her bottomless bag and pulled out parts of a newspaper. She showed Wicke clippings talking about the Revelry, about the deaths of the old Pirate Lords. Wicke faltered as she read about Rebel Red’s death at the hands of Somme Ankor. She then presented a more recent clipping: a request by the Guild for information on the cause of the Dungeon’s destruction. “Looks like we got away with it,” Sabine said with a nervous smile. “Perhaps. It may not take them long to figure out we were the furthest in, but hopefully the fake names buys us enough time to move onwards to the next ones. Still...” Wicke stated, looking at the reward for information. She then looked down at her palm, visualising as big of a magic stone as she could. She condensed the energy in her palms and then looked at the gold and purple stone. “No, I think we’ll be fine.”

Chapter 196: Damnation

“Jayce, they’re not going to stop!” Marisha stated, the faintest traces of the Brunxchume fleet still on the horizon. “It’s been nearly two weeks already, we have to stand and fight,” she stated. “Barca Khalid is pissed, and he has that entire nation under his command.” Jayce looked down at her and shook his head. “They’re innocent in this, we can outrun them. I know we can. If we can make it to the Frontier then they’ll give up the chase – we just need to stall until Alara and the fleet make it across. Their supplies will run out eventually,” he stated. “Their supplies? Ours will long before them – they have an entire nation-”

“Uh, sorry to interrupt,” Morgana stated from atop her broomstick, “they’re turning away.” Jayce looked from Morgana to Marisha, pulling a face. She glared back. “See,” he stated smugly. She shook her head, verifying it for herself – the ships were indeed turning away. “This isn’t over, and you know it!” she stated to him before storming off to listen to the transceiver. Jayce maintained his smile, his people were looking to him although he knew as well as they all did that this was far from over. Something was coming. Something far worse than a fleet of Navy warships.

“Falconer, take over from Bjorn,” Jayce ordered, looking to his first mate and gesturing with his head towards his quarters. “Astris, join me inside my quarters,” Jayce then added through his communicator. She entered moments after them. “It’s coming,” he stated, as soon as they looked to him. Immediately all of their heartbeats sped up. “The Sovereign herself?” Astris questioned, folding her arms as Jayce stepped past her and looked out of his windows towards the retreating fleet. Jayce shook his head. “I doubt it. She’ll want to send a message to the world. It’ll be a Betrayer. Maybe even multiple.”

There was a flash of purple lightning on the horizon, Jayce’s hairs immediately standing on edge and a cold feeling spreading throughout his body. “Who?” Bjorn questioned. Jayce glanced towards him, his mind pondering that very question. “I’d send Vexx,” he said quietly. He’d kept the conversation between the three of them precisely not to cause panic. “Or Elaine,” Astris suggested. Jayce nodding. A shadow was darting across the ocean towards them. It then flew over the top of the ship, the windows rattling as Jayce, Astris and Bjorn looked at each other. “Captain,” came a nervous Zeta across the communicator.

Jayce stepped outside. It felt like the entire world was holding its breath. The seas were calm, the skies overcast but darkening on the horizon – a storm visible beyond the bow. Jayce walked forwards, Falconer bringing the ship to a stop so

that the main cannon remained locked on the figure stood on the air above the surface of the ocean. She floated on nothing, her eyes locked ahead on the Stacked Hand and its crew, and her arms folded.

She had dirty, shoulder-length golden hair that curled forwards around neck and chin. A black, studded leather jacket lay around her shoulders, her black trousers ripped over her thighs as if a creature had raked its claws across the fabric. She wore matching boots and had no visible weaponry. Her skin was fair, a flash of freckles across her somewhat large nose – the bridge firm and strong like the rest of her features. But it was her eyes that drew Jayce’s main attention: they were a firm gold – her pupils reptilian.

“You’ve made me come a long way, Exarga,” Kaina stated, her arms folded and expression cold. Jayce approached the bow, placing a firm foot on the edge of his ship as his crew braced for battle. “Sorry for making you come this far. How about we have a chat – talk about this before anything brash happens?” Jayce proposed, quietly praying that she would listen. *There is something... familiar about her.* Jayce tried to ignore Paimon, but Kaina’s eyes seemed impossible to look away from.

“There won’t be any talking. I have been given my commands, and unlike you – I follow what the Sovereign tells me to do!” Kaina stated. Jayce pointed. “Fire!” he yelled, the Stacked Hand lurching as it fired its forward cannon. A black void flew towards her – the shot instantaneous and practically point-blank, but she swung outwards with her arm – slapping the shot aside like it was nothing. The ball split the water to her left before sinking harmlessly into the depths.

The entire crew of the Stacked Hand froze, their bodies reacting to a carnal feeling of terror as Kaina brought her right hand up to her mouth. She opened wide, a long and forked tongue extending outwards, her mouth full of canines. She seemed to smile as she took a deep breath in and Jayce’s eyes widened. “Get down!” he yelled, a small blue flame emerging from her mouth before a colossal stream of golden flame flooded towards the Stacked Hand.

Soteria and Tempest lunged forwards to create a protective barrier, alongside the wall of thorns that Gaea erected between the fire and the ship, but the flames seemed to continue to flow and burn. The sides of the ship slammed open, Zhurong and Taranis bursting through before taking to the air on a pair of large arcs. The flames died and Soteria cowered on the floor, covering her head with

her wings. "Fear!" she said, Jayce's mouth dropping as he heard the Dragon speak for the first time. "Afraid!" she cried.

Jayce summoned RK into his ball, commanded Sola and Luna into a pair of swords and then darted off the side of the ship and around the wall of thorns. Kaina slammed into Zhurong, sending the Dragon spiralling out of the air towards the water. "Weak!" she yelled, turning her attention downwards as Taranis lunged out of the water to bite at her. The hit landed and she was caught entirely within his large jaws – the teeth beginning to rev.

The Dragon then faltered, his eyes going wide as his mouth was forced open. Kaina stood up straight, and looked towards Jayce with a grin. "You brought children?" she questioned, golden scales spreading across her face. "To a massacre?" In a flash of gold, Taranis was dragged downwards by a sudden and forceful change in mass – a colossal golden Dragon appearing in Kaina's place in an instant.

The pair disappeared beneath the waves before Kaina reappeared alone, taking to the skies in a wide flight. She had a pair of huge horns that curled forwards and around like a rams. Six large wings adorned her back, each flapping in a continuous pattern before all linking together as she glided. Large hook like talons ran along the bones of her wings. A long tail led from the back of her body, the end tipped like a large trident. Along with the wings she also had four limbs, but unlike Zhurong, the front pair looked different from the back pair – they looked more like arms and Jayce questioned for a moment whether she could stand in a near bipedal fashion. As she flew over the Stacked Hand, Jayce also immediately realised just how much larger she was than the other two already-large Dragons. Kaina was colossal.

"Take her down!" Jayce commanded, his crew rushing to action. Falconer took to the skies aboard Wren. Soteria and Morgana darted into the skies. Ordo and Arthuria dashed towards their Dragons as they surged from out of the ocean. Bjorn and the Beastly Boys brought the ship about, trying to bring it away from the combat before Bjorn handed the wheel to Wam. Mai Lu flung large shards of blood into the air. Caelie conjured portals to bring herself and the crew closer to Kaina. Tempest and Gaea formed a shield of lightning and thorns around the Stacked Hand. Zeta sang and Red stabbed with a trident. The whole crew fought for their ship. Fought for each other. Fought for their lives.

"Enough!" Kaina yelled, twisting in the air and throwing off the bodies that had landed on her. "You will all burn!" she roared, pulling back and taking in a deep

inhale. She then unleashed flames upon them all, the crew desperately diving, falling, or teleporting to avoid the colossal streams of fire. Jayce pushed forwards, darting around the flames to swing his blades down towards her eye. They landed, but bounced harmlessly off – her gaze immediately turning towards him with a flash of frustration.

“Why use a rifle to squash insects?” she questioned to herself, her scales shedding away to reveal her original form. She lunged for Jayce, grabbing his throat and squeezing. A bullet hit her temple before exploding – her grip breaking as her head tilted away, momentarily stunned from the blast. Jayce fell and she turned on Astris – the others desperately moving to block her from view, buying any moment they could to split the Betrayer’s attention.

“Jayce, this isn’t working,” Bjorn stated, the deck on fire and those on board desperately putting it out. Jayce grit his teeth, the Dragon form had been huge, weighty and cumbersome – but in human form, Kaina faced no such issues. Her Focus was of equivalent level to Jayce’s, and when she needed distance she would unleash a burst of flame from her mouth. All hits seemed to do nothing to her, and a single hit from her was almost certainly lethal. “Jayce...”

Jayce nodded, darting forwards towards the Dragon with every ounce of energy he had. He combined Sola and Luna into a heavy maul before he slammed it hard into her head. She flew backwards from the impact, a tiny trickle of golden blood flowing down from her temple. “Back to the ship, everyone!” Jayce ordered, pursuing after her as she recovered from her fall – her jacket morphing into six large, golden, draconic wings. “What?” Thalia questioned. Jayce glanced to her, a sliver of fear in her eyes. “Go!” he reinforced, swinging his maul into Kaina again before darting past her to lure her away.

“Tempest!” Jayce yelled into his communicator, darting across the surface of the water with the Dragon in hot pursuit. She threw a clawed fist at him, the ocean erupting in a colossal splash. “Teleport us out of here!” Jayce commanded, diving into the ocean to avoid a heavy blast of fire before clambering out of it and continuing to run. “Where to?” Tempest responded, much to Jayce’s drastic and immediate ire. “Any-fucking-where!” he screamed.

“I need you back, or you will be left behind, Captain,” Tempest returned. Jayce stopped in his tracks and jumped back and then down, propelling off the air as he created multiple platforms to leap off. Kaina darted right beneath him and he broke off running towards the Stacked Hand – his crew hovering around it on

their various brooms, Dragons and birds. "Start casting!" Jayce screamed, a few seconds between him and Kaina with her rapidly gaining on him.

A large purple circle began to surround the Stacked Hand, flashes of purple lightning filling the air. "No!" Kaina screamed, somewhere behind. But Jayce didn't care, he didn't dare look back – the moments ticking away before the Stacked Hand vanished. "Jayce!" Astris cried, rushing to the edge of the deck with Caelie. "No portals!" he yelled, afraid Kaina would make it through before it would close.

Wren flew up, Falconer unleashing an arrow towards the Dragon in hopes of slowing her down. Morgana slung a red spell and Soteria forged a shield behind Jayce, that Kaina slammed straight through. Zhurong and Taranis both unleashed blasts of fire and lightning, but Jayce and Kaina both weaved through the Dragon breaths. The circle span faster, the lightning flashing brightly as the spell neared its end. Jayce lunged, landing on the edge of the Stacked Hand as the numerous Rising Aces darted down to the deck with him alongside Wren and the Dragons. "Go!" Jayce commanded, the spell finalising and a wave of purple energy surrounding the ship and its crew.

Then with a heavy slam, Kaina threw her full Dragon-sized body into the side of the ship, the entire thing lurching as the spell executed. The edge of the Stacked Hand swept Jayce's legs, his body tumbling over the side. Little Witch darted across the deck and leapt towards him landing in his arms. He grabbed and held her tightly as they twisted, the ship spinning in a vortex of purple lightning and magic.

It then faded and Jayce hit solid ground, rolling across rock and dirt with his eyes shut as he hugged the ship's cat tightly in a desperate attempt to protect her. He rolled and rolled and rolled until finally coming to a stop, the world spinning around him. The black cat wriggled out of his grip before stumbling away from him and throwing up her breakfast. Jayce nearly did the same as he opened his eyes and lay on the floor. "Ugh," he groaned, turning over and pressing down onto the red dirt beneath him.

He frowned, faltering as he slowly lifted his head up. "Little Witch?" he questioned, the cat stumbling her way towards him before brushing her body against his arm. "Where are we?" he questioned to himself, looking around at the endless expanse of red nothing in all directions. "Good question," Paimon answered, from his neck. "Wherever it is, we are alone," she added. Jayce glanced

around: the Stacked Hand was nowhere in sight. He reached for his communicator. "Hello? Is anyone there? Bjorn? Astris? Yuthura?" he questioned.

He waited for a few moments. There was no response. "Hello?" Jayce questioned. "Is anyone there? Can anyone hear me?" he questioned, panic in his voice as he stood up and looked around. Every direction looked the same: flat red-orange rock and dirt in all directions. He looked up. The skies were flat grey cloud, with no hint of sun or blue. "All Rising Aces, please respond? Arthuria? Ordo? Thalia? Zeta? Falconer? Anyone..."

Nothing.

Jayce looked down at himself: he still had his bottomless bag. He breathed a sigh of relief. *We have some food and water.* He then patted his pockets before he felt RK's orb. He pulled it out and released the rokken, the giant stone creature immediately landing with a crash and looking for enemies. It saw nothing and then slowly turned towards Jayce and Little Witch before letting out a long grumble. "Yeah, I know. We're lost," he answered, placing a hand to the rokken's side before resting his head against the stone. "You have no idea how happy I am to have you with me."

RK grumbled and then settled down onto the dirt. He scooped a handful up in his giant arms before carrying it to the volcanic core on his back. His entire body shuddered and he staggered backwards before slamming the ground in a rage. "Woah, woah, what's wrong?" Jayce questioned, trying to tame the giant angry pebble. A useless grumble came in response. "Right, not good dirt or rock – I get it. Then, given the colour, the nothingness and the general feeling of death and dread... I guess we're down south – in the Scourge," Jayce theorised.

"A sensible conclusion," Paimon stated. Jayce shook his head. *A grumbling golem and a Demon in my head. Oh and the cat. Just great.* Little Witch brushed his legs and he looked down, reaching down to pick her up. She purred in his arms, bashing her head into his chin. "Well, at least you're happy with our situation," he said to her, placing his head to hers before setting her across his shoulders. Jayce reached into his bottomless bag, pulling out a compass. It span wildly. "Oh great."

He put it away and looked up, trying to see any spot of sunlight. He then checked his watch before aligning the two. "North is roughly that way," he told RK, Paimon and Little Witch. He picked the cat off his shoulders and placed her onto RK's huge back before clambering on himself. He rapped his knuckles on the

rock's head. A grumble came in response. "Let's go this way," he told the rokken, pointing vaguely north. "There's got to be someone around here. Somewhere... hopefully..."

The rokken trundled forwards, the group departing for the empty horizon.

Seize the Seas Tales: Bribery of the Highest Office

"Ah," Damian said with a wide grin. "Do you hear that? That is the sound of civilisation, commerce and a nice bed," he declared as he, Wicke and the others departed their ship and stepped into the large dockyard of the Capital. "We're not here for taking it easy, we've had enough of that on the ship," Wicke stated, stepping forwards and turning to the group. "We're here to repeat Caedom and to secure another Grimoire," she stated, much to the lack of enthusiasm from the others. "Food first?" Sabine questioned, her stomach rumbling loudly. Wicke grit her teeth, delays were not a part of her plans. She sighed. "Fine. I know a place, and I need to book a meeting with the Admiral in charge anyway. I don't want another telling off."

The food quickly turned into a few other side quests, that soon led to the day ending – much to the group's relief. But the following morning, Wicke found a letter waiting for her in the lobby, and along with the others, she quickly set off in the direction of the Republic High Office. The city was abuzz with excitement, people were talking about some group of Navy that had just returned from an away mission to the Old World, but Wicke ignored it – her mind was too preoccupied for world affairs.

"Good morning," she stated formally to a receptionist. "I am Wicke, of the Rising Aces, here to see Fleet Admiral Exarga." The receptionist nodded and then started to flick through a large binder of appointments. "Oh," she said. "Uh, please follow that man over there. They're waiting for you." Wicke nodded to him and then looked towards Damian. "I guess your mother is in this time, perfect – this should be much easier."

Wicke's face immediately fell as she saw a dark-haired man with glasses behind a desk in the room they were let into. "Ah, Wicke, Damian, and... others," Admiral Exarga stated, standing up and nodding to the escorts who shut the doors behind Cinderlee. Philip Exarga hugged his son tightly before doing the same to Wicke. He then looked towards the other four and nodded before gesturing to various seats. "Please sit," he ordered, his voice firm.

Wicke and Damian glanced at each before sitting at the two seats positioned directly in front of the huge desk. "I saw you wanted to speak to my wife about entering the Dungeon. Unfortunately Damian's mother is still away doing her duty, so you'll have to deal with me," Admiral Exarga stated, sorting from papers before setting them aside. He then leant forwards, his chair creaking and glasses glinting in the light as he set his green eyes on the pair. "So I heard you've come from Caedom?"

Uh oh, Damian and Wicke both thought. "How was it? I've heard repairs have really come along," he stated with a smile. Wicke felt sweat begin to form on her forehead, the light awfully bright all of a sudden. "It was... nice," she said cautiously. "Good to hear. I've been meaning to visit. Anyway, Damian, I very much like this little group you two have formed." Damian began to turn his head. "Look my way," he said in a gentle command, that caused Wicke to gulp.

"Now, I'm aware the pair of you have been Dungeon diving – as is the intention of your visit after all. I am also aware that about two months ago, the Dungeon in Caedom collapsed – about the same time as you and your group departed the area. A coincidence maybe? I think not. So, what do you have to tell me before I let you visit this crucial source of magic stones to fuel our war efforts and economy? Perhaps it's best we go to separate rooms so I can have a chat with each of you individually."

Wicke and Damian both remained silent, neither of them daring to say the wrong thing. A squeak came from behind. "It was us," Sabine said quietly, immediately folding. The pressure in the room immediately dispersed and a soft smile returned to Admiral Exarga's face. "See, I just knew it." He turned and looked plainly at Wicke. "We have just had a major battle at the Frontier, and that is not even factoring the countless rebellions scattered across the New World. The Dungeon is allowing us to keep our Navy and the Marines alive. So why should I let you destroy another Dungeon?"

Wicke held out her hand, concentrating before forming a magic stone. Philip Exarga's eyes narrowed. "How?" he asked cautiously. Wicke produced another of a different size. "I was taught by an Archmage within the Dungeon. I will give you the method, and teach anyone you ask me to. Even Damian can do it," she stated, turning to him. He sighed and made his own tiny stone. Admiral Exarga gave her some paper and she wrote down the instructions. "Can you use magic?" she asked him. "An appropriate amount," he answered carefully.

“Focus on that source within you and try to force it into your hands, you’ll feel a bubbling or fizzing sensation. Squeeze that both physically and with your mind. Condense it. Keep doing so. That’s all.” Philip looked down at the rock in his palms. He shook his head. “How could a process that simple have been hidden for so long?” he questioned to himself, pocketing the paper and the stone. “The Dungeon is yours. Destroy it if you see fit. It’s loss is an acceptable risk, and whatever you find inside I’m sure is a suitable reward for this.”

Wicke nodded and got to her feet. “Thank you,” she stated, stepping away and walking towards the door. “Oh, one more thing. The Dungeon changed in response to the destruction of the first. It has gotten more difficult. Good luck.” Wicke smiled and led the way towards the door, the others following behind. But as Cinderlee stepped forwards she felt something hold her back, her gaze turning towards the Admiral.

Philip stared at her, his eyes cold and face expressionless. “Harm them and you will never see the sunlight again,” he warned. She left without anything more than nod and a feeling of eyes on the back of her neck.

Chapter 197: Justice

Alara struggled to maintain a brave face as she departed the Courier. It had been a long journey. Once full of constant fear and trepidation, along with a serious dose of regret. They had made it to the Frontier, escaped through it whilst under harassment from the Null Legion and then left their allies to deal with the mess once they were through. It felt far from heroic: it felt weak. And Alara was fed up with being weak.

“Chin up,” Cyrenna commanded quietly to her, as they headed to the edge of the ship. Alara looked at her and she looked back – the pair of them sharing a silent expression of fatigue and grief. “Don’t give them the satisfaction of seeing you down. We’re alive – that’s what matters. And we can go from there, to our next victory,” she reassured. “Beowulf will be fine. He’ll make it through that blockade – I know he will.” Alara nodded, forcing a smile as she took Cyrenna’s hand and squeezed it. A crushing grip came back before she released Alara’s hand. “Come on. We’ve got reports to hand in and then I’m owed a proper bath,” Cyrenna stated, leading the way.

Alara ensured all bows were tied, stamps had been licked and requests had been filed before she made her way across the city to her assigned quarters. The world crashed down upon her the second the door shut behind her and it was multiple days before she left her quarters – and, even then, it was only out of necessity. She glanced towards the Wolfpack’s tree, nestled neatly on a table in the centre of her apartment. She sighed, looking at the tags hanging from its branches. There were only seven of the squad remaining: herself, Brett, Witchford, Wulf, Riley, Astris, and Braze. Just over half, a statistic that seemed almost representative of the greater Vanguard fleet. The losses had been extreme and there was no telling just how many more had fallen from the separated group. She shook it off, dressing in her uniform before grabbing her glaive and making for the door.

Alara climbed across the city, heading upwards towards where the Imperial Palace had sat. On arrival, she was guided through a series of checks and corridors before being thrust in a huge circular room. It was an auditorium, one designed as if to be oppressive, with the main seats for the Admirals placed upwards such that they were looking down on the brightly lit floor. There were rows of additional seats placed closer to the ground and several, clearly important, figures sat within the seats with notepads and pens. Alara sighed, it wasn’t going to be pleasant. For the moment she stood alone, but then the doors opened and several other familiar faces entered – other Captains and

Commanders that had survived. Cyrenna then walked in alone and came to stand alongside her in the light. "How bad?" Alara questioned quietly. Cyrenna shook her head a tiny bit and gave no further answer.

"Captain Alara Vanathur, you have been summoned to answer some questions regarding the disaster that occurred in the Old World," boomed Fleet Admiral Truth's voice from above. "This hearing will be to determine your future as a Marine, and as a free citizen. You have been accused of treason and of jeopardising the Vanguard Fleet for your own personal goals. How do you plead?"

"Not guilty," Alara returned. "I believe I have the right to face my accuser." "You do," came a familiar voice, Alara's heartbeat steady as she heard Philip Exarga's voice. "Step forwards, Captain Sellen." From the shadows emerged Sellen. She looked rough, as if she hadn't slept well, and Alara was not surprised – she'd lost almost her entire crew, as well as her left arm and eye. She had every right to levy the blame on Alara.

Alara looked at her and Sellen stared back with a cold hatred. Alara simply nodded to her and then looked up towards the Admirals. "The testimonies provided by Commodore Kai, Commander Witchford and Commander Riley have all identified that you, Captain Vanathur, engaged in your own pursuit – entering the Fortress Ship of Betrayer Barca Khalid. Is this true?" questioned Fleet Admiral Truth. "It is," Alara returned.

"Were you given orders specifically against taking your ship and crew to this target?" questioned Admiral Barome. Alara nodded, a silence following. "Yes, I was," she answered truthfully and cautiously, as she felt the walls closing in on her. "And did you?" came the follow up. Alara glanced towards Cyrenna – her face stony. "No, I did not. Commander Witchford had his own objectives that were parallel to my... goal. I worked alone." A cough came from above. "Alongside Commander Riley," Alara corrected. Riley held her head in shame in the darkness before slapping her cheeks and standing up. She strode into the light. "Commander Riley, you have not been summoned."

"Sirs and Ma'ams, if there is any blame and punishment being put upon Alara – I mean Captain Vanathur – then I am equally to blame," she said forcefully, standing tall. "So be it," came Truth's growl from above. "You both disobeyed orders—" There was a pause. "Apologies, you both circumvented orders in order to stage a two-man insertion into an enemy fortress. An action that led to both of you being identified as agents of the Republic acting within the Old World.

Regardless of any and all information you gathered – the saving grace of this entire fiasco – you took matters into your own hands and jeopardised the entire Vanguard Fleet. Do you have anything to say in your defence?” questioned Truth, his anger evident.

“Admirals,” Cyrenna inserted, “It was not Captain Vanathur that led to our identification. She was identified, yes, however it was the actions of forces outside of our control that led to our identification. Commodore Osiris and her fleet had a direct engagement with hostile forces that led to our identification. That is the reason our forces were separated so greatly and why we were so vulnerable. We were compromised already, before Captain Vanathur and Commander Riley managed to verify the locations and living statuses of Admirals Vanathur and Vanathur. Captain Vanathur did circumvent the orders I gave her but in a way that has secured information vital to our original objective. The Admirals are alive.”

“May that be so, however, renegade actions are not fitting of a Marine Captain. Perhaps it was an error to throw one so young into a mission so close to her heart,” came Admiral Barome. “Captain Vanathur’s actions were the final nail in the coffin, the last damning effect that led to so many deaths – it is hard to ignore.” Cyrenna shook her head and stood forwards, gesturing towards Alara. “Captain Vanathur was not the cause. I swear on it. I of all people am rightfully vexed by Captain Vanathur’s blatant disregard for my command.” Alara looked down. “But her connections and actions are the direct reason we are here to have this conversation.”

“Ah, yes... Pirate Lord Jayce Exarga,” came Truth’s voice, several of the eyes in the darkness immediately looking towards Admiral Exarga. “Ever-ready to lend a hand, ever-ready to run into fire to save the day,” Truth continued. “Reliance on a Pirate Lord is not our way, nor should it ever be. These testimonies place your command into question, Commodore. You willingly worked with the enemy, placed lives into their hands, and gave away command.”

“You weren’t there!” Riley called out. She immediately looked down, realising her mistake. Cyrenna stepped forwards to protect her. “Let it not be so quickly forgotten, Fleet Admiral, that the reason this council exists, this Republic exists, is because of Jayce Exarga and his allies. Either accept that and discard us all for this situation, or turn your attention forwards and let us move on to the plans of a counterattack. I stand with Captain Vanathur, the information gained was invaluable and I have already testified – in person and in documentation – that

the assault was not her fault. Punish her for circumventing orders, reward her for initiative in a situation where she had every right to command, and let us move on from this. Captain Vanathur is one of the best officers within not only the Vanguard Fleet, but the greater Republic. She will be crucial to everything that will follow. Remove Captain Vanathur from this fleet and you'll lose me and my brother too," Cyrenna declared defiantly. She then glanced towards their shadow audience. There was a sigh and the clattering of chairs. "Excuse me, sorry, excuse me," Kask muttered as he emerged and joined them in the middle. "Me as well..." he said begrudgingly. Witchford and Wulf both stood up, as did Commander Volker.

There was an audible growl from Admiral Truth before light painted the back of Admiral Exarga's head, as someone entered his chamber. He turned to look before turning back. "Apologies, Fleet Admiral – I have just received word that the rest of the Vanguard Fleet has arrived at the Capital," Admiral Exarga interrupted. There was a moment of pause. "Let us pause. We will return to this matter," Fleet Admiral Truth stated, standing up and walking out – the door to his chamber slamming shut behind him.

It was worse than expected. "My gods," Alara muttered, reading the eighty-percent casualty rating. All three Commodores had perished, along with the majority of the fleet. Commodore Osiris had been the last to fall, and her sacrifice had been the distinguishing factor that led to Beowulf Kai's ships breaking through the blockade on the other side of the Frontier. He sat alone on a pier looking down at the water. Cyrenna cautiously approached, standing next to him before saying some things to him. She didn't sit, he didn't stand. They just stayed near each other, but eventually he nodded and she walked away. "He will be fine," Cyrenna reassured, placing a hand on Alara's shoulder and gesturing for her to follow.

"Did you really mean what you said?" Alara questioned, sitting next to Cyrenna in a bar. Cyrenna looked at her, her obsidian eyes warm and gentle. "Of course. It is well known that, should you leave, you'll immediately turncoat to the Rising Aces. I miss my sister and I'm sure you'd put a good word in for me," she said with a half-joke, a smile on her face. "Although it would take some getting used to. Jayce is frustrating and taking orders from him would sting for a while. But I'm sure I could advocate for my own command with enough time and enough flaunting of the word: 'Commodore', in his ears." Alara smiled back, swirling her glass of silver liquor. "Thank you," she said softly. Cyrenna shook her head. "I didn't lie in that trial, Alara, but they weren't wrong about you circumventing

orders to get your way. You should have waited – there were alternatives.” Alara nodded. Cyrenna glanced away from her, a smile emerging as Beowulf sat down at the bar on her other side.

“How are you handling things?” Alara asked, as he ordered a similar drink to hers – hard liquor. “As to be expected,” he said quietly. Alara and Cyrenna both nodded. “So what’s to happen to the Vanguard fleet?” Beowulf questioned, looking to his sister. She scoffed and drank her drink. “What fleet?” she questioned back. “That bad?” Beowulf asked. Cyrenna and Alara both looked down. “Our casualties weren’t much better than yours,” Alara answered. “Still, at least we’re still here,” Beowulf said.

“Not for much longer if Alara is court-martialled,” Cyrenna muttered. Beowulf frowned and leant forwards, looking at her with confusion. “I’m mid-trial over invading the Betrayer’s Fortress Ship,” she stated glumly. He chuckled and shook his head. “What a joke. They put us in command of a fleet, in a whole different world, against enemies most of the Admirals would lose to, and expect us to follow the rulebook and somehow find a victory. We were doomed from the start, we had no idea of the sort of firepower that world held. Now we do and they want to get rid of you. What a way to spit in the faces of Zahn, Guin and Osiris and all everyone sacrificed.”

Cyrenna reached over and placed a heavy hand on her brother’s head, forcing him to lower it. “Mind your tongue. They’re still our superiors for at least a day longer.” She released him and he shook his head. A chime came from their communicators. “Vanathur, Kai, Kai, please return to the council chambers immediately.” The trio looked at each other before glancing towards the clock. “Why now?” Cyrenna questioned.

“You’ve been found not guilty,” Fleet Admiral Truth stated clearly, the room more brightly lit and the floor empty other than the trio. “Be grateful to have such firm support, Vanathur,” Truth said plainly, before leaning back in his throne. “Captain Beowulf Kai and Captain Alara Vanathur, please step forwards,” Admiral Barome stated. They did so. “For your actions against insurmountable odds you are both elevated to the position of Commodore.”

“Commodore Kai, your actions in getting the splintered fleet home were honourable and you showed great promise in command of multiple ships. Commodore Vanathur, the information you have gathered is indeed crucial to our next steps. Your actions, although reckless, came from a personal desire for good – and upon reading your assessments it is clear that had you been in a more

fitting position, this trial would have been unnecessary. You minimised risks, obtained evidence of the survival of Admirals Vanathur and Vanathur and have been innocent of compromising the fleet. That compromise falls to other hands that did so out of no other choice. There is no one to be punished, nor any need to.”

Alara, Beowulf and Cyrenna all looked at each other, trying hard not smile. “That brings us to this sudden meeting,” Admiral Exarga stated. “It is... terrifying to hear of the destructive power in the hands of our enemies. The Fortress Ship is of great concern, but even more so is the Sentry outpost that Beowulf discovered. A platform capable of launching artillery from beyond the horizon is unnerving to say the least, without even factoring in that there are three of them.”

“After much discussion,” Truth chimed in, “we have come to the conclusion, that in order for any chance of operations to be viable within the Old World, these weapons must be seized or destroyed. You three will wait until such a time that operations may resume in the Old World. During this period you shall study the information that has been gathered, as well as undertake your own training to better serve your new positions. You shall also be given means and access to rebuilt your fleet to your definitive specifications.”

“Once the time comes, you three will return to the Old World. You will seize the Sentries – one each – and will use these to lure in and cripple the Fortress Ship. You will then stage a rescue – at which point your reinforcements will arrive and command will pass to the Rear-Admirals, and Admirals Vanathur and Vanathur. Questions?” Fleet Admiral Truth concluded. Alara faltered: it was a lot to take in but she couldn’t help but breathe a sigh of relief that her parents hadn’t been abandoned. “Sir, what of the Betrayer?” Beowulf questioned.

There were glances between the Admirals. “There are rumours that the Sea Sovereign has recently punished the Pirate Lords for Jayce Exarga’s actions,” Barome stated. Alara’s chest tightened. “The Betrayers will likely be too busy dealing with that – both in keeping the Sovereign happy and the Pirate Lords under heel. And if rumours of the Rising Aces destruction are true-“ Alara’s face fell, her knees threatening to buckle. “Then any survivors will certainly cause enough mayhem to keep Barca Khalid busy. Equally, your fleet will not be the only ones dispatched. The others will have their own objectives in order to help destabilise and distract attention away from the Brunxchume outposts.”

Alara forced away her feelings. “We cannot dream of establishing a presence in the Old World without the Fortress Ship and Sentries gone,” Truth concluded.

“Do whatever it takes. You have our blessing in that. The moment those Sentries fall, reinforcements will arrive. Dismissed.” Alara, Beowulf and Cyrenna all stood up straight and saluted before quickly departing. They only stopped to talk properly once they had descended the mountain.

“Well...” Beowulf said softly. “That’s... news.” Beowulf and Alara both had their eyes to the floor. “The Rising Aces...” Alara said quietly, wanting nothing more than to run away and cry somewhere. “I don’t want another word about it from either of you,” Cyrenna stated firmly. “Do not disrespect Jayce, do not disrespect Astris, do not disrespect their crew. Rumours are rumours. And I know that neither of them would go down without taking at least a Betrayer with them – and that would be news. They’re alive, and until I have proof of the opposite then that’s how they are. Our mission is clear, we’ve been told to charge the guns and take them out, so how are we going to do that?” she questioned, leading the way back towards the Isle of Duty and their favourite bar. Alara shook her head, she simply didn’t even know where to begin. “Then think,” Cyrenna stated, walking swiftly ahead – her knuckles white from how hard she was clenching her fists.

They sat down at the bar, the old retired sailor looking at them as he always did before passing over their favourite drinks and leaving them to it. “It has to be simultaneous,” Alara stated. “Any mistiming would allow those guns to be turned on any of our groups. We have to hold the attention of each of them or we will be picked apart, one by one.” Cyrenna and Beowulf both nodded in agreement, writing down their own lists of necessary resources. “It can be done,” Beowulf stated. Cyrenna shook her head, taking her glass and downing the amber liquid. “It will be done,” she declared.

Alara staggered back to her quarters a while later. Her new uniform lay on her bed waiting for her, along with a small note on top of it. *We’re both very proud of you – Philip & Cass.* Alara smiled as she raised it aloft, eventually setting it aside as she lay back on her bed and threw off her clothes. She lay there on top of the covers, the world spinning slightly and her mind desperately trying to think of something to continue to distract her. But nothing came and tears swiftly welled up in her eyes – eventually sliding silently down her cheeks.

“Where are you?” she questioned to the air, hoping that whatever had befallen the Rising Aces hadn’t been nearly as bad as she had imagined. She cried for a while, the alcohol making it far easier for her numerous walls to break apart, but eventually the darkness took her and she fell asleep. Her dreams bombarded her, rolling into a continuous flicker of faces from friends she’d lost, until eventually

it fell into a stable image of a sunlit home. One where the world felt so much bigger than it was, where the seats were high and the tabletops practically in the clouds. She looked up at the hands she was holding, each of them connected to arms and shoulders high above before eventually she found smiling faces looking down at her.

Then the sun vanished and Alara stood tall on the other side of metal bars. A hunched figure sat in the darkness ahead of her. Alara stood frozen, her arm reaching out towards the bars – her mother just beyond. Slowly her mother looked back at her through thin strands of hair – her eyes glinting in the low light and looking up at her with distrust and then anger. “You left me behind. You left your own mother behind,” she said coldly.

“No!” Alara half-yelled, sitting up in alarm in the darkness of her room. She covered her mouth, her heart racing. “Commodore?” questioned a guard, banging on her door. “I’m...” She took a deep breath of air. “I’m okay,” she stated back to him, before begrudgingly getting to her feet and approaching her door. She opened it a crack, forcing a weary smile to the patrolling guard assigned to the accommodation she stayed at. He tried to peer beyond into her quarters. “It’s fine,” she stated quietly, yet firmly. “Just a nightmare. Carry on.”

He nodded and stepped back before resuming his patrol. Alara watched him go before shutting the door and leaning against it. Slowly her legs gave way and she slid to the floor, tucking into a ball as she sobbed once more.

Seize the Seas Tales: The Second Dungeon

Wicke double and triple-checked her backpack before sliding it into her bottomless bag. She read through her list, checked her old and new grimoire, glanced at the notes she had made after asking about the recent changes to the Dungeon. Check. Check. Check. All was fine, at least she believed it to be. She glanced towards Damian, lazily gathering his things together and shoving them into his bottomless bag without care.

Damian glanced towards Wicke, catching a scowl on her face. “What?” he questioned, finishing his packing. “You’re a mess,” she stated. “How can you be so... lazy?” she questioned to him, patting her pockets before putting on her long coat and hat. “Lazy? I... I take offence to that – I’m not lazy – messy definitely, but not lazy,” he protested. She rolled her eyes and stepped towards the door, the others already waiting outside of their new accommodation. “I’m not lending

you anything," she stated firmly, as he tied the bottomless bag to his belt and rushed after her. "That's rude," he stated in return, as she locked up.

"What is?" Sabine questioned, with a smile. She had a new helmet on her head, with horns adorning it like a ram. She also had new armour and weapons, and she was far from the only one who had made upgrades. With Wicke's new money making method anything and everything was available to buy and with it there had no bars held. From clothes to tools to makeup to weapons, the group had ransacked the Capital in preparation. "Damian's messy," Wicke responded. Sabine snorted. "Yeah, and is water wet?" she returned sarcastically.

"Well actually-" Cinderlee inserted, receiving multiple looks from Wicke and Sabine. They turned their attention outwards to the streets of the Republic Capital, before onwards and upwards to the Dungeon at the peak of the island. "Does everyone have everything?" Damian questioned. Numerous nods came back. "Then let's conquer another Dungeon!" Wicke declared.

Chapter 198: Lost Without Leadership

Teleporting felt far stranger than it had before. Last time it had been almost instantaneous for the Stacked Hand and its crew, yet this time the process seemed drawn out – stretching from one moment into multiple before into several seconds. Wam gripped onto the wheel of the Stacked Hand for dear life. A purple maelstrom surrounded the ship, the vessel caught into a swirling tornado. Periodic strikes of purple energy struck the still-burning ship.

Screams filled his ears and mind as he watched his fellow crewmates disappear into the surrounding vortex. A glimmer of golden scales drew his attention to the colossal form of the Dragon Betrayer, Kaina, tumbling in the air before she vanished through the spell's wall. A heavy crash drew his attention to the other side as the Gambit broke free of its restraints, the flyer crashing into the side of the ship before vanishing. The deck seemed to groan beneath his feet, cracks spreading, Gaea's scream breaking through everything as she held the Stacked Hand together. Tempest floated before her – the djinn desperately trying to finish the spell.

There was another crunch, the Last Card breaking free and then orbiting the Stacked Hand before the small ship swept its way across the deck. "Bjorn!" Wam yelled out, staring in horror as the vessel collided into the large therian and swept him off the side, alongside several others, into the vortex. The ship seemed to separate, a layer peeling off everything as purple energy bled from every surface. But then with a heavy splash, the ship snapped together and everything quietened.

Wam dropped a knee, a wave of exhaustion consuming him, his arms desperately grasping the Stacked Hand's wheel for support. He paused, regaining himself, waiting for someone to speak up. Nothing came and he raised his head, his eyes widening as he found the deck of the Stacked Hand practically empty other than Gaea, Tempest and Red. "Are we all okay?" Wam called out, standing up – his stomach churning. He pushed the discomfort aside, reaching up to his communicator as the other three nodded. "Can anyone hear me? Bjorn? Marisha? Captain?" Wam questioned. Silence followed.

"Fire!" Gaea called out, gesturing to the flames persisting near the ship's bow. Red darted to the edge of the ship and leapt overboard, returning and spraying water out of his body at the flames. "Use your own powers!" he stated forcefully towards Gaea. She looked at him with both offence and confusion before her eyes widened and she thought through what he had said. "Oh," she said daintily,

huge paddles emerging out of the sides of the ship and then throwing water across the deck – dousing the flames in a strong wave. “Foolish girl,” Red stated, shaking his head and looking around. “Rude!” she returned, vanishing in a cloud of golden spores.

“Guys, guys!” Wam stated, dropping the anchors and stopping the ship before stepping down onto the main deck. “This is not the time to be picking fights with one another,” he attempted. Red scoffed and immediately stormed to the edge of the ship before leaping overboard – leaving Wam alone with Tempest. Wam looked up at the djinn, desperation in his eyes as he hoped the floating armour would offer something – anything – whether words of encouragement, a suggestion of an idea – something to change their situation for the better. Tempest floated silently, small charges of electricity bouncing across his metal armour. “Is anyone there?” Wam attempted desperately, once more.

A rattle drew his attention to the stairs leading below deck, his chest tightening as the hatch failed to lift. He stepped forwards and pulled it open, a pair of Demons staring up at him. “Fuck!” Wam screamed, Asmodeus and Byleth looked at each other before up at Wam. “I hope that is not due to our presence,” Asmodeus growled in his bat form. “Is the battle won? Our victory, yes?” Byleth questioned. Wam shook his head, grabbing the ears on the top of his head and pulling tightly. “Where is the Captain?” Asmodeus questioned. “Where is Lord Baal?”

“Gone!” Wam snapped, the Demons flinching and backing slowly away before looking at each other. “Dead?” Byleth asked softly, looking up at the sobbing badger therian. “I... I don’t know,” Wam said quietly, sitting down on the floor and looking through tears towards the still silent Tempest. “It is unlikely,” Tempest confirmed. “The magic was... distorted. Our crew is lost, but I doubt they have fallen. It is not a great concern, Wam, do not shed your tears.”

Wam clenched his fists. “Not a great concern? How?” he challenged, wiping his face as his anger grew. “Jayce was always good at looking forwards. We have plans for such an eventuality – albeit I very much doubt he could have ever foreseen a splitting of this magnitude. First we must figure out our location.” Wam looked down at his feet and nodded. “I will follow your lead,” he stated, looking up at the djinn. Tempest shook his head. “No,” he said firmly. Wam frowned. “No?”

“No. I will not lead. I am not qualified to deal with interpersonal relations, nor do I have any wish to. Provided Chalakon has not departed, I would advise

placing him in command. However, that is at your discretion, Acting Captain," Tempest explained. Wam faltered before glancing towards the Demons. They both looked up at him. He then spotted Gaea observing quietly from inside Jayce's quarters. He sighed. "Fine," he said begrudgingly.

"Red, return to the ship," Wam ordered, glancing around the horizon for anything that stood out. A few islands lay on the horizon and the air held a surprising chill for the time of year. A splash announced Red's return. "What is it?" he growled, looking towards Tempest. Wam cleared his throat and stood up straight – his large size still far smaller than both the djinn and the jiaoren. "We need to work together in order to get out of this mess. It's not the time for arguments," he stated cautiously.

Red glared at him menacingly. "I have no reason to listen to you, nor remain aboard this vessel. My debtor is lost, likely dead, as such I am forever exiled. I have... failed," he said firmly, but with a distinct layer of contemplative mourning. Wam nodded. "I get that. And you're free to leave. I cannot stop you and I respect you enough not to try to trick you to stay. But they're out there – I know it. By brothers, Bjorn, Jayce – all of them. They have to be, something like this wouldn't be enough to take them down. Those islands over there, the coldness of the air, the waters, the skies – we've been here before. I think we're southwest – near the therian lands. I could be wrong, but maybe they landed there. I - we - could use you," Wam stated, glancing towards the observing Gaea and gesturing for her to come closer. She glared angrily at Red and at Tempest.

Red looked towards her before letting out a bubbling sigh. "I apologise, dryad. My anger is misplaced. We should work together to protect this vessel," he stated. The planks next to Wam split open and Gaea appeared in a flash of golden light. "Forgiven," she stated. "You're not," she added, pointing at Tempest. Tempest looked at her blankly. "Do you not even care? Are you that cold and soulless?" she accused.

Tempest floated silently for an uncomfortable length of time. "I care," he sparked quietly. "I am to blame for this disaster. If there is any to blame for failure it is me. I apologise. I will do what I can to make amends, but emotion will not change the situation. I concur with Wam's idea – those islands should clarify our location, and should they not be Belluabella then they should at least help identify the region we are in." Gaea looked awkwardly at the deck. "It's not your fault," she said softly. "Sorry," she then added. The djinn nodded and floated below deck. "Acting Captain, the golems are still available to be used,

the night is coming and we are mostly defenceless. We should get moving," Tempest advised from below. Wam nodded and headed towards the Stacked Hand's wheel. "Right, you heard him. Let's get going!" he declared.

The islands were not what Wam had initially believed them to be. "You are in the right region, however," assured the Dockmaster, analysing the damage to the Stacked Hand. Wam and Gaea's faces lit up. "Belluabella is a little more than a week west of here," he confirmed, the silver fox therian pondering for a moment. "Damage to the deck and masts shouldn't be too difficult to fix, may be costly if you have any particular rush."

"We should be fine without external assistance," Tempest inserted, an aggressive tinge to his voice. "Very well," the Dockmaster stated, raising his hands up. "I take it you will still need the materials?" he pressured, smelling money in the air. Tempest sparked angrily. "Indeed," he zapped, his eyes glowing as he looked towards Wam. "We'll, uh, get back to you, Dockmaster. Just need to discuss finances with my shipwright," Wam stated. The fox nodded and then departed. "Do we have money? I have a bit in my bottomless bag but Marisha normally stashes our pay somewhere," Wam questioned. Gaea looked towards Tempest. "Let us visit the vault," he stated.

Tempest led the way to the main cargo hold. Where there were usually stacks of crates carrying resources and supplies for the Stacked Hand's typical long voyages, Wam instead found it, for the most part, empty – the rear vault door exposed for all to see. It was something that Wam had rarely been allowed to go to, least of all with no one to supervise him and his brothers. It opened on simple command as Wam placed his palm to the surface and stated his name, allowing them to step inside.

The vault had slowly turned over the years into a large golden corridor lined with smaller vault doors. Each circular door held the markings of a specific crewmember – all of them sealed and only unlockable by the Captain, Bjorn, Astris, or whoever owned the individual vault. Sitting at the end of the long corridor sat a colossal spider-like sorting machine, one with pipes leading up and into each of the separate vaults. At the base of the terminal was a large hole containing a swirling black void.

"So...?" Wam uttered, looking from Gaea and Red to Tempest for guidance. The djinn floated forwards, gesturing to an open vault sat behind the sorting machine. "Ah," Wam stated, faltering before taking a gulp as he looked at the mass of colourful pearl decorating the vault. It was a considerable sum, a large

and sizeable fortune, but something in Wam twinged as he felt disappointment. "I was... expecting more," he stated. Marisha had never shown him the ship's vault, likely to prevent any ideas of pocketing extra cash, but for a crew like the Rising Aces he would have expected more. A lot more.

Gaea and Red both bore similar expressions. However Gaea almost eternally found money to be both a bemusing concept and something she had no real means of measurement to compare her thoughts with. "Isn't it a lot?" she questioned back. Red, on the other hand, let out a disappointed sigh and shook his head. The Forgotten Prince treated anything other than an absolute fortune as poverty.

Tempest held up a hand to interrupt Red's incoming scathing comment. "You may remember that a little over a year ago we were part of the Therian War. Jayce found it appropriate to give the Republic the spoils we obtained. Since then we have been moving from battle to battle with little in the ways of financial victory. This will have to do, for however long we need it to do for. Should it not then I shall offer my own funds to the cause," Tempest offered. Wam looked down before nodding. "I will too," he affirmed, before looking towards Gaea and Red. "Fine..." they agreed, one with reluctance, the other with enthusiasm – even though she had next to no real funds of her own.

They stayed in port for a few days, ensuring the Stacked Hand was repaired and stocked up for their next voyage, before setting off for Belluabella. Without Falconer to act as the ship's navigator, Wam found most of his time was spread between ensuring that Gaea was kept focused on her task of steering the ship and also his own task of plotting their route. He had initially passed it off as a task that didn't require much effort and energy, but after waking one morning to find the ship facing in completely the wrong direction it almost immediately dawned upon him that it required far more than just following a rough heading.

But, after a few close encounters with rocks, reefs, and the odd storm, the crew set their eyes Belluabella. "We may not find the friendly welcome we are looking for," warned Tempest, as Wam took control of the Stacked Hand's wheel. "Maybe not, but it's the best chance we have at finding help," Wam returned, slowly easing the ship into the central channel. He shivered as he felt numerous eyes fall upon him from all directions, and a seedling of doubt quickly began to grow inside his mind.

He wondered just what it all looked like to the outside. A nobody sailing the Stacked Hand, the ship empty apart from four unheard-of members of the Rising

Aces and a pair of toy-like Demons. He shook his head. Tempest was heard of, few would not recognise the djinn. But the dryad, the jiaoren and the badger therian – who had heard of them? Something brushed his leg and he looked down, only for the creature to move and flap up onto the railing next to him.

“Ease your worries,” Asmodeus calmed, either seeing or sensing the panic quickly growing within Wam. “They will not attack, this ship’s legend stands on its own – it’s colours known across the world.” Wam looked to the large bat. “How can you be sure?” Wam questioned, the ship exiting the mountain back into bright daylight. “Because this is the ship of Jayce Exarga, and even without him here it is still his. And what fool would pick a fight with that man?” Wam nodded, a soft smile crossing his face. “Only a Betrayer, I suppose.”

They docked in the bay they had used previously, the process reliant entirely on Gaea using her connection to the ship to guide it’s mooring, and it wasn’t long before a small group arrived to say hello. “Captain,” Tempest stated, providing a mental push of encouragement to Wam. Wam took a nervous gulp and made the first move, clambering down over the side of the ship to the pier below. “Hello!” he greeted boldly, looking at the large group of armoured therians.

“Where is your Captain?” questioned a hyena therian, the clear leader of the small group of guards. “Unavailable at this very moment, you’ll have to deal with me,” Wam stated firmly, glancing briefly backwards to ensure that both Red and Tempest had joined him. Fortunately they were there, and - from the quick glance of the therians to Tempest – Wam quickly sensed it would have been trouble had they not been.

“I see...” said the hyena. “Well, a message was to be passed onto Pirate Lord Exarga upon his arrival. Are you willing to accept the duty of passing it forwards?” he questioned. Wam nodded, his fists clenched and chest puffed out as he stood as tall as he could. “Lord Magnus of the Frostbear tribe wishes to see him at the soonest convenience. That is all, good day.” The delegation turned and marched away, leaving a short moment of confusion behind that quickly fell into a patch of disappointment.

“So no one is here then,” Wam realised, looking towards Tempest. The djinn nodded. “That would seem probable. A shame, but we at least have a direction.” Wam nodded. “Is it possible for us to take the ship with us?” Wam asked. Tempest shook his head. “No, although I have successfully reverse-engineered the runes on the ship’s original container – I have failed to replicate the original

in a manner that functions with the Stacked Hand. The Captain is in current possession of the ship's container. It will have to remain here under Gaea's care."

"Great, just great," Wam said with a sigh. "Red, stay here with her. Just in case. Tempest you'll come with me to visit the Frostbear Tribe." Red nodded, climbing back aboard. "An excellent suggestion. Should something occur I am able to bring us swiftly back aboard," Tempest advised. Wam smirked, nodding appreciatively before beginning to walk towards the exit. "Wait!" called down Asmodeus, the large bat gliding down from the Stacked Hand to land on Wam's back. "I will join you." Wam shrugged and continued onwards.

It took several hours before they arrived at the Frostbear village, and by that point Wam was starving. Something Magnus sensed almost immediately. "Come come, there is no point discussing whatever has occurred whilst you're in this state," he quickly advised, the polar bear therian hobbling forwards towards his home and gesturing for Tempest, Wam and Asmodeus to follow. "Welcome home," came numerous voices from the locals, as Wam followed after him. He nodded and smiled awkwardly, each pat and greeting alien to him.

He flinched as Magnus finally stopped and embraced him tightly. "What?" Wam questioned, trying to push back only for the large bear's grip to feel inescapable. "It is okay, you are safe here," Magnus assured, keeping hold tightly until he felt Wam's rigid body soften. He pulled back, placing both hands on Wam's shoulder and looking at his face. Tears flooded silently down Wam's face, his body shaking as for the first time since the crew's separation he felt safe. "Eat, drink, tell me what has occurred. Where is your crew? Where is Bjorn?" Magnus questioned.

"I see..." Magnus eventually stated, sometime later, holding his chin in his hands and pondering quietly. "This is quite an issue." Wam scoffed and shook his head. "You think, old man?" he stated, looking towards Tempest and the otherwise empty hut. "I suppose you are correct. This is a real mess. Unfortunately this has also occurred at quite possibly the worst time. There is little I can do to aid you, as much as I wish I could."

Wam looked towards him, frowning with quick confusion. Magnus held up a hand. "Crach's death has opened a dangerous line of thought within these lands. King Xerxes is now faced with numerous challengers, all seeking to be the Therian King and seize both the title and the now associated Pirate Lord position. Crach bastardised the crown, and now Xerxes has turned it into something that anyone can steal without an honour duel. Something that both hinders and helps you."

“How so?” Wam questioned, not exactly certain how any of this could possibly be helpful. “Well, in simpler terms, Xerxes’ hands are now so full with quelling rebellions and reunifying the therians that he may not be able to turn his attention to his true task: getting revenge on the Empire – apologies – Republic. He seeks vengeance for his imprisonment, and is using his War Hounds to ensure that little stands in the path of his goal. I fear that soon we shall have to fall in line as well, but for now the attention is not on us. I wish I could help you, Wam, Tempest, Asmodeus, but I cannot split my people. Not so soon after Inger joined the ancestors. You may stay here for as long as you need to – we will hide you.”

Wam looked down. It wasn’t what he had been hoping for, but if there were any Rising Aces nearby then perhaps waiting in Belluabella was the best idea. “I-“ “Wam,” came a voice from his communicator. “There’s trouble,” said Gaea, his heart twisting as he shot to his feet. “The ship is being boarded. Come back, please come back,” she pleaded. Wam looked to Tempest, who looked back blankly – waiting for a command.

“Go. Sail to the New World. It’s a long journey I know, but you’ll find safety on the other side. Perhaps your crew, if not then friends. I believe in you, young cub. Prove us proud, as I know you already have Bjorn,” Magnus reassured, placing a gentle hand on Wam’s shoulder. Wam nodded, stepping back. “Tempest, take us back to the Stacked Hand!” he ordered, resolute in his only real option. The djinn began to chant, a purple swirl surrounding both of them before in a flash of purple lightning they landed on the main deck.

Blood covered the deck beneath his feet: a therian corpse lay sprawled on the ground. It was a hyena, the one that Wam had seen earlier that day on arrival. He had been gutted, the wound clean and from a blade. Wam faltered – unless the golems had struck first - neither Gaea nor Red used a blade. “How curious?” came a gnarly voice that send a shivers down Wam’s back. He looked up, glancing towards the helm where Gaea and Red both stood in defensive positions. Stood on the stairs beneath them were another two hyenas, both dressed in sand-coloured, long and loose-fitting robes, with a rectangular headscarf over their heads – their eyes hidden behind black visors. Armour made of numerous metallic rectangles sat over their loose clothes, and they both held a pair of long, curved swords.

But behind them, stood initially with his back to Wam, Tempest and Asmodeus was another hyena dressed in the same uniform – only his was a blood-red colour and one of his blades dripped with blood. He turned, his eyes visible and an

unusually human green colour. "So, there are more of you," he said, his voice grating and dripping with cruel malice. "But not the great reinforcements you spoke of," he then added, with a high-pitched cackle – the other two hyenas laughing along with him, before several more voices joined in from behind, alerting Wam immediately to the others scattered amongst the deck. "And most notably, no Jayce Exarga."

The War Hound glared at Wam, his eyes analysing him in an intimidating and almost lecherous manner. Wam clenched his fist, the silver ring on his middle finger forming into a large warhammer. "You two okay?" Wam questioned, calling up to Red and Gaea. "Yeah, fine," Red growled back, Gaea hiding behind him. "So, I take it you're in charge of this ghost ship? We haven't been introduced, but I suppose you already know of me – don't you, little badger?" Bayle the Joker stated, putting his weapons away.

"The clown, Bayle – I know of you," Wam returned, holding his weapon tightly and glancing nervously towards the other hyenas as they spread around and began to surround him. "Clown..." Bayle growled, letting out a sigh and rolling his eyes. "I will kill Persi for that nickname – I much preferred the Cackler. Still, it is good you know of me. I take it you also know that it is wise to surrender. This ship is mine, and your lives with it – whether you admit it or not."

"Never," Wam growled. Bayle nodded, looking towards one of his hyenas who charged silently forwards. A large thorny spike launched upwards out of the deck, impaling the hyena with a yelp before quickly retracting. "Another move dryad and your tree burns, with you along with it!" Bayle growled, turning to look at her. Wam surged forwards, lifting his warhammer high and bringing it sharply down across Bayle's jaw.

The weapon met bone and flesh, carrying forwards and through with a spray of broken bone and blood. Bayle staggered backwards, slowly reaching up to touch his ruined face as Wam swung again. This time the hyena caught the strike, almost lazily, with his free hand before he looked down at the blood covering his other palm. His green eyes glanced up, anger burning within them. He gargled something, before his head glowed green and transformed back into human form.

He had strong facial features, his cheeks and nose prominent – his skin pale, and gaunt, with numerous weary wrinkles. He laughed before he transformed back – his jaw reformed. "Strike first, strike hard – a wise idea, but one that needed to be lethal." Bayle shoved Wam back with a single, human hand – that quickly

transformed between therian and human form. His eyes remained green – human. “Try again,” Bayle goaded. “Interfere and you shall meet the same fate as that other failure!” he warned to his pack.

Wam roared and surged forwards. He leapt and slammed the weapon down hard, the hammer brushing the fur on Bayle’s face. He brought the hammer back up, trying to catch him with the hook on the back of the hammer’s head, but again it seemed to only just miss. Wam threw a heavy fist, dropping his therian form around his hand and concentrating his Focus into the strike. Again it missed, and his eyes widened as he realised what Bayle was doing. “Faster than most,” Bayle said softly, his pack cackling around them. “But too slow.”

Wam sputtered blood, his eyes looking down at confusion at the blade that had appeared from nowhere and impaled his chest. Desperately he pushed away, transforming fully out of therian form and trying to run away, only for Bayle to grab his shoulder and lean into him. “Weak.” He thrust the sword through Wam’s back, the blade emerging from his chest. The blade retracted nearly as quickly and Wam dropped to the floor, his vision darkening before his breath left his body.

Seize the Seas Tales: Know Thy Enemy

Alara flicked as quickly as she could through the tower of documents amongst her table. They were file names, all detailing Marines and Navy that she could choose from. Captains, Commanders, all at her disposal for their next attempt at the Old World. She needed the best of the best, it was the only way they stood a chance at taking down the Sentries and then freeing her parents. She had failed already, she wouldn’t again.

A knock drew her attention to her door. She had had numerous visitors across the last few weeks, but most knew now to leave her alone. She was busy, anxious, stressed, and it was not pretty. She growled slightly, forcing herself to her feet and wiping her eyes before stumbling to the door and dragging it open. “Yes?” she questioned. “Delivery,” stated the Navy Lieutenant, dressed in all black. She frowned and took it from him, shutting the door as he quickly walked away.

It was a large envelope, big enough for a sizeable folder – and that was exactly what it contained. “Huh?” she questioned, looking down at the damaged paper. The words on its surface were scrawled, twisting in her vision as her necklace automatically began to translate the words in a foreign language. She held it

tightly, staring closely at it as the writing finally stilled. Her eyes widened. "Personnel file: Barca Khalid," it read.

Chapter 199: Beast, Man... and God

Gaea stared in horror as Wam died in front of her. It had been so quick, and, although unlikely that he could have won against the War Hound, she had been counting on him buying enough time for her to slip away and command the golems to attack. "That was... disappointing, but inevitable," Bahl goaded, wiping his blade and turning back towards her and Red. "Kill them," he commanded, his pack of hyenas surging towards Tempest and the helm.

She screamed, the entire ship rattling and twisting before the surface cracked apart and detonated outwards in a sea of large spikes. Red launched himself upwards, dodging out of the way of the wave of thorns and carrying himself aggressively towards the also leaping War Hound. They clashed in the air, before slamming back towards the deck as the thorns disappeared. Red glanced behind him, Gaea was gone. A fist then cracked against his eye.

Gaea caught her breath as she emerged below deck amongst the guarding golems. "Defend the ship!" she cried. The stone statues ground to attention and then marched towards the stairs to the main deck. She then paused, leaning against the wall with her hands over her face – orange tears dripping down her chin. She could hear fighting above: crashes of blades against stone, cracks of lightning, and the rushing of two apex predators throwing everything they could at each other.

She gasped, doubling over and clutching her side. When she pulled her hand back she saw sticky, green blood. Someone was attacking her tree. Gaea let out a pained sob, leaning back into the wall and transversing through it before lunging out of her wounded tree with a screech. She lunged at the large hyena – his body almost double the size of hers. Wam lay at his feet, tucked into the tree - by her design - to protect his corpse from her fury. The hyena stumbled backwards as she wrapped herself around his body, the light impact causing him to trip over Wam and crash to the floor.

She mounted him, her hands wrapped tightly around his throat as she pushed him down. He reached for her face, raking a claw down her cheek but she didn't let go – the wood of the deck parting beneath his head as she physically willed the ship to split. She screamed as his head fell back into the gap before she slammed the ship together – killing him instantly and painting herself red. His corpse spasmed beneath her before falling still, and only as the final movement stilled did she release her hands from his neck, slowly reaching up to wipe the blood off her face.

Tempest disintegrated the pair of harassing hyenas, running so much lightning through them that the deck ignited beneath their feet, before they turned to ash. More just kept coming, reinforcements beyond the hyenas that had presumably been called to aid the War Hound. It was a losing battle and with every fallen golem they came closer to their demise and joining Wam in the afterlife. He floated backwards towards the protection of his golems, analysing the deck before freezing as he spotted Gaea sat stunned in horror over a corpse of her own making. Tempest didn't blink – he didn't need to – but Bahl appeared in an instant in front of her.

Bahl lunged for her, she was the ship and with her death would come the end of the fight – he knew it, it had to be done. He swung with his swords, his eyes not on her but on Tempest as he chanted and then Red as he darted to use the opening to kill him. Bahl feinted his strikes, the frozen dryad already defeated, swinging instead into the opening ocean crawler. Red blocked the first strike with his forearm, the curved blade embedding itself deep into his armoured arm before the following strike came harder and more precisely downward through his joint – severing his left arm at the elbow.

Red screamed, the War Hound dropping his embedded blade to grab his throat and then throw him directly into the direction of Tempest's incoming spell. Tempest faltered, a moment's thought questioning whether it was worth sacrificing Red to ensure victory. That moment was enough for the War Hound's second blade to embed itself directly through his neck, Red's body crashing into him a moment later and sending them both crashing to the ground with a fizz and then a pop.

Gaea's eyes widened as she looked up at the War Hound. He towered over her, his eyes furious and frustrated. "You cost me a lot of valuable soldiers. For what end? A meaningless fight to defend a broken crew?" he growled, placing his foot on Red's severed arm and then wrenching the blade free from the exoskeleton. Gaea turned and looked to her remaining crewmates. Red lay on the ground in a pile, his arm gushing blood and body smoking. Tempest has a blade embedded in his neck – something of little consequence to the being made of energy – but his armour looked dull and lacked light. The interruption of his spell had been catastrophic, the damage unknown. A hand grabbed Gaea's throat, lifting her up from the floor and removing all contact to the ship – unknowingly cutting off her connection.

"You'll join them soon enough, but first I have questions I should get answers for," Bahl growled, his rage fading and a begrudging duty reemerging. Gaea spat blood at his face but he didn't even flinch, he simply hacked at her tree with his blade – the pain agonizing. "Stop! Stop! Please stop!" she begged, struggling against his grip as he hacked at different spots purely to hurt her. Her body screamed as she did, wounds opening up across her skin. "What do you want to know? Ask, please," she cried. He didn't say anything, hacking once more. "That's the thing... I don't want to know anything. It's too much effort."

Byleth cowered in Jayce's quarters, the fighting outside finally coming to a close – only instead to be replaced by the agonizing pleading of Gaea as she screamed and sobbed in pain along with a wild, animalistic cackling. The Demon had never known fear like it, nothing nearly as close to his own primordial fear of death. It was strange, alien, haunting and deeply concerning. Byleth feared for the lives of the mortals on this ship. "Asmodeus," said the small cat, "we need to do something." He turned and looked towards the other Demon, only for his eyes to widen as he found himself alone. "Asmodeus? Asmodeus?"

Wam gasped as he bolted upright. The floor was hot, scaldingly-so. "Ow-ow-ow-ow!" he yelped, leaping to his feet before bouncing on his tip-toes. The floor burned, but there was nowhere to escape to – everything around him was a flat expanse of molten magma. He looked down, a bloody hole sat in the centre of his chest, his body cold – despite the heat. He gasped briefly, another gasp following, followed by another, and another, before he let out a horrified and desperate scream.

"Enough!" came a deep growl, the horizon of the flat volcanic expanse beginning to undulate before a colossal mountain erupted out of the ground. Its surface exploded, sending out rivers of lava and plumes of smoke. "Asmodeus?" Wam questioned, a colossal creature dragging itself out of the volcano before sitting at its peak. The giant Demon stared down at him: his form completely different from the large bat Wam was used to, and also very different from what he remembered of Jayce's initial descriptions. "Wh-where am I? What happened? I'm... I'm dead?" Wam questioned.

"There is little time. You are dead, and the others will be soon," Asmodeus declared. "What?" Wam questioned, the Demon's glowing red eyes bearing down upon him. "Listen," he commanded. "Should I have willed it, I would have abandoned you the second you perished, but I do not wish for this crew to fall. Not whilst we both have so much yet to discover. I am offering you a chance to

fight again, to survive this grievous wound and take back the ship that is yours.”
“A deal with a Demon? What’s the cost?” Wam questioned, already accepting there was no choice. “That you do not disappoint me, Captain.”

A hand grabbed Bahl’s ankle, his head angling quickly down as his leg began to burn in fast pain. He screamed, releasing Gaea and swinging his blade downwards before leaping away as the grip was released. Bahl landed on his feet, his left leg giving out as the exposed bone snapped on the impact. He crunched into the stairs of the aft-deck, staring in horror as the Demon rose from the dead.

“Wam?” Gaea questioned from the floor. He turned and looked down at her, the hole in his chest had been filled in with glowing orange magma. “Thanks for protecting me,” he said softly, with a genuine smile. Wam then turned, the smile gone, and his glowing red eyes full of hate as he stared at the War Hound. “You greedy bastard!” Bahl cackled, transforming his leg from the knee down into his human form. Wam transformed, his black and white badger form emerging, only now with a pair of bat-like wings and large streaks of glowing orange magma throughout his fur. His eyes remained a glowing crimson with a brown core. “I don’t normally get to kill people twice. Be honoured.”

Wam lunged for him, flapping his wings to launch himself forwards. Bahl swung his blade into Wam’s shoulder cutting the arm clean off, but Wam ignored the pain, pressing his larger body into the hyena before placing his remaining palm onto his chest. His hand melted into magma, the hyena screaming in pain before Wam pulled his head back and then slammed it into the War Hound’s face. The impact hurt, but, between the pain of the heat and the sharp change in battle, Bahl had no defence.

He tried to fight against Wam but Wam continued to press down onto him, his entire body a glowing weapon. “Burn you bastard!” Wam roared, the fur of hyena catching alight as he pressed further and harder into the War Hound’s chest. Bahl screamed before something gave way and Wam’s hand dropped inside the hyena’s chest. The green eyes stared directly at Wam with horror and surprise before they clouded over and Bahl went limp.

Wam pulled his hand free, reaching down for his severed arm before pressing it back to his shoulder – it reattached almost instantly and felt good as new. He turned to the few remaining therians. “Run,” he commanded coldly, the soldiers scrambling for the edge of the ship before leaping overboard down onto the pier, or even the water in desperation. *Good*, came Asmodeus’ voice in Wam’s head –

the sensation unsettling but also somewhat reassuring. *This body feels... strange, like there's something else in here.*

"Can we talk about this later?" Wam questioned aloud, stepping towards Gaea and looking over her wounds. "I'm fine," she cried, clearly not fine. "Them," she added, pointing at Red and Tempest. She faded away, disappearing back inside her tree as he headed over to the pair. "Red? Tempest?" he questioned, reaching into his bottomless bag and pouring a healing potion over Red's stump. The bleeding stopped and the wound sealed into a gnarly scar. Wam poured another into the ocean crawler's mouth, and he soon began to stir. He then turned his attention to the djinn.

The blade in his neck was sparking and, without thought, Wam reached for it and pulled it free. It was only as he held the weapon in his hands that he realised what he had done. "Curious..." he admitted, tossing the weapon aside and looking at the sparking armour. He didn't know what he could do to help, or even if there was anything he could do. Wam's eyes flowed across the damage, the holes in the armour. He looked around, his eyes landing on a broken golem. "Better than nothing," he muttered, grabbing a chunk of stone and concentrating upon it. The stone melted and he placed it onto the gaps in the armour.

With a loud zap, he was sent sprawling backwards, the shock agonising but brief. "Ow..." Wam groaned, getting to his feet as the armour began to glow once again. The two began to move, Tempest and Red regaining some semblance of consciousness. "Get up!" Wam commanded, the pair looking to him and then the devastation around them. "The War Hound is dead? How?" Red questioned, looking briefly at his stump before shrugging it off. "You bound yourself to Asmodeus?" Tempest questioned in turn, the pair self-accepting the silent answer. "Gaea?" Tempest questioned.

"Alive," Wam answered. "We need to leave this place, reinforcements will be coming. Can you teleport us?" Wam questioned. The djinn looked down, shaking his head. "I... do not think that is wise. It could end up worse than before," he answered quietly. "I didn't ask if you thought it was wise. Can you do it?" Wam asserted, the djinn's visor glowing brightly as he looked down at him. "Yes... Captain."

"Then let's go. It doesn't matter where. We'll make our way from wherever to the New World. We'll meet the others there, I'm certain of it," Wam declared. They all turned as they heard shouting in the distance. "Get us going, Tempest!" The djinn nodded, floating upwards and beginning to chant. "Are you certain

about this?" Red questioned. "Last time it didn't work. The djinn could doom us." Wam smiled, looking to the ocean crawler. He shook his head and followed the swirls of lightning around the ship. "We'll be fine. I trust him. Besides, I've already died once."

Thalia hit the ground hard, her knee dropping straight into the sand beneath her feet. Her heart pounded inside her chest, her body pumped full of adrenaline, and her soul felt fear, yet excitement. The Dragon, Kaina, had been something else. A beast, a monstrosity, and, as much as it had pained her that they had fled, she couldn't help but grin at the thought of facing down not only her, but all the Betrayers in the future.

Her eyes stared down at the sand, her left hand gripped her anchor tightly, but her right hand brushed the coarse floor. Beneath the surface sat a far harder rock floor: concrete, not a natural rock from the density as she pressed it with her finger. She frowned, her brown eyes flicking towards a splotch of congealed red sand, a white tooth sat in the mixture. *This isn't the ship*, she thought, as it finally dawned on her.

The roar in her heart died out, replaced instead by a far louder and deafening roar all around her. She looked up, her eyes widening as she got to her feet and took in the packed stands surrounding her in all directions as she stood in the centre of a colossal arena – an arena she recognised. An arena she had fought in only a few months prior. "What? Where's the ship?" she questioned aloud to herself, only instead to fixate her attention on the end of a battle occurring in front of her.

There was a cheer as a large man crumpled to the floor, his hand on his chest – over his heart – and the armour across his body cracked and dented. "Ladies, gentlemen, monsters and mortals, we at the World Guild must apologise for the unexpected intrusion! The on-site guards are on their way to remove the intruder. Once more, we deeply apologise for interruption," called out the announcer, his voice gentle and soft.

Thalia hefted her weapon, her heartrate accelerating as she stared beyond the crumpled body ahead of her. A lone figure stood beyond, his arms folded and a curious expression on his face. Thalia had never seen him before, but something stood out to her – an alien familiarity. He tapped his long, thin, stained fingers, the entire hand and forearms beyond stained a deep orange-red colour. He was short, most definitely close to a foot shorter than her, and quite small in build.

He had muscle, but not an overwhelming amount – a clear leanness over a bulky body, but every minute movement sent a ripple of taut muscle across his arms. Other than his stained arms, his skin was fair and covered in periodic patches of freckles – a strong stretch across his pointed nose. A large red tattoo of a scorpion lay on the left side of his neck. Curiously, he wore a simple black vest, but the lower half of his body appeared to be covered in smart attire, including dress shoes. A golden tie was wrapped around his right hand and a grey jacket sat discarded in the sands near him.

Thalia stepped forwards. “Dearest patrons, I have just been informed that our guest is no other than Thalia of the Rising Aces! As such, we are delighted to inform you of the special match that is just about to begin!” clamoured the announcer. Thalia grinned, permission had been granted and she was itching for another fight. The strange man smirked at her, his blood-red, narrow, crimson eyes flashing at her across the thirty-metre gap between them. His messy black hair flicked around in the gentle wind, the sands of the arena picking up as they both slowly approached each other. “Place your bets now! Thalia of the Rising Aces versus the Assassin, Oni!”

Oni darted forwards across the sands, the small ex-Emperor’s Fist clearing the gap towards her in a far faster time than Thalia could. He was dwarfed by her, but he moved in a blur, sliding through her legs as she swung her anchor down in a devastating strike that shook the entire arena and send a tsunami of sand in all directions. He then pushed against his momentum, leaping up towards her exposed back.

Thalia sat upright, her body cold and her surroundings dark. It had been a dream, it must have all been a dream, she rationalised – a firm and sticky sweat across her body as she sat in a hospital gown. She couldn’t remember anything other than the small man avoiding her blow. Slowly it dawned on her, ice spreading throughout her as she began to pant heavily. She covered her face, her hands blocking out the sight of her humiliation, but in the darkness she saw only red. The red eyes of the warrior that beat her before she could realise she had lost.

And then, as the tears began to stream from her eyes, the rush of shame and embarrassment was replaced. A grin spread across her face, a sadistic expression twisting her mouth as her heart raced. She’d lost. She’d lost in an unbelievably devastating way. And that meant she had so many good fights ahead of her.

Seize the Seas Tales: Crash, Bang, Sputter

Marisha spat out a clump of dirt, pulling her face back from the grass she had landed upon. Her body ached, and she had a sneaking suspicion she had fractured a rib, but none of that was her biggest priority. "Where in the abyss am I?" she questioned aloud, standing up with a groan and looking around at the dark grassy island she was on. It was hilly and plain, with nothing other than grass and ocean in view – nothing other than a flyer laying on its side. She gasped as she recognised the colours: the flyer was the Gambit.

After chugging a healing potion, she raced over to the vehicle. Much to her relief, it was for the most part intact: it had taken some knocks, but nothing particularly stood out as damaged, other than that its left wing needed its fabric retying. She folded her arms, turning and taking in her surroundings. She was definitely more north than they had been, but how far north was the question. A groan drew her attention back to the Gambit.

Someone was underneath the damaged wing. She peered around the fabric, a large form laying on the floor. "Bjorn?" she questioned hopefully, only for the mass of white fur to turn and look at her – a giant panda staring groggily at her as he rubbed his head. "No..." Ohno said softly, groaning as he stood up – only to immediately sit back down as he bumped his head, both hands grasping the top of his head. Marisha tried her very hardest not to voice her disappointment: Ohno was a wonderful, kind and gentle young man, but he was – for lack of better words – a bit thick-headed.

With bleary eyes he looked up at her, her face clearly giving away her disappointment. "Sorry," he said mournfully. She shook it off and stepped under the wing to be by his side, checking him over for injuries. "You don't have anything to apologise, Ohno. I'm glad you're with me," she reassured, placing a hand on his cheek and smiling at him before stepping back and helping him up. "Where are we?" he questioned, stepping more carefully out from under the wing. Marisha shook her head. "I don't know, I think we've crossed the Frontier, but I'm not certain."

"The Gardens?" Ohno questioned, standing over her and looking around at the horizon. Marisha looked up at him before nodding. "Could be, since we're in summer and it's so mild. We'll have to see what we can find once we get into the skies. Check the fuel, I'll see what I can do about this wing," Marisha commanded. "Okay," he said simply, stumbling towards the flyer before clambering inside. Marisha turned to the wing. "Hmm," she vocalised aloud,

before letting out a sigh and turning to the ocean. She reached up to her communicator. "Rising Aces, it's Marisha – can anyone hear me?" she called out.

Morgana turned to Soteria as they flew through the air, Morgana on her broomstick, the Dragon flying through her own means. "Did you hear that?" Morgana questioned. "I did," Soteria responded, her voice raspy and emotionless, but the faint change in expression on her face indicating, at the very least, intrigue. "Marisha?" Morgana responded. "Where are you?" she questioned. "Where are you? Where are we?" came back the response.

Morgana looked down at her broomstick, her knuckles white as she flew absent-mindedly. She then looked past the wood, her eyes focusing on the various islands she was flying over. "Home. We're near my old home."

Chapter 200: A Future Beyond Today

Damian looked down at his shaking hands, his entire body was trembling: a mixture of fatigue – both mental and physical – and also the memory of what he and his group had just encountered. The Dungeon had changed, that was for certain. They had conquered the Dungeon in the west, but this one had completely wiped them – the group hardly making it over halfway. Between new and more complex monstrosities, as well as an evolution to the Dungeon's environments, the entire journey had felt like an uphill struggle. Damian disliked it. Wicke hated it.

"More than a month... wasted!" she growled, storming down the Isle of Majesty and leaving the group behind. She didn't care that they weren't following her. It didn't matter. She wanted space. She wanted time. She needed to do better. It was the middle of the day, the summer skies already hot on her skin and the streets flooded with people – all milling around as they went about their ordinary lives.

They parted for Wicke, her expression more than intimidating enough to get her through even the thickest crowds. That was until she walked face-first into the chin of a slightly taller woman. "Ow," came an all-too-familiar voice, Wicke's eyes widening as she rubbed her forehead and looked up at Alara. "Alara?" Wicke questioned. "Oh great," she immediately followed up with. Alara frowned, glancing at Wicke before looking beyond her. "Hello, you two," she stated, smiling at Damian – the only member of the group who had followed after Wicke – before folding her arms and glaring at Wicke. "You look like you're up to trouble," she scolded.

Begrudgingly, Wicke followed Alara across the Capital to a small bar on the Isle of Duty. She had used every possible excuse, but neither Damian nor Alara were having any of it, and, before long, Wicke found herself sat in a booth with a strawberry ice-cream milkshake in front of her and Alara's inquisitive eyes staring her down. "I would prefer a beer," Damian stated quietly, looking at his almost matching drink. "Nonsense. And no, young man – not yet, not until you're an adult," Alara said, somewhat mockingly. Wicke rolled her eyes, sipping her straw. "So, what are you two doing in the Capital?" began Alara's first line of questioning.

"We just exited the Dungeon," Damian stated quietly, the pair of them looking down at their laps. "I take it didn't go well? What floor did you reach?" Alara pried. "Sixty-four," Wicke answered plainly, her hand reaching unconsciously to

her side – the memory painful. “And how many are there in total?” Alara questioned, leaning forwards and staring intently at Wicke. “I... uh,” Wicke stammered. “I heard about Caedom’s Dungeon – your handiwork?” Alara pressed. “Yeah, that was us,” Damian said more confidently, taking Alara’s attention back to himself. “One-hundred floors, but it’s changed recently so there could be more – I don’t know,” Wicke inserted, trying to take control of the conversation. “I was just going to say that,” Damian said quietly to her. “I can speak for myself,” she returned. “I’m leading this group after all.”

Alara smiled, shaking her head and leaning back into the booth seat. “Sounds to me like you had your behinds handed to you. I get it, it happens. It’s not nice, but it’s sometimes inevitable. Will you go back in?” she asked. Damian looked towards Wicke. She seemed uncertain, but then a familiar glint reemerged in her amber eyes. “It’s what Jayce would do.” Alara twitched, her face darkening before a soft smile reemerged. “Yeah, it is. He’s expecting you to finish these Dungeons sooner rather than later. So you best get to work. We’ve all got roles to play, this is yours,” she stated, standing up.

“And what’s yours?” Wicke questioned. Something splashed into her milkshake, a look of confusion crossing Wicke’s face before she looked inside at the coin that had landed in her drink. Wicke looked back towards Alara, Riley stood up from her seat at the bar, a few other Marines with her. “Leading us,” Riley stated with a grin, placing her hands on Alara’s shoulders as the Marines heading for the exit. Wicke grit her teeth: she could have sworn no one else had been in the bar – how could she have missed multiple Marines? “I’ve got my own fight. My own war to wage. Make it count you two – this may mean more than you know.” She departed with a small nod, their drinks and food paid for by Riley’s donation.

They left a little later, stepping out and pausing for a moment as they saw a large fleet of Navy ships sailing south. “So...” Damian said quietly, turning and looking towards Wicke. “A week today,” she stated confidently. “We enter, and do not leave until it is ours.” Damian grinned, rolling his neck from side to side before stretching. “What will the others say?” he asked, watching as Alara’s ship disappeared into the horizon. “Aye aye.”

The end of the Dungeon matched that of the one in Caedom: after beating the ninetieth floor with little resources left to use, they found the following floors empty apart from old defensive outposts. They then came across more fields of dead crops before finally the city where the ancient people had stayed. Once

again, a lone white tower sat in the middle of the city - but this time Wicke knew what she was going to ask.

“Do not touch anything!” Wicke warned to her party as they entered the Dungeon’s control room. Sabine immediately and slowly lowered down the large, glowing gemstone she had picked up. Wicke ignored her, her own attention fixated on the large frozen chamber in front of her. Mist billowed from the icy surface, yet the woman inside was easy to see. She was a short woman, with long brown hair and darker skin. Her eyes were open and unseeing, her irises a bright, almost-unnatural, cyan colour. Her robes matched her eyes, and - like the Archmage Wicke had met before - this one floated over a black, shadowy orb: a Demon bound to the machine and the conduit for the Dungeon.

Wicke edged closer to the stasis tube, giving a brief glance backwards before adjusting the levers to deactivate the device. Her world faded away, and she once again found herself inside a blank environment – only this time, the Archmage sat on a chair sipping a cup of tea. “Hello,” she said cordially, looking at Wicke with both suspicion and intrigue. “Take a seat, intruder from the future, killer of my friend – or saviour of the past, and protégé of us all,” she said, her voice icy and smooth. She gestured in front of her and ice rose up from the floor to take the form of a chair. Wicke strode forwards, her heart racing and excitement consuming her as she sat down. “So,” carried on the Archmage of ice, “which are you?”

“My name is Wicke, oh great Archmage,” she began, attempting flattery only to falter as a cold stare pierced her. “Uh, I met Porthos. In the Dungeon to the West, in Caedom,” Wicke reattempted. “He gave me his grimoire and then the Dungeon collapsed.” The Archmage stared at Wicke, squinting before sighing and nodding. “I’ve never heard of Caedom, nor do I know of any other Dungeons apart from those south of this location. But it seems plausible and I have no reason to doubt a creature such as you. Who is your master?” she questioned.

Wicke frowned. “Uh, I have no master. No one other than my sisters and my own skills.” The Archmage smirked, nodding approvingly before sipping her tea. It then vanished into thin air. “Then there is much to discuss, little one. My name is Alizia, Cyromancer of the First Orb. If all has gone well, I take it you have never heard of me?” Alizia asked. Wicke nodded. “How much time has passed?” “Five hundred years, give or take.”

“Ah... bollocks. Then the rate of deterioration will be accelerating with every moment. That gives us little time. This grimoire is for you, it represents not only

my life's work, but that of my predecessor's, and those before them. Collect the rest, mention our names and they should understand what has occurred. I sensed the destruction of another Dungeon – your doing?" Wicke nodded. "Then the threat has passed and the world is healing?" Wicke nodded again, but a momentary falter drew a look of suspicion out of Alizia.

"What is the state of the global authority? Are Mages in command still?" Wicke shook her head. "No. We're... working through some things at the moment. For a while magic was persecuted and that has only just stopped." Alizia's face twisted into a look of disgust. "Disappointing, but I suppose to be expected since the Anvil of Agron is still functional. Which faction is in command of the Great Forge?"

"Uh..." Another look of confusion and curiosity crossed Alizia's face. "What's the Anvil of Agron?" Wicke asked. The Archmage shook her head, her visage beginning to crack. "The Dungeons are fed enchanted items by the Anvil of Agron, it is a forge – located near the pole. You must have wondered why there were items to aid you throughout your exploration?" Wicke sat in silence. Alizia shook her head. "This world is doomed."

A hand yanked Wicke backwards, her hands clutching a cold, cyan grimoire. "Hey," Damian said with urgency, the entire Dungeon around them shaking and large cracks spreading throughout the floor and ceiling. "We need to go!" he stated. Wicke blinked a few times, returning to herself before she glanced towards the stasis chamber. The glass had cracked, the light from within was gone, and blood steadily dripped down its surface. "Shit!" Wicke stated, she'd taken too long – wasted too much time answering questions when she should have been asking them.

But then a portal appeared behind her, the surface speckled with shards of ice and the opaque blue surface swirling in front of her. "Go!" Wicke stated, a voice in her mind saying the same thing. The group didn't need to be told twice. One by one, they darted through the portal, emerging back out into daylight just as the Dungeon crumbled to dust. "What did you learn?" Cinderlee questioned, immediately ignoring the destruction and looking towards the new grimoire in Wicke's arms.

"Arrest them!" yelled a voice, and before Wicke could even react she found her face pressed to the floor and a pair of antimagic cuffs around her wrists. The others put up more of a fight, but, one-by-one, they all found themselves pressed to the floor before being dragged away by armed guards. Before Wicke could

even properly complain, she found herself gagged and separated from the rest. The dirt soon turned to rock and then to carpet, her kicking legs finding no grip to stop her rough manhandling as she was dragged through the Republic Command Centre before placed kneeling inside a large and well-furnished office.

A cold, yet furious presence pressed down upon her from every direction, a red-faced, clean-shaven, giant of a man staring down at her. Fleet Admiral Truth was beyond livid. He sat behind his desk staring down at her, his breathing heavy, and teeth audibly grinding together. But Wicke ignored him, as much as she could, looking around for anyone who wasn't wanting or able to snap her in two. A heavy thump drew her attention to Damian as he was thrown down next to her. "Of course," Truth said with a growl. "And here I was hoping that an Exarga wouldn't be with you." His brown eyes glared firmly at her.

Using her tongue she pushed out her gag. "This is rude," she said snarkily. "Rude? Rude!" roared Fleet Admiral Truth, transforming into his giant elk form and dragging his giant desk aside before levying an accusatory finger at Wicke's face. "You have single-handedly destroyed any chance this Republic has at gaining independence from the Guild! Your sabotage of our Dungeon has doomed us!"

"Hang on, that's not true," Wicke returned, flinching with every bit of spit that landed on her face. "We were given permission to destroy the Dungeon." Truth let out a long growl. "By whom?" he questioned, looking to Damian as he nodded profusely. "His father. Admiral Exarga." Truth's eye twitched and he stood up straight, adjusting his uniform before approaching his desk and picking up a communicator. "I want both Exarga's to my office, now," he commanded, with cold fury.

"We made a deal, we traded how to make magic stones for the permission," Wicke argued. "This was months ago," she reinforced. Truth shook his head and leant against his desk before folding his arms. "I will throw you in the ocean bound in chains myself if you're lying," he threatened, looking up from her as the doors to his office opened and rescue arrived. "Please tell me you did not give her permission to destroy our Dungeon?" Fleet Admiral Truth questioned.

Wicke's cuffs snapped open and Fleet Admiral Exarga strode past her, standing next to Truth and looking down at Wicke with bemusement before a cold glare flicked over to her son. Admiral Philip Exarga remained by the accused as they slowly stood up. "I did. It was of no use to us and a consistent money hole. Wicke provided a more consistent and permanent source of magic stones – which

requires nothing more than simple training. I figured it best to ensure that systems were established before I presented this to you, my apologies but I know you have no time to be wasted on fantasies without results," Admiral Exarga explained, holding out his palm and created a small magic stone himself.

Fleet Admiral Truth growled and looked back towards Wicke. "The Dungeon provided far more than just a source of magic stones – it was heritage, a training ground, a use for our overpopulated prisons, and a consistent, exploitable source of enchanted weaponry. Philip, even for you, there is little way to spin that loss in a positive light," the Fleet Admiral stated, glancing from Wicke to him and then levying the blame towards Fleet Admiral Exarga. "I don't disagree," Cassandra stated, nodding in agreement – her blue eyes remaining on Wicke.

Wicke sighed. "We learnt where the magic weapons are coming from," she stated quietly. "We did?" Damian questioned, looking at her with confusion. She glared at him before looking back at the eyes bearing down upon her. "Go on," growled Truth. "It's near the pole. Something called the Anvil of Agron – a Great Forge of the past," Wicke explained. "The Archmage inside the Dungeon told me herself," she added. "That adds nothing," Truth stated blankly.

"Which pole?" Cassandra questioned, her husband cracking a smile as he thought the same thing. "I don't know," Wicke answered. The three Admirals looked towards Damian and he simply shrugged. "I know about as much as you do, but we'll give over any further information we find out," he promised. "I'm sorry you guys didn't communicate effectively, but we're heading to our next Dungeon and not stopping until they're all dismantled. At the moment, the Guild knows nothing – so, this is an opportunity. Only we, and you, know how to make magic stones. The value is going to change heavily, and if you keep that method quiet..."

Cassandra turned to Truth. "She's not wrong. This is a powerful weapon we can utilise, and, if Wicke says she's going to destroy the other Dungeons, I'm inclined to believe her – two have already fallen by her hands. This Anvil of Agron could be a major asset if we can find it – I believe it's worth letting them see what information they can find out," she argued. Wicke tried to not to look smug: she could hug Jayce and Damian's mother, but Truth was still glaring at her. "Very well," he said reluctantly. "If there is a final conclusion we can all agree on – I wish to never see your face again, Wicke."

It felt like they were being deliberately sabotaged as Wicke and Damian waited for their friends to be released. They had been promptly booted out of Admiral

Truth's office – and neither of them had wanted to wait for the Exargas to emerge from their presumed telling off. Eventually Sabine shakily emerged from her captivity – her face covered in tears. “Oh thank the Gods!” she sobbed, dropping to her knees and hugging Wicke's waist. “How long was I in there for?” she asked. Wicke glanced towards Damian. “Uh, thirty minutes,” Wicke answered. Sabine shuddered.

Enki and Morgause strolled out with little care moments later, but Cinderlee faltered at the doorway, turning and looking back the way she had come. “Until next time, darlings!” she said, blowing a kiss. She strolled up to the group. “Some of the nicest cells I've ever had the pleasure of being in. Five stars. Anyway, what did we miss?” she questioned. It took some time to explain all of which had been discussed, both with the Archmage Alizia and the Admirals, and by that point they had made their way through the city back to their accommodation.

“A forge? Something of that scale must be... absurd. How could it be functioning after so long?” Morgause questioned, looking to Cinderlee for answers. Cinderlee just shrugged. “The Gods work in strange ways, the Heavens even more so,” she said cryptically. “So, that's two Dungeons down. Where to next?” Enki questioned. The group looked towards Wicke. “I was thinking we head East, to the Mysts.”

“Word will spread quickly that two Dungeons have collapsed, we should probably get moving sooner rather than later – every moment will only make it harder for us to get in,” Damian stated. The others all looked at him. “What?” Wicke shook her head and placed a hand on his shoulder. “That sounded somewhat sensible. Let's get going. Let's find a ship.”

Seize the Seas Tales: Brutal/Beauty

Thalia decided against leaving the medical ward. It was late, and her body groaned at her when she took the first step. It screamed at her as she climbed back into her bed. So she lay there for a while, looking up at the ceiling. She knew where she was: the Guild Arena in the Old World - but was anyone else nearby? She didn't know. It didn't matter. This was an opportunity. A chance to improve. It was something Jayce had told her she should look for.

“What?” Thalia questioned, looking at Jayce as he stood on the bow sprit, riding the waves. He turned and looked at her, his orange eyes glowing. “We do not stand a chance against the Sea Sovereign. None of us. Not me. Not you,” he said firmly. “We cannot beat a Betrayer together at the moment, and all of the

Betrayers would struggle to defeat her. Therefore, something needs to change. We need to grow, to evolve, and to find a way to stand toe-to-toe with the Betrayers. I need you to evolve.”

She grit her teeth, looking away as a spray of water crossed her face. “I... I can’t. I need to avenge my grandfather. I need to... be realistic about what I can do,” she said quietly, the words hurting her throat, but an unfortunate truth that had long tormented her. “Who says that? Because that’s not your words – it’s not you. You survived being cut in two. You do not back down from a fight you cannot win. And that’s why you are such a great asset to this crew. You charge first, always.”

She looked up at him and he stepped down to meet her, looking up at her and placing a hand on her head. “You’re our beast. But I need a predator who can hunt and kill, not just maim. A chance will come, one where you can test yourself, push yourself, but you need to find out your way of fighting. Your real way of fighting, something that isn’t just throwing yourself at your enemies without tactics or strategy. You can do it - break the mould, become my first Champion.”

Thalia woke up without pain, and she wasted no time in ignoring the healers in the ward, grabbing her stuff and immediately setting off for the upper levels of the Guild Arena. Her Captain’s words rumbled in her mind as she stormed through armed guards, recounting the route she had walked a few months before. Eventually she came to a stop, a field of eyes looking upon her from all the edges of the large viewing box she had entered.

Most of the fighters eyeing her up were women – a menagerie of body types wielding a range of weapons from swords to spears to shields to fists. They all looked her with curiosity, suspicion, and hunger, and all braced as they prepared to engage her in violence. But she ignored their stares, her eyes locked on a man that she had seen speak to Jayce before. “Ming!” she bellowed, startling the peacock-like man before approaching him. He yelped as she strode across the room, her feet stomping loudly on the wooden floor.

Thalia then stopped in her tracks, another fighter stepping between her and her target. Thalia stared straight ahead, looking at the chest of the woman who had intervened. She frowned: Thalia was by no means small, but this goliath must have been seven feet tall. And she wasn’t lacking muscles either. “The Rising Ace who had her neck snapped, for a toad leaving her pond you’re awfully bold,” stated the goliath, her green eyes boring into Thalia’s brown. Thalia didn’t think, she just swung her fist – straight into the larger woman’s jaw.

She toppled over and crashed through a table, clearing the way for Thalia. Ming stared up at her, his mouth hanging open before he firmly closed it. "I'm not here to talk, I want to fight. I want a rematch against that... assassin," she stated firmly. A yell and the clatter of bits of wood alerted Thalia to the goliath regaining consciousness but, as she charged forwards, Ming held out a hand. She skidded to a halt. "But-" she attempted.

"In a tournament between women fighters, a headliner like this one will only increase the revenue for you all," Ming stated efficiently. "Think between now and the future, and choose which you think is worth it, Brigitte. Is it worth a fight now that could prevent this entire event from reaching its full potential? If you think so then hit back. It won't be me who stops you," he warned, the numerous eyes around the room all falling on Brigitte. She stepped back, wiping her mouth before shaking her head. "We'll settle this, I swear," she threatened, pointing at Thalia before storming off – her short auburn hair bouncing with each step.

"So where is your Captain?" Ming questioned. "No one visited you in the infirmary, are you truly alone?" Thalia glanced around before standing at her full height. "I'm on holiday," she lied. "And as I said, I want a rematch." Ming shook his head before stroking the long strands of hair falling from his chin. "Oni is beyond you. And his fights are... special. If he takes interest then it will be arranged, but he's not a man that you can force to do anything, so I advise – to the best of my ability – that you look elsewhere."

Thalia folded her arms. "My patience isn't something to be squandered, peacock, speak fast," she stated. His mouth opened slightly and he fidgeted as he ruffled his fanciful clothes and became a little flustered. "Peacock?" he questioned, before shutting down his thoughts and pushing aside the nickname. "Well, uh, as it so happens – Oni is probably going to be interested in facing the champion of our new event. With all that has been going on – and a few complaints from the audience of our ratio of fighters – we at the Watergate Guild Arena are proud to announce an all-women tournament," he stated.

"Put me in it," Thalia stated firmly and immediately. Ming took a cautious step back and nodded profusely. "But of course, a Rising Ace would be always welcome in such an event. Um, well, the rules are simple: it is a round-robin style tournament. Most victories wins. You may challenge each other fighter multiple times, but if you lose to any of them more than three times in a row then that is marked as a permanent loss on your record and you cannot face that fighter again. This works both ways, win three times in a row and it is marked as a

permanent victory – alternatively, any fighter may concede against an opponent outside of a fight which works the same way. There is no benefit to two fighters constantly switching between loss and victory – it does not add to your points. Additionally, some fighters are marked as... special – these provide additional points but can only face each other, so as to not trivialise the tournament.”

“What makes them special?” Thalia questioned. Ming glanced beyond her. “They are... in any other sense, unbeatable – except by each other.” Thalia grinned – between fighting waves of fodder or actual champions, she knew immediately which she would prefer. “So, like me,” she suggested. Ming eyed her with a glint of greed in his eyes. “Perhaps, but that is to be seen. One of them will test you, and we will go from there. Athena, could you please?”

Thalia turned, her eyes locking onto the approaching woman. She was tall, slightly shorter than Thalia by only by a few inches. Her eyes were a stark grey, and her silky black hair was braided to look like a mohawk. Like Oni, like Vexx, her hands and muscular forearms were stained orange. “Follow me,” she said plainly, turning and beginning the walk away. A large tattoo covered her mostly exposed back.

Chapter 201: Better Than Most

The ex-Emperor's Fist led Thalia down below the arena to a smaller and more secluded training area: a small sand-covered ring that was only a dozen metres wide. The woman, Athena, hardly stopped speaking the entire walk there, mostly filling the silence with conversation about the arena and how things worked within the Women's Fighting League. Thalia ignored it all, her eyes hardly leaving the muscular back of the assassin as she analysed the way she carried herself.

Each step was deliberate, her movements graceful and precise – leaving hardly a sound as she stepped, despite the boots she was wearing. The large tattoo was of a waterfall, with orange and black fish swimming up the raging waters. The corpse of a slain golden dragon lay at the top, a snow leopard laying proudly across its kill. “Thalia.” Thalia glanced upwards, Athena's grey eyes watching her back. “What?” Thalia questioned bluntly.

“I asked you a question: how is Arthuria?” Athena interrogated, stopping in the centre of the training ring and folding her arms, the muscle rippling across her forearms as she drummed her fingers. Thalia's body tensed, her brown eyes narrowing as she tried to read Athena. “You... know Arthuria? How?” Thalia questioned back. Athena rolled her eyes. “I was a Sister, if that wasn't obvious. I know Arthuria from then.”

“Arthuria was a nun?” Thalia said with a blank face. Athena's face mirrored hers before she looked down and chuckled. “Gods... Is she alive, barbarian?” Athena questioned more forcefully. “Last I saw... yes,” Thalia returned, beginning to circle around the edge of the small arena – her anchor in her arms. “Which was?” Athena pressed, mirroring Thalia's movements. “Not long ago, the djinn fucked up a spell so we have been separated.” Athena frowned, and Thalia leapt at her, lifting her anchor high before slamming it down towards her. Athena took to slightest step backwards, her foot placed on top of the weapon and her face mere centimetres away from Thalia's. “We were under assault by a Betrayer, in defence of that suit of sparks and bolts.”

“I see,” Athena said softly, pondering for a moment as Thalia tried to wrench her weapon out from under Athena's foot. It didn't move, the entire weapon locked in place in an unfamiliar, supernatural manner. Athena stopped her pondering and focused back on Thalia. “I'm waiting, what happened to that ferocity?” she goaded. Thalia roared, engaging her Focus and dragging the weapon

downwards through the sand and the stone, rather than attempting to press back against Athena's own Focus. "Better," commented Athena.

Thalia lunged, swinging the weapon and releasing it, switching her grip to the anchor's extended handle and chain. She twirled like a tornado, the anchor swinging hard and fast and sweeping up sand to blind Athena. Athena darted backwards, taking several small leaps to avoid the swings. The sand didn't bother her, she didn't need her eyes to see Thalia. The weapon swung past her head and Athena darted forwards, grabbing the chain and using her body as a leverage to swing the anchor back towards Thalia.

Thalia grunted as her own weapon hit her, her hands grabbing the metal as she skid across the sand. She grinned, the weapon's chain was now wrapped around Athena. Thalia pulled the chain tight, taking the chance to swing Athena instead. Thalia then moved to swing the assassin into the nearest wall, but Athena just slipped out of the binding, her body contorting and bones shifting before returning to form as she slipped out. She hung onto the chain, yanking hard and pulling Thalia towards her as she pulled up and launched herself forwards. They collided – hard.

Thalia's head rang as she staggered backwards, Athena grabbing her anchor and wrenching it out of her hands before tossing the weapon aside with a clang. Athena then darted backwards, lifting out a hand before beckoning for Thalia to come at her. "I will not lose," Thalia stated confidently, gritting her teeth and channelling her full Focus into her fists. "Amongst the crew, none are stronger than me!"

"Cocky, aren't we. Show me," Athena commanded, Thalia roaring as she charged towards her. She leapt at Athena, throwing a flying punch that Athena simply guided past her by tapping the outside of Thalia's wrist. Thalia's strike went wide and she fell flat on her face as Athena tripped her. "Sloppy. Power only goes so far these days." Thalia twisted on the ground, swinging out a heavy kick towards Athena's shin. Athena turned, taking the kick on her calves and letting Thalia knock her down. As she fell, she dropped her elbow straight down into Thalia's stomach.

Thalia threw up bile, Athena immediately moving to grapple her. Athena wrapped her arm around Thalia's neck, locking her arm and squeezing hard. Thalia's vision began to darken, but she simply grinned. The assassin was as cocky as she was: grappling had been her favourite past time growing up, it was her battlefield and a soldier doesn't forget their wars. Thalia had mere seconds,

she knew that better than anyone. She reached down for Athena's leg, grabbing her knee and wrenching. A groan came from above but the grip did not release. Thalia Focused on her elbow, lifting it up and driving it down into Athena's leg. The hold didn't release, and darkness took her.

Thalia came to several seconds later, immediately bolting upright and preparing for round two. Instead Athena was sat on the floor a few metres away, rubbing her leg. She held up a hand. "You lost. It's over," she stated firmly, a warning glint in her cold gaze. Thalia sat back down and lay back on the floor. "How?" she questioned quietly to herself, rather to Athena. "How am I this weak?" she screamed, slamming her fist onto the floor and kicking up a cloud of sand.

"You're not, is the simple answer." Thalia glanced towards her. "Against most people, in the world, you'd come out on top," Athena said softly. She let out a groan, a soft crack audible across the room as she fixed her leg and cautiously stood up. She shook her leg side to side before bouncing on her feet, the injury seemingly gone. *Listen to those above you, they will tell you how to beat them.* Jayce's words rang in Thalia's mind as Athena turned back to her. "It's your technique."

"You can use Focus, but not in abundance. You have one tool – a good tool – but a two-dimensional method. Your strikes are simple, and obvious, and that is a weakness that lets you down," Athena said plainly. Thalia looked the assassin up and down. She didn't seem any different, and even as Thalia analysed her with Focus nothing truly stood out. Athena sighed, before she tensed her body. Thalia's eyes widened as in a rippling wave, from Athena's feet to her head, she radiated Focus: a ripple of red, then blue, then cyan before finally black, as Athena controlled her Focus between different levels and in every aspect. "I know what I'm talking about," she stated purely and firmly.

"Then why tell me?" Thalia questioned, sensing an angle she wasn't seeing. "Because, whilst it was far from perfect, I enjoyed our bout. I'm stuck here – a long-term duty, let's say – so I want to ensure that whilst here I get the opportunity to practice and improve. I can only do that if I face someone of equal or higher capability, and - big girl – you could certainly be either, with a bit of training and guidance. So... lunch?" she offered.

Thalia didn't quite know what to think of the events of the last day or so, as she sat at a nice restaurant, grinning whilst the waiters attending them started to cry as she and Athena emptied out the restaurant's fridges, the pair ordering meal after meal. Between Dragons and assassins everything seemed to be going wrong. Yet, as she devoured meal after meal with her companion, it also all

seemed to be going beyond right. One braver-than-most employee, probably a manager, cautiously approached the pair as they tore apart a practically raw steak with a fork and their teeth. "Uh, excuse me, gent- I mean, ladies. We will need to see funds up front before we bring out any more food," he stated with false bravado.

Thalia and Athena both glanced towards him, a glare from both of them causing him to topple over backwards, foaming from the mouth. "Another!" Thalia bellowed, holding an empty bottle of ridiculously expensive wine in the air. "Same here!" Athena stated, letting out an ear-drum bursting belch. As the staff raced away to tend to their needs, Athena leaned forwards. "You have money, right?" she questioned. Thalia frowned.

"Do you not?" she questioned back. Athena glanced out of the window, the city below them. "My... funds are being sent elsewhere." Thalia tracked Athena's gaze, her own eyes settling on a gaggle of young school children being walked through the streets with a carer. "Do we need to pay?" Thalia questioned back, looking at the lavishly dressed patrons all escaping the restaurant. "We should," Athena said softly, looking back inside the restaurant at the frightened staff.

Thalia let out a sigh and stood up, approaching the most lavishly dressed of the fleeing patrons. The terrified pair stared up at her as they clutched their gemstones and gold. "You're so kind to be paying our bill," she said menacingly, leaning forwards and placing a gentle finger on the man's collar. "Get your-" "Dear!" interrupted his wife, firmly, her eyes unwilling to look away from the monster in front of her for fear of what might happen. "Do what the barbarian wants."

Thalia sat down, a wealthy tip ensured for all the staff and their bill more than settled. "Happy?" she questioned, picking up the menu and gesturing for the staff to approach. "Most certainly," Athena said, raising a bottle to her. Thalia did the same, clinking the glass together. They departed more than an hour later, staggering back to the arena before stopping inside its main lobby. "Head downstairs to our ring, I need to inform the boss you're eligible," Athena said concisely, the drunkenness fading away as if she willed it. Thalia nodded, giving a loose thumbs up. "I'm going to work you hard. You know that, right?" "Me too."

The crowd roared, the stands shaking, as Thalia strolled into the arena. She had left her anchor behind, but she was far from weaponless. Her opponent stood waiting for her: a master of sneak attacks and dirty fighting, a bald, short woman

dressed in skin-tight clothing. A gnarly scar ran across her nose, her eyes both dark blue. Her mouth was covered by a mask, but Thalia could tell she bore the same expression as her: a grin of excitement.

The dirty fighter: Elinda the Chainweaver, drew her signature weapons – a pair of metal chains covered in spikes – twirling them for the deafening crowd and kicking up sand before taking a stance. The announcer was saying something, a well-prepared speech to create tension and excitement in the audience as a narrative was created for why they wanted to hurt each other. There was no need, a fight was a fight – a chance to break bones and draw blood. Neither of the women cared for a reason.

Thalia glanced towards the high boxes, the other fighters and elite patrons staring down at her. A single pair of eyes drew her gaze, a silent nod giving permission to go all out. Thalia turned back, her grin widening and eyes locking onto her prey, the first of many as she began her crusade to fight her new friend, mentor, and rival. “Begin!” roared the announcer, Thalia and the Chainweaver surging towards each other.

The Chainweaver threw up sand towards Thalia, but Thalia dropped low, sliding through the dust cloud to collide with the Chainweaver’s legs. But the Chainweaver took the blow, leaping at the last moment to take the impact and turning it into momentum for a forwards somersault. She slashed her chains down towards Thalia who lifted up her arms, blocking the slashes, grimacing as the spiked chains embedded themselves and wrapped around her arms. Thalia came to a short stop as the chains yanked her arms upwards.

The Chainweaver turned, Thalia caught in his chains and still laying on the floor. It was her win, it had to be. But Thalia grabbed the chains with her hands, ignoring the pain of the spikes before pulling hard in a whip-like the motion. The Chainweaver was flung over her, slamming into the ground in front of her where she lay dazed for a moment. Thalia then yanked, ripping the handles of the Chainweaver’s weapons out of her grip, disarming her before she took the chains in her hands and snapped them free of their handles. She peeled the spiky chains off her forearms as the Chainweaver shakily got to her feet. “Now then,” Thalia stated, towering over the far smaller and disarmed woman, her arms dripping blood. “My turn,” she stated with a grin.

Thalia departed the arena as a victor, moments later, but she didn’t walk with her head held high. Her arms hurt, she had been injured and, even disarmed, the Chainweaver had still put up a fight. She was still far off from defeating the

assassin that had beat her. She passed through the gates. *Don't think about him, Athena had warned. Even amongst the Emperor's Fists there were monsters beyond the assassins. Two stood out. One left early, the other was left behind. Oni was left behind and received proper training. The other is a Betrayer.*

Thalia shook her head, before raising it high. "One after another they will fall. I will make sure of it."

Seize the Seas Tales: Worst Of All

Fenn screamed as he was flung from the purple void. He tumbled through the air, floating through clouds as he was dragged downwards by the brutal clutches of gravity. He couldn't see the ground, but he felt in his stomach and through the thin air that it was some distance below: a certainly fatal distance below. Something passed his eye: a piece of rock – a ledge of some kind – and instinctively he grabbed for it.

He gripped rock for the briefest of moments, his claws digging into the surface as his momentum scraped him downwards, his body slamming into the side of something large and hard. "No, no, no, no, noooo!" he yelled, scrambling for anything to stop his fall. He felt his fingers tear, his claws shred away against the stone, but slowly he stopped in his place, hanging onto something. The wind whipped around him, the noise deafening other than his own rapid heartbeat and heavy panting.

Cautiously, he looked down. Clouds floated beneath him, his boots on the edge of the tiniest of ledges, his fingers gripping the smallest of cracks in a light coloured stone. The clouds parted for a moment a red haze below him. He snapped his head back to the wall. "Oh Gods," he muttered, tempering his stomach as he tried not to vomit. He looked upwards, a ledge a few metres away. "You can do this," he said quietly to himself, cautiously sliding his right hand upwards until he found a grip. He kicked off his boots and began to climb.

It felt like a lifetime, but eventually his hand found a grip more than a few centimetres deep. He groaned as he pulled himself upwards, resting his head on the ledge and taking a deep breath of success. His eyes shut and he grinned. "Hell yeah!" he said firmly, a series of clicks forcing his eyes back open as he felt he was no longer alone. "Uh," he uttered without thought, staring at the multiple guns pointed at his face. "I surrender."

A loud cry of a familiar bird drew his attention away from the numerous rifles, all being wielded by identical-looking people. A loud crash immediately

followed, throwing up a cloud of dust as Wren slammed into the ground nearby – Falconer tumbling off her back to land only a few metres away from Fenn. A sigh of relief escaped Fenn – he wasn't alone. The relief then faded as a pair of arms grabbed his body and dragged him up off the ledge. Something hard and spiky pressed into his back and his vision went to black as a jolt of lightning coursed through him.

He awoke to find himself in a dark cell. "Fuck me! Not again!" he cried out, a faint beam of light illuminating the otherwise pure darkness. A groan alerted him to the other presence in the stone cell, somewhere near the thick metal bars. "Falconer?" Fenn questioned, his body in agony as he slowly got to his feet and then staggered over to the other body. The familiar and unique eyes of Falconer slowly opened, the golden crosses glowing in the darkness as he looked up at Fenn. "Fenn... where are we?" he asked with a pained groan.

Fenn looked around. They were in the air, on some sort of floating city or castle. His eyes widened. "We're on a djinn palace, I don't know where. What happened? Where is everyone else? Are we alone?" he rattled off in confusion, looking to the man who often held countless answers. Falconer held up a slow hand as he recovered, shutting his eyes and breathing heavy before slowly getting to his feet. "The teleportation was disrupted, we were thrown through the void – it is fortunate that we are even alive. As to the others..." he answered before reaching for his necklace, only to falter as he failed to find it. "Curious..." "What is?" Fenn asked.

"We have been stripped of our equipment and magic items. I suppose they know what to look for, most typically overlook our necklaces. And they have put antimagic bindings on us," he added, looking down at the bronze band across his wooden arm and then pointing out the metal collar around Fenn's neck. "Huh?" he questioned, only just realising he was in human form before desperately trying to pull off the metal collar. "Hang on," Falconer stated, reaching up for the collar. "We will use Focus, concentrate on the front, I will pull from the back. Three, two, one," he instructed.

They then both screamed, dropping to their knees in unity as they clutched their heads. An agonizing void filled their mind, the cells across their body feeling like they were gasping for air. They immediately ceased their attempt, both panting heavily. "What... the... fuck?" Fenn gasped, Falconer shaking his head. "Where are we?" Falconer questioned in turn, looking towards Fenn. He

SEIZE THE SEAS

shrugged, before he remembered what he had briefly seen before. "We were over something red, like a desert of sorts."

"The Scourge. We are near the south pole. A place devoid of life itself," Falconer realised. "Great... so how do we get out of here?" he questioned, looking towards the cell bars. "We don't... we wait."

Chapter 202: Unearthing the Past

The sight of a Dragon coming towards her still felt unnerving to Marisha. She doubted it ever would not be unnerving, but equally it was something she most definitely didn't want to become a normalcy. But the Witch flying alongside the dog-sized pearlescent Dragon... she was ever-happy to see her, never more-so than now. "Thank the Gods," Marisha stated, as the pair landed next to the damaged Gambit – Ohno sharing a similar expression of relief.

"Same feeling here," Morgana stated, stepping forwards and swiftly and tightly embracing Marisha. Marisha faltered, somewhat startled by the sudden affection, but as she gently placed her arms around the young woman she was quickly reminded that – although she carried herself with far more maturity and styled herself more like an older woman – Morgana was young. More than a decade younger than herself.

Marisha raised her right hand, placing it gently against the back of Morgana's head, softly brushing her long black hair. "Good job on finding us," Marisha reassured. "With you and Soteria here we can start figuring out a plan to find the others." Morgana pulled back, her golden eyes watering as she looked directly at Marisha's visible eye. "I... I don't know if they survived. That Dragon, Kaina, she disrupted the teleportation spell. We could have been sent anywhere, the others could have teleported into the ground, or the skies, maybe even space or another dimension. They... they may not have even rematerialized..." Ohno stared at them both with horror. "No... Fenn... Wam..."

Marisha shook her head. "No, they're alive. I know it. I also know what you're referencing. That is likely the outcome for a pure teleportation spell - Wicke and Tempest used to argue over the theory for days at a time. They've probably been shunted out of random teleportation circles. I couldn't see anyway, but the one here could be ancient. They're alive. Have faith in them, and, if not them, then Tempest. That djinn has never let us down."

Morgana looked away, shutting her eyes before nodding as she steeled herself. "Right, of course. You're right, Marisha. You're right," she said repeatedly to herself. Marisha placed a hand on Morgana's shoulder. "We're alive, we can go from there." Morgana looked back at her. Marisha tilted her head to the damaged flyer. "Anything you can do to help us with the wing?" Marisha questioned, providing a task to focus on. "Let's see."

With a combination of magic, physical muscle – provided by Ohno, and reading a manual, the wing began to resemble its undamaged sibling, eventually leaving only the task of restitching the fabric. Marisha and Morgana wasted no time in getting to work. “So...” Marisha said eventually, Morgana glancing towards her. “You said your home is near here?” she questioned. Morgana nodded, her expression twisted into conflict as her mind became muddled with a mixture of feelings. “Worth a visit?” Marisha prompted.

“Ooh yes, bed and food,” Ohno said, from somewhere below them as they sat on the wing. Marisha ignored him. “It... might be,” Morgana said quietly. Her expression hardened. “Uh, yeah, we should go. There’s a good chance we could find help there,” she said more firmly. Marisha’s gaze lingered in Morgana’s direction. “So what’s the plan afterwards?” Morgana questioned back, turning to meet Marisha’s stare, a subtle warning in her expression to not press the topic.

“Sticking to the running theme of family, I figure we should make our way to a Guild outpost. I will contact my mother from there, we can use her contacts to try to reconnect with the others,” Marisha stated. Morgana nodded – it seemed reasonable. “There should be enough room for all of us in the flyer, right?” Morgana questioned. “Enough for Dragon as well. Food, however, is an issue-” “Food?” interrupted Soteria, drawing out a confused pause from Marisha as she leant over the edge and looked down at the Dragon.

“You speak now?” she questioned, before looking back at Morgana. “Always, just also now,” Soteria answered, her voice gravelly and deep. Marisha shrugged. “Does that mean you’ll actually follow my instructions?” she questioned, already knowing the answer. “No. Only by my bond. And so long as I am fed,” the Dragon warned. Marisha raised and pointed a finger at Morgana. “Your job.”

Morgana nodded. “Fair enough. Where are we going to connect with the Guild?” “The Gardens has a few major hubs, but there’s an outpost in the Mysts that I know my Mother visits and also has parts we can use for the Gambit. It should also have better communication systems, so I’m thinking there,” Marisha answered. “Perfect,” Morgana returned, finishing her final stitch before standing up. “I’ll lead the way.”

The Gambit sputtered to life, the mechanical beast letting out a wounded roar as Marisha took to its cockpit. “That doesn’t sound good,” she muttered. “Just hold.” She strapped in, glancing back towards the main hold as Ohno hung onto straps on the ceiling and Soteria lay on the floor. He nodded to her, giving a

nervous thumbs up. Marisha pushed the flyer forwards, the entire vehicle rattling as it began to skate along the grass towards the nearby cliff.

"Looking good," Morgana stated through her communicator, hovering in the air above them on her broomstick. "Doesn't feel it..." Marisha muttered, holding her breath as they approached the edge and then tumbled over it. Her stomach lurched as they fell, the ocean rising up to meet them. She pulled back on the stick between her legs, the wings catching the air and pulling them up. The sputtering stopped, settling into a steady purr as she took them higher and higher. She let out a sigh of relief. "I hate flying," she stated through her communicator, as Morgana came and flew alongside the cockpit, sitting casually side-on on her broomstick. She laughed, her hair whipping in the wind. "You learn to love it." "I doubt it..." Marisha muttered. Morgana accelerated, getting ahead of the Gambit and leading the way.

They flew for a few hours, rotating between pilots, before eventually coming down for a landing on the ocean. It was rougher than Marisha would have liked, but the flyer slowly came to a stop, drifting into the shore of a small islet. "Are we there?" Marisha questioned, as Morgana landed ahead of them. She shook her head. "No, we're only an hour or so away at our pace. I figured it best we arrive in the morning, they may not be there, but if they are then we can leave if we need to," she stated.

"You're nervous, is there anything we should know about before we get there?" "Uh," Morgana uttered, caught out by the accusatory question. She shook her head. "It's just been a long time. My sister might be there, so... it's fine," she lied, badly. "Arthuria?" Ohno questioned. Morgana shook her head, looking up at the emerging stars. "No, my younger sister: Morgause. The one I left behind. The one we all left behind."

They decided to sleep inside the Gambit. It wasn't particularly comfortable, and was a bit of a squeeze with all of them, plus the Dragon, but it kept them warm and out of the night-time rain. Ohno was by far the first to sleep, Marisha was the last – her eyes glancing through the darkness towards the huddled form of Morgana, her golden eyes still visible in the low light as she stared up at the moon.

She had lied, Marisha knew it. She wanted to go home, but she was equally afraid to. The golden eyes finally shut and Marisha glanced away. Morgana had always been complicated: she had been desperate to fit in when she first arrived, and willingly, and readily, abandoned her sister, as well as Mai Lu and Jeanne to do

so. She often had a habit of hiding her feelings from others, or fleeing when things got too much. She was reserved, but didn't want to be. She craved the attention when people knew she was upset. She wanted a hero: a rescuer to come and tell her it was all going to be okay. That often meant Arthuria, but now it meant Marisha, and family problems were far from Marisha's forte. Her own mind wandered, thinking back to some of the final words she had had with Bjorn and Jayce.

"What?" Bjorn questioned, interrupting the conversation she had been having, admittedly openly, with Jayce in the living quarters. Marisha flashed him a look of false irritation, lifting the leg she had been resting on a chair and sliding it out for him to sit on. He sat and Jayce leant forwards. "We need to destabilise the Guild," he said casually, as if it was something that was both possible and simple to do. Bjorn scoffed and looked towards Marisha, who shrugged back at him. "There's someone in the Guild, or maybe even the whole thing, who is helping the Sovereign. As long as that is the case she has a hold, not just on the Republic, but the entire world. The Guild is too big, too broken, and cares little about who they are helping to support. That needs to change," he stated. Marisha shook her head. "And just what do you suggest replaces it? Who could possibly rule the business world in a way that doesn't end up exactly the same way as it is now?" she questioned sarcastically.

"You."

Marisha shook her head, shutting her eyes. Jayce was a fool. A naïve, stubborn, stupid fool. How could she run it all? How would she even begin to unravel the World Guild? It wasn't possible, it couldn't be... could it? "Stupid idiot," she muttered, turning onto her side, herself uncertain as to whether she was describing her idiot Captain, or his idiotic faith in her. "Maybe... maybe it's possible."

They took to the skies, hungry for anything other than the fish that Soteria had helped capture for them, and - as Morgana had predicted - they landed again a little more than an hour later. Their arrival was neither subtle nor unnoticed, and before long countless villagers and their children had arrived to see the unusual sight. "Soteria, guard the flyer," Morgana said almost immediately, the Dragon letting out a huff before clambering out of the hold to sit on top. The adults almost immediately dragged their children away, leaving Marisha, Morgana and Ohno unhindered to walk towards the village.

Morgana led the way, the group passing by countless, newer, brightly-coloured wooden buildings amongst the older stone and thatch houses. They came to a stop outside of a pale blue wooden house, standing by the gate leading through the white picket fence surrounding the two-story building. “Th-this is it,” Morgana said quietly, her hand hovering over the handle. “It looks nice,” Marisha said softly. Morgana shook her head. “It’s just got a fresh coat of paint, it creaks at night, the wood is full of holes and splinters,” she said quietly, her head angled towards the floor. “I’m sure it’s still shit,” Marisha said softly to her. “Even worse without you in it.” Morgana looked at her, a soft smile breaking through. “A quick hello, and we’ll head onwards,” Marisha offered. Morgana nodded, opening the gate and stepping through. She muttered as she walked up to the porch, reciting lines she had thought up countless times over the years.

She knocked on the door and stepped back, holding both hands behind her back and standing up as tall as she could. The door opened and she opened her mouth, only to falter as a middle-aged man looked down at her with confusion. “Yes?” he questioned, a thick dark beard on his chin, his head bald and shiny in the light and his brown eyes curious and also cautious as they flicked from Morgana to Marisha and finally towards Ohno. “Uh, um,” Morgana stammered, the words gone in an instant. “Is this Morgause’s home?” Marisha rescued, stepping forwards and placing a gentle hand onto Morgana’s back. The man frowned and then stepped back. “One moment, please,” he said gruffly, before shutting the door.

Morgana deflated. “Hard part done,” Marisha reassured, looking back to Ohno and gesturing for him to come closer. The door pulled open quickly, a figure stepping forwards in a flash of silver hair, a pair of arms wrapping themselves around Morgana. “Morgie,” said the middle-aged woman softly, tears in her eyes as she held Morgana tightly before pulling back. The trio stood stunned, the woman in front of them young, early forties at most. Her eyes and hair were both a shiny silver, her skin pale and features petite. She wore an apron, over a casual blue dress and her hands were covered in flour – that now covered Morgana’s back.

The woman pulled back, the relief switching into immediate fury. “How dare you!” she stated firmly and quietly. “You run away without a word, fine – but you come back without a warning, and with guests! The house is a tip!” she leant to the side, looking past a red-faced Morgana at Marisha. “Anna,” she introduced. “I’m Morgana’s... aunt,” she said with a smile, extending her hand before pulling it back as she realised it was covered in flour. “Marisha, this is

Ohno, we're crewmates of your niece," she returned civilly. Anna smiled warmly, before pulling back and glaring at Morgana. "Please come in, my husband will make some drinks."

They stepped into the house, the walls covered in photos and artwork and otherwise very nicely decorated. They were guided to the living room and Anna gestured for them to sit before hurrying off towards the kitchen. Marisha leant forwards, looking directly at Morgana. "Your aunt seems nice," Marisha said quietly. Morgana nodded. "She wasn't the problem," she returned quietly. The door opened and the large man who had been at the door peeked his head in. "Tea? Coffee? Hot chocolate?" he offered.

"One of each, thanks," Marisha answered for the group. He nodded and stepped away, only to almost immediately be replaced by Anna who took to an armchair opposite the trio. "So, where have you been?" she interrogated immediately, her face full of both worry and relief. "I, uh, found work. Ended up with the Rising Aces – if you've heard of them?" Morgana returned quietly. Anna's gaze slowly and cautiously turned towards Marisha. "Oh," she said quietly, the colour draining from her face. "That's... nice."

Marisha flashed a gentle smile. "Morgana's been a wonderful addition to the crew, she's saved more lives than I can count." The colour slowly returned, her husband entering the room. "Dear, Morgana has been with the Rising Aces." "Huh, oh. I see. Is Morgause with you as well?" asked Anna's husband. "She's not with you guys?" Morgana questioned with sharp alarm. Anna looked down. "She followed in your footsteps Morgie, ran away from home not long after you did," stated the husband.

"Don't call me Morgie!" Morgana growled, her ears burning red as they peeked through her hair, her eyes to the floor. "Gar, could you bring the drinks? The water should have boiled by now," Anna suggested, the pair exchanging silent words. He sighed and stepped out of the room. "You'll have to forgive my husband, he and Morgana have always struggled to get along," Anna said to Marisha and Ohno. "Not my fault..." Morgana muttered childishly.

"It wasn't, you were young – still are. But you had a home here, Morgana. I know it was different without... without your mother. Gar was there for me, he was there for Niamh when she got ill. He's a good man who you never gave a chance to," Anna said firmly. The door opened as Morgana opened her mouth to retort, Gar walking in with a tray of drinks. He set them down passing a coffee to Ohno, a tea to Marisha and a hot chocolate to Morgana. As he turned to sit down,

Morgana passed her hot chocolate to Ohno, who passed his coffee to Marisha, who passed her tea to Morgana.

"Have you had any contact with Morgause? We've been worried, it has been... a long time," Gar questioned. Morgana shook her head, looking down at her cup. "No, I've not seen her... I thought she was here. I... hoped she wouldn't follow me." Anna and Gar both nodded, sharing a worried expression between themselves. "We put out messages through the Guild, perhaps we should try again," Gar suggested.

"Leave that to us, I have contacts and we'll try to find your daughter," Marisha stated. "Thank you, her brothers have been asking about her, they keep wondering who the girls in the photos are," Anna said with a soft smile. Morgana twitched. "They ask about you as well Morgie, they're at school now, but if you stay for a bit I'm sure they'd love to see you," Anna offered. Morgana shook her head, Anna's hopeful face falling into a sharp look of hurt. "We've got a lot to do, Captain's orders," Marisha stated. "Um, by any chance are you also in contact with Morgana's other sister, Arthuria?"

Anne choked on her tea, coughing heavily as she regained her breath. Her wide eyes glanced from Marisha to Morgana. "No, why would I be?" she questioned, confused anger in her voice. Marisha hesitated, unsure of what she had said wrong. "I... found her," Morgana said quietly. "We, uh, found each other. And We're also on the hunt for Elaine. Arthuria and I got separated – don't worry, it's nothing."

An uncomfortable silence permeated throughout the room. "Good hot chocolate," Ohno said with a naïve friendliness. Gar cleared his throat, Anne's cup rattling as her hands shook. "Ohno, was it? Could you help me in the kitchen?" Gar suggested. Ohno glanced towards Marisha who quietly nodded. The pair of men leaving the room. "Have you... had any contact with her?" Anna asked quietly. "She's dead, it's just Arthuria and Elaine," Morgana said quietly, glancing towards Marisha with a warning glare. "Ah, I see. A pity," Anna said with distinct malice, her cup steady as she sipped her tea. "Have you found your father?"

Morgana shook her head. "I haven't looked, neither of us have. He left Arthuria's mother not long after Elaine left their home," Morgana said cautiously, uncertain whether the information would cause more harm than good to share. Anna scoffed. "Of course he did. The scumbag." She set her drink down and the warm smile returned, the entire room seeming to regain both colour and warmth.

"You're all welcome to stay, we have a guest bedroom. Your therian friend may have to squeeze onto a sofa," Anna offered.

Marisha looked towards Morgana, who shook her head. "Uh, no, sorry." Anna nodded. "I understand. It is still your home, I hope you don't forget that. In fact, I still have some of your things upstairs if you want me to get them for you," she offered. Morgana nodded and Anna stepped out of the room. The faintest of sighs and a sniffle reaching only Marisha's trained ear. Morgana looked similarly upset, her entire body tense as she fought against her emotions. Marisha leaned over to her, placing a hand into Morgana's and squeezing. "You've done very well," she reassured. Morgana shook her head, silent tears dripping from her eyes.

Anna and Morgana stood in embrace with each other for what felt like a lifetime to Marisha, but she knew they needed it more than Marisha found it uncomfortable. "Send Morgause home if you find her, her mother misses her. She misses all her girls, even those two," Anna said quietly to Morgana. She then looked over to Marisha and Ohno. "Take care of this one, I know she's trouble, but she's good trouble and means well by it." Marisha nodded and Ohno stood up tall. "We'll do our best," he stated with a big grin. He then looked towards Gar, the pair nodding to each other, with a firm layer of respect for one another. "Come on, let's go," Marisha commanded.

Marisha waited until they were back at the Gambit to ask the questions that had been populating her mind. "So what was that all about?" Marisha questioned as Morgana sat down inside the Gambit's hold, Soteria waddling over and resting her head in her lap. "It's messy, and complicated, not worth discussing," Morgana stated. That certainly wasn't true in Marisha's mind, if anything it made her want to ask even more.

She faltered, taking a slow seat near Morgana as Ohno did the same, the large panda munching on food they had bought from the village. "Look, I understand what it's like to have a strange family, to be inundated with messy relationships." "Sure you do," Morgana said unthinkingly. Marisha sighed, leaning back and looking out of the Gambit. "My mother had me to trap my father," Marisha stated honestly. Morgana glanced over to her.

"She only ever cared about her career, and he was an obstacle to it. So she seduced him, slept with him and had me. There was even a contract on it. In the biggest mistake of his life he traded away everything, and she trapped him with me, slowly sapping every resource from him before discarding him. I think I

was... eight. I never saw him again, I think he killed himself," Marisha stated. "That's awful," Morgana said quietly, Ohno staring at both of them with alarm. "When your mother's business name is the Serpent you get used to it."

"I tried everything to be in her good books, to get her to be a real mother to me. I danced, I sang, I cooked for her. I was the perfect doting daughter, but it never felt enough. She would always train me with some tutor, push me to be like her. She said my beauty was an asset that we could both use to dominate the world of men with. But I burnt myself whilst cooking for her and some guests. Poured boiling oil on my face. That... beauty vanished. And then so did I. So I know messy. And I know whatever happened won't have been your fault. Because it's the same with me. I blamed myself for years for everything that happened in my family, long after Bjorn's tribe adopted me. So what happened?"

Morgana faltered before she let out an eventual sigh. "Has Arthuria said anything about it to you before?" Morgana questioned first. Marisha nodded. "Only a little bit. It's never been a topic she would share outside of a select few." "I'm not surprised. Her side will be a little different from mine. But basically, our father is a manwhore: a serial adulterer who seduces women, even when committed to others. He cheated on Arthuria's mother after she had Arthuria, and so came along me. He faked being committed to my mother, switching between our house and Arthuria's house, whilst also sleeping with Anna."

"Eventually the scumbag was caught and the whole thing was revealed. Three women, three sets of children. We all moved in together, a... weird big family, but Arthuria's mother wasn't happy. She was the first wife, the oldest woman, with two children: Elaine and Arthuria. She gave him a choice, either she'd leave and take everything or he'd come with her. So my mother and Anna were left behind. The Pendragon's departed, shunning our existence and pretending like we never existed."

"That's... horrible, I'm sorry," Marisha said, a heavy sobbing coming from Ohno. "That's so sad!" he cried, both Morgana and Marisha reached out and placed sympathetic hands on his knees. Morgana shook her head, her mind and body numb to it all. "We lived together, the abandoned girls. But my mother grew ill and died, and Anna moved in with her partner. It didn't feel like my home. I felt like a stranger, so I left. I guess Morgause did the same sometime later, but I don't know where she could have gone. I think Jayce mentioned something about Wicke encountering a girl called Morgause, but we've been out of contact with her for so long that I never got it verified. It's really unlikely even if." Marisha

nodded. "We'll see if we can track her down. But for now, let's head to the Mysts. Let's send a message to my mother, and then we'll make our way back to the Old World. I think a visit to the Guild mothership is in order."

Seize the Seas Tales: Seeing What's Buried

Bjorn's eyes flickered open as he found himself sinking in very cold water. His body hurt, a rib or two cracked, if not broken, and the world around him was dark. He looked upwards: he saw sunlight and the hull of a small vessel. A cloud of bubbles escaped his mouth and he grabbed upwards, swimming to the surface before taking in a deep gasp of air as he grabbed onto the side of the small boat. "Bjorn!" cried a familiar voice, an elderly woman reaching over and grabbing his arm. "Doc?" Bjorn questioned, another pair of hands taking his other arm and helping him to climb aboard.

He immediately collapsed onto the floor, transforming out of bear form and looking up at Yuthura and Jeanne as they both stood over him, also soaking wet. "What happened?" he questioned, his head and body still hurting, but his ribs healed. "In better words, we had our arses handed to us by a Dragon," Yuthura stated, checking him over for wounds. "In lighter words, Tempest's teleportation spell went awry and now we are in the middle of nowhere."

"Great..." Bjorn muttered, groaning as he got to his feet, Jeanne handing him a towel after emerging from somewhere in the Last Card's hold. He looked around: they were sat in the middle of a large canyon, the mountains on either side of them dark and craggy. The Last Card drifted forwards, following the natural flow of the channel, a small whirlpool was to their left in an alcove. "Not, nowhere, the New World – I think," Bjorn stated.

Yuthura paused, looking where he looked before turning and looking around. Her purple eyes narrowed and she shook her head before looking away. "The Maw," she stated. Bjorn and Jeanne looked at each other before back at Yuthura. "Are you certain, Doctor? How do you know?" Jeanne questioned. Yuthura rolled her eyes. "Trust me, this is the Maw. The air, the lands, the waters, it's the Maw."

"Doc, we need more than that. Whirlpools are not enough to be certain," Bjorn stated, sitting on the edge of the boat. There was hesitation on Yuthura's face, both Jeanne and Bjorn observing her closely as she clearly concealed something from them. Eventually she sighed. "I used to live in the Maw. A long time ago.

This is Crackling Canyon, in winter it freezes over, apart from the whirlpools that break apart the ice and make the whole region crackle.”

“You didn’t think to mention that last time we came to the Maw? We could have stopped off at your home,” Bjorn stated. Yuthura shook her head, looking up at the cliff walls. “It’s nothing worth wasting time on,” she said quietly, a slight tremble to her old body. “Your family?” Bjorn questioned. Yuthura’s gaze snapped towards him, quick anger on her face. “What did Jayce tell you?” she demanded. “Nothing. Doc, I’ve known you four years now – do you think I’m that unobservant to not notice your pendant? That image of that child. Your grandchild?” he questioned.

The anger faded and she slowly sat down on a bench, her gaze low and head shaking slightly. “My child,” she said reluctantly. “She would be... sixteen, no, seventeen about now,” Yuthura confessed, a physical change of relief coming over her body as she finally admitted it to someone other than Jayce. “How?” Jeanne said stupidly. Bjorn flashed a glare at her but Yuthura held up a hand. “No, no, it’s a fair question. I’m not exactly a young woman anymore, and I wasn’t then either.”

“I modified my body after years of miscarriages, but no matter how much I wanted her – I just wasn’t fit to be her mother. The reality wasn’t right, so I left.” “Doc...” Bjorn said softly. Yuthura shook her head, letting out a sigh and wiping her eyes. “It’s fine. I don’t need your pity. Since we’re here, let’s pay my home a visit – I know you won’t let me get away with not doing so. We should then head to the Capital, if anyone else landed in the New World then that’s where they will head. Agreed?” Yuthura proposed. The other two nodded, uncertain of what to say – what they could say.

It took a few days of cautious navigation, but fortunately Bjorn always kept the Last Card stocked with food, water and other resources. It felt all the more gratifying to actually use the boat for its purpose again, and compared to sailing the Stacked Hand it felt ridiculously easy. But eventually they docked at the foot of a large mesa. Following the wooden steps zigzagging the outside of the cliff walls they eventually made it up to the grassy top, where a large village sat out of view. Bjorn set Yuthura down. “This is nice,” he said quietly, stretching after carrying her up so many stairs. “Don’t push it,” she warned, hobbling forwards.

They approached a small cabin-like house, the various villagers observing them curiously from afar, but, as they came up to the door, Yuthura faltered. “No one’s home,” she said quietly, and with confusion. Jeanne stepped to the side,

approaching a window and looking inside. "It's covered in dust," she said when she returned. "Strange..." Yuthura muttered. "Maybe they moved?" she questioned to herself.

"Excuse me," said a voice from behind, one of the villagers approaching. "Are you looking for someone?" he asked, the man of a similar age to Yuthura, his body hunched over a wooden cane. "Saman," Yuthura said. "Where is he?" she asked. The old man faltered. "Yuthura?" he questioned, his eyes widening as he recognised her. "It is you, you came back – after all this time?" Yuthura remained silent. "Where is Saman, Yosef?" she said coldly. His eyes narrowed, confusion crossing his face before it relaxed in realisation. "Ah, I see. You do not know." "Know what?"

Yuthura stood stunned as she looked down at the grass-covered grave in front of her. "Your daughter left this place not long after. She did not say where she was going, and has not come back since. I'm sorry," Yosef said softly. Bjorn nodded to him and the old man walked away. Bjorn then turned to Yuthura, blood dripping from her chin as she bit her lip with considerable force, her knuckles white as they rested on her cane. "It's okay, Doc. It's okay," he reassured, placing a soft hand on her shoulder. She shrugged it off, shaking her head. "No, Bjorn, it's not. It's not okay."

"We could try to find her. There are connections we could use," Jeanne suggested. "I don't need pity. Let's go, we've got a crew to find," Yuthura stated, turning and hobbling in the direction of the Last Card. Bjorn and Jeanne watched her go. "Will she be alright?" Jeanne questioned, looking from Yuthura to the grave and then finally towards Bjorn. "Probably not. The only thing preventing her from feeling even more guilty was that her daughter was with her father. That reality has come crashing down on her. Yuthura didn't even know that her husband was dead. Would you be alright after learning about that?" he asked. "No, I guess not. Is there anything we can do?" Jeanne asked, worry on her face. "No. She likes to help others, not be helped."

"You two coming? It's a lot of steps that I don't want to walk down!" Yuthura yelled back at them. "You were saying?" Jeanne said with a side eye and a small smile. Bjorn rolled his eyes. "Stubborn old crone."

Chapter 203: Dragon's Heart

The air filled with a mixture of Arthuria's scream and the panicked roar of Zhurong as the pair tumbled through colossal foliage, scrambling for anything to hold onto to stop their fall. Arthuria crashed into a large branch, her back screaming out in agony as she bounced off of it. She immediately lunged for the trailing vines, gripping them tightly as she slid downwards before swiftly coming to a halt. She groaned before swearing loudly, only for her golden eyes to widen as Zhurong continued to tumble downwards into the darkness. "Zhurong!" she cried, the Dragon disappearing out of view.

She felt no pain other than her own injuries, a fast relief that her Dragon was still alive coming to her mind. She then looked around. "The Frontier, definitely," she muttered to herself, looking at the colossal trees all around her, each trunk at least fifty metres wide. She let out a sigh, reaching for her communicator. "Anyone nearby? What the hell happened?" she questioned. Silence followed. She groaned as she began to climb up the vine, eventually dragging herself up onto a large branch. "Anyone? Jayce? Astris? Jeanne?" Silence followed once more. "Well, shit."

She lay on the branch for a few moments, fumbling in her bottomless bag for a healing potion, which she drank immediately. When the bubbling pain subsided she sat up with a groan and fumbled for her necklace once again. "Zhurong, come to me," she commanded. A loud roar came from below, the trees shaking and countless flying creatures taking the air in all directions. "Stuck!" came a deep growl through the communicator. "Okay, I'll try and come to you," Arthuria stated, still not sure how she felt about the Dragon now talking.

She sat there for a moment, shaking her head. "Compared to Kaina... it's like they were children," she muttered, steadily getting to her feet and concentrating to lock her body to the branch. She walked around the branch, standing upside down on its bottom before looking up, to see down. She couldn't see her Dragon beyond the foliage beneath her, but at least this time she was prepared for the fall. She released her Focus and drew her sword, carving her way through the leaves.

Smoke immediately directed her to where Zhurong had landed, the Dragon spewing fire as he lay tangled in vines and colossal webs. Chittering filled the air, Arthuria's gaze glancing in all directions to the numerous gigantic spiders travelling across the trees towards the flailing Dragon. "You might have mentioned the problem," Arthuria stated with a hint of frustration. She had

wasted Caliburn against Kaina, so using her back-up blade she darted through the air towards her Dragon.

A spider lunged towards Zhurong, the creature far larger than Arthuria, but she dove past it like a lightning bolt, carving a golden line through the air that spiralled outwards to free the trapped Dragon and bisected the arachnid. Zhurong fell but twisted in the air, flapping hard to push himself upwards before he turned his red gaze towards the creatures that had arrived to feast on him. He took in a deep inhale and burned them all, the creatures shrieking and convulsing as the fluids inside them boiled before erupting out of their abdomens in gory carnage. Zhurong lunged for a particularly large one, grabbing the creature in his forward claws before crunching down on the barely-living monstrosity.

Zhurong devoured his feast as Arthuria slaughtered the survivors. "Care to help?" she yelled his way, the lazy Dragon ignoring her as he found a relatively safe perch to eat on. As he finished his meal, Arthuria prepared for his assistance, instead the Dragon curled up and let out a loud yawn before shutting his eyes. Arthuria scowled, darting through the air with her Focus and slicing upwards through the huge branch the Dragon was laying on. Her blade cut through it like butter and the Dragon swiftly woke back up as he began to fall. Fighting together, the beasts didn't last much longer.

The pair then found themselves resting on another large branch. "You owe me." "No. This is your fault," Zhurong returned. Arthuria scoffed and gestured around them. "You'd be spider food without me," she returned, cleaning her blade of blood and then putting it away. "And I wouldn't be here if not for you." "On the contrary, this is your home. You would be here, just smaller and not as well fed." Zhurong raised his devilish head and looked around, the Dragon doing what Arthuria could only perceive as a shrug before lowering his head once again. "I see."

"You see? Is that all you have to say after everything that just happened?" she questioned in disbelief. "I want sleep, be quiet for a moment," Zhurong grumbled. "Unbelievable. I preferred you when you didn't speak," she growled, looking up at the branches above them and then beginning to walk up the tree towards them. An eventual huff alerted her to the Dragon deciding to follow her, only rather than fly up with her he flew past her and found another branch to lay upon.

She eventually caught up to him, standing in front of him and folding her arms. He peeked a crimson eye open, staring at her before shutting it. He let out a slow

huff. "What do you wish us to do now?" he questioned. Arthuria shook her head and sat down. "Truthfully, I don't know. We're in the Frontier, but that runs across the entire equator. We could be anywhere and, given this place's infamy, I'm guessing its no easy task to get across it – regardless of which side we want to go. Right?"

"Why would I be aware of such things? I never tried to leave this place until you ambushed me from above," Zhurong grumbled. Arthuria shrugged looking away. "Sorry about that. Captain's orders," she said quietly. Zhurong rolled over, exposing his back and stretching. "The food has made it worth it, besides it was the Ancient's will," he stated lazily. Arthuria raised an eyebrow, shuffling closer to the Dragon and laying against him – he was incredibly warm as always, only just bearably so, and it immediately made her want to take a nap against him. "The Ancient's what?"

"The Ancient. One of the greatest of my kin. One of the eldest, the strongest." "Like Kaina?" Arthuria questioned. There was a deep and long pause from the Dragon, his mind clearly thinking over the events of the previous battle. "Perhaps. Her glorious and colossal body would indicate so, but... she felt young. I can only imagine what battles she has survived and what feasts she has gorged upon."

"Could you grow that large? Could you transform like she does?" Arthuria questioned. "Enough talk. I hold not the knowledge of those... paper things your kind uses, nor does this topic interest me. Ask the Ancient, not I," he growled, turning and pushing her away. "Then I guess that's where we will head. To where we first met. These answers could be of use, to not just us, but the others too. Also, they may have landed there," Arthuria suggested. Zhurong growled. "I tire of you Oathsworn, we will depart once I've rested, and only then." "Very well."

Whilst the Dragon snoozed, Arthuria turned her attention to their surroundings. This was most certainly the Frontier, and deep within it. She glanced up: they were near the tops of the trees, going above would help to give some clues about their position. She faltered, fumbling for her bottomless bag before pulling out her survival kit – something Falconer had made for all of them some time ago. She found the compass within and turned until she identified north. "New World that way then - okay, that's something." She put it away and thought to herself. The others were probably fine, but if they had been scattered in all directions then the logical place to reconnect would be the Republic Capital, or Last Drop, or the

Dragon village... "Damn, this isn't going to be easy..." she muttered, leaning back and shutting her eyes.

"Oathsworn, waken," came Zhurong's deep voice, as quietly as he could. Arthuria's eyes flickered open; she hadn't meant to fall asleep but exhaustion had overwhelmed her. "What is it?" she questioned, keeping her voice similarly quiet and drawing her sword. "The night is far more dangerous than the day, beasts are on the hunt, we should be too," he advised. She sighed, standing up and stowing her sword. "Then we should find a better place to sleep. I've figured out which way north is, so we should fly and see how far away the edge of the Frontier is."

"I would think otherwise, the largest predators avoid the trees and fly above them. We would be an easy meal," he warned, standing up and stretching in a manner similar to a cat. Arthuria shook her head. "We need to see, and at the very least we could see the stars to estimate our rough position and where your nest is," Arthuria suggested. The Dragon tilted his head in confusion, his crimson eyes staring at her like she was mad. "I know where my nest is."

"You do?" she questioned in confusion. "How far are we from it? Where is it?" "Considerably far." He raised a claw towards the east. "That way. I can feel the call of the Ancient ones." Arthuria deflated, of course the Dragon had the answer all along. Why wouldn't he have? "Great, then that's our heading. We'll travel that way and kill everything that gets in our way. How does that sound?" she offered. Zhurong nodded. "More feasts, more hunts, perfect." Arthuria stepped up onto his back. "Ugh," he complained. "I change my mind," he grumbled. "Shush. Let's go."

It took the pair of them several weeks of travelling, at the very least – Arthuria long lost track of time, with most days consisting of battles against giant insects, arachnids, birds, and even the rogue Dragon. They fed on their prey, despite Arthuria's initial refusal, but eventually her food rations ran out and she was forced to devour anything and everything they could get their claws and hands on, whether that had wings, legs, hair or an exoskeleton. By Arthuria's fifth spider she no longer felt she had any moral grounds to refuse any more of the grotesque meals that Zhurong hunted for her. And despite all the horror it brought her, she actually began to enjoy Zhurong's well-cooked meats.

Eventually however, the trees began to take on familiar sounds – the sounds of Dragons – and, early one afternoon, they flew out into a large open expanse. "We did it!" Arthuria exclaimed, her nose dead to her own stench and hair braided to

ignore the knots and the fact it had not been washed properly for so long. She looked around, scanning the Dragon swarm for anything or anyone familiar, but nothing stood out. "I sense a presence," Zhurong stated. Arthuria leant forwards to be in his vision. "What kind?" she questioned, fumbling for her communicator. "A fellow Oathsworn, another Dragonlord. Somewhere above us. It's not one I recognise."

"Anyone, can anyone hear me?" Arthuria questioned into her communicator as they flew upwards towards the Dragon Monk village. No response came, but as they neared the gaps in the foliage something lunged at them from above. Zhurong grunted as he was tackled, a white, colossal, serpent-like Dragon slamming into him. "Go!" yelled Zhurong, as the two Dragons fell away, Arthuria surging upwards to break through the foliage and land on the familiar wooden walkways of the Dragon Monk village.

She immediately drew Caliburn, pointing the blade towards the woman stood leaning casually in front of her. "Call it off!" she ordered, a scoff coming from the woman. "And why," Dragonlord Thákane questioned, "should I do that?" She was shorter than Arthuria by about half a foot. A cream hood covered her braided brown hair, the sleeveless clothing made of animal hide with numerous bright colours and feathers decorating the outside. She had light-brown skin, her similarly coloured eyes narrow and staring both curiously and threateningly at Arthuria. A fresh scar lay across her left cheek. The Pirate Lord stood unafraid. "This place dislikes violence," Arthuria said quickly. "You may be able to handle me, but do you want all of them as your enemy?"

"I am simply dealing with an intruder. A Rising Ace that has caused so many problems already for the greater world, and is undoubtedly going to do the same here," she stated. Zhurong was silent, but Arthuria felt no pain from him. The other Dragon had been far larger. "Please," Arthuria asked nicely, putting her sword away and holding up her hands. Thákane nodded, putting her hand up to her mouth and whistling loudly.

A moment later a hooded woman flew up through the gap, floating down to land next to Thákane. She had ghostly white skin, a white hooded leather jacket across her top. She wore a cyan skirt, and her feet were bare. Her eyes glowed from the darkness of her hood, both matching her cyan skirt and distinctly reptilian. "Another one that can transform?" Arthuria muttered aloud to herself. Thákane folded her arms, looking back to her companion before back at Arthuria. "Another one?" she questioned.

Arthuria held her tongue, uncertain of what she should share with the possible enemy. Thákane let out a sigh, looking away. "Look, truthfully I only have a problem with your Captain. And from the looks of things you haven't been with him for some time. Unless that stench and look is trending amongst your crew. You don't need to be afraid of me, or this one. I swear on our bond and the rivers of my homeland that we will not harm you unless you bring it upon yourself. Okay?"

Arthuria hesitated before letting out a sigh and nodding. "Kaina, the Betrayer, is a Dragon - just like your companion," Arthuria stated. Thákane immediately glanced towards her companion, a look of confusion on her face. "Nanabolele?" The Dragon shrugged, almost too casually. "I had no idea," she said, surprisingly softly. Thákane glanced back towards Arthuria. "Then it seems you're lucky to be alive," she said gently, with a small smile.

"Lucky is not how I would phrase it but... hard to disagree. Well, since no one else is here, I will be on my way," Arthuria said cautiously, stepping forwards. With a sigh, Thákane held up a hand. "Wait, I feel bad. You came here with a purpose, I'm guessing to follow your Dragon's call?" Thákane questioned. Arthuria nodded. "You'll need to climb the tree. There's an alcove high above. You'll get whatever questions you need answering there, or you'll perish. I can't speak for the rest of your crew, or your... Captain, but at the least it'll give you a better chance of survival." She stepped past Arthuria, her Dragon - Nanabolele - following closely behind before they dropped through the hole in the floor and fell out of sight. Arthuria shook her head, uncertain what to think of the strange Dragonlord, but she turned her gaze upwards. There was visible path leading up to the foliage, one that she could follow.

She trusted Zhurong to stay out of trouble and, after negotiating with the locals, began to climb. The twisting wooden staircase didn't last long and she found herself using Focus to leap and run upwards. The journey felt forever, mainly due to not knowing what exactly she was seeking, but also due to the abundance in combative creatures she encountered, whether Dragon or otherwise, all hoping to have her as an easy meal. They fell without issue and eventually she passed through a thick barrier of foliage, coming to a stop in a huge grassy cavern.

Arthuria frowned as she climbed up and onto the solid ground floor. It made no sense, there should have been no reason for the floor to be covered in grass, but then her eyes glanced around the colossal birdcage-like structure she was in. The

entire place had been artificially made: someone or something had constructed it, and clearly a long time ago. "Hello?" Arthuria called out, stepping forwards in the colossal grove. Her eyes scanned the floor, looking for anything that stood out. For Zhurong to have previously described an 'Ancient One' with such reverence, she could only imagine the creature to be ferocious, and quite likely preposterously big. She couldn't help but think back to the colossal reptilian eye she had seen when she had first bound herself to her Dragon. It had been golden, with lightning-like patterns throughout its iris.

"Hello?" she repeated, her hands over her hilts and no apparent creature in sight. Arthuria reached the centre of the grove: the grass was flattened outwards, as if something colossal had been laying upon it. She faltered, reaching down and taking off her gauntlet before touching the ground: it was warm, unusually so. Her eyes widened and she looked upwards. It was hard to see: the creature was camouflaged to a near-invisible degree, the only identifier of the gigantic Dragon's presence was its vague outline and golden eyes. Arthuria couldn't believe she hadn't noticed it, she had looked right through it, both with Focus and without. It hung from the ceiling, its wings wrapped around its body like a bat.

Its head was large, with an ox-like pair of wide horns. Its snout came forwards getting narrower towards its large maw, with countless large spiky scales pushing backwards and outwards to form something akin to a mane. The creature huffed, blowing a casual threat of air that smothered Arthuria immediately in a foul-smelling cloud. It then unfolded its wings, spreading the four of them wide, before releasing the grip it had in its hind legs, dropping hard and fast towards her. Its body shimmered, the camouflaged scales transforming into a pearlescent pattern reminiscent of a far larger Soteria.

Arthuria remained where she was - she didn't have the speed to avoid the creature falling towards her. She was going to be crushed and there was nothing she could do about it. The creature spread its wings casually, gliding just enough to land in front of her with a crash that knocked Arthuria to the floor, the entire cage shaking from the impact. Arthuria immediately regained her composure, looking forwards as her heart hammered inside her chest. The Ancient Dragon stared directly at her, its snout only a metre or two in front of her. "Well?" she questioned, getting to her feet. "Eat me or speak, I know you can do either, Ancient One."

"So you do," boomed the Dragon's voice, directly into her mind. It was distinctly feminine amongst the firm growl. "Yet you seek me, not the other way around."

So ask your questions, mortal. Why have you sought me out?" questioned the Dragon. "I was looking for my companions, I was hoping they are here, but clearly they are not. Were they here, have I missed them?" Arthuria questioned. The Dragon tilted her head, curiously like a confused cat. "I do not know. Matters like that are beneath me."

"Then what of my Dragon, Zhurong? He can speak now, like you do but with his voice. Are... will he develop further, change forms like that one bound to Thákane? Or Kaina?" Arthuria questioned next. The Dragon pulled her head back, sitting up tall and proud. "Your Dragon?" she questioned, a glare to her eyes. "I meant no disrespect. My pacted companion, my Oathsworn bond. The Dragon I travel with," Arthuria corrected.

"Tell me then, do you wish it so? Do you seek him to shed his body to take a more... human form?" the Dragon questioned. Arthuria looked away, the Dragon moving slightly to ensure she was still in her eyeline. "I asked, you answer," the Dragon commanded. Arthuria didn't know. She didn't know anything about the Dragons, nothing more than a basal layer of their history – and even that came through the lens of a Demon, their once allies.

"I seek only a resolution to our bond. A day may come where we have to part, I want him to be free, and not as stupid as he was and currently is," she said honestly. The Dragon's face twisted into what she could only describe as a smile. "A fair comment. My descendants are far from what my ancestors once were." "Your descendants? All of them are your children?" Arthuria questioned. The Dragon shimmered, the scales transforming in colour to form a tapestry across her colossal body. It showed countless Dragons falling from the skies, images of giant machines launching huge spears towards them. It showed a small Dragon hidden away in a cave, and a young child stumbling across it.

It then showed the pearlescent Dragon in a larger form, and the young child now a grown woman, the pair of them flying high above countless islands, both on the seas and in the skies. It then showed the pair of them encountering other Dragons and other mortals riding on top of them. Finally it showed a dark shadow on the horizon, and a wall of trees emerging from the ocean. "I was not alone, but perhaps I may be now. Those you see around us are my descendants, but my direct line was cannibalised long ago by a wave of weakness and stupidity. The inferior remain, but your kind have helped to rediscover some of their strengths, so that someday we may return to our thrones. Your name, child?"

“Arthuria Pendragon, Ancient One. May I know yours?” she asked back, both in awe of the genuine piece of history before her, alongside an equal acknowledgment that her life lay literally in the Dragon’s maw. The Dragon looked at her with bemusement. “Valnea is the name I was once given. Take it with you, Pendragon, and let your descendants hold it close.” Arthuria nodded. “I will. I must ask, how can my bond with Zhurong grow further? I am afraid we only cause each other harm in battle. How can I help him grow stronger? How can he help me become stronger?” Arthuria questioned.

“Through conquest. Through feast. Like any creature, strength comes from the strength of our prey. Seek and devour the greatest of foes and you shall find your answer. But be warned, growth before its time comes through the cost of pain. That child is in your care, it requires a cold heart to force an evolution. Not impossible, not unnecessary, but it is your burden - should that be the path you wish to tread. It is risky for the weak to devour the strong.”

Arthuria frowned. “This place was attacked before, wasn’t it?” she asked. “Aye,” returned Valnea, her golden eyes sparking as she tried to read Arthuria. “Did someone force a Dragon to devour other Dragons?” she questioned. “My kin devour the weak... it is our way.” Arthuria shook her head, looking firmly at the Dragon. “Did Kaina kill the other Ancient Ones?” Arthuria questioned. Valnea hesitated. “I do not know of this Kaina.”

“That does not answer my question, great Dragon,” Arthuria pressed. “Was the might of the greatest of your kind challenged by a child?” Arthuria questioned. The Dragon shimmered and vanished, a human-like form fleeing in the corner of Arthuria’s eye. “Questions like those need no answer. Nor should they be spoken,” came a whisper into Arthuria’s mind. “Leave this place Pendragon. And speak not of the Apex.”

“How can I break my bond if it needs to be done?” Arthuria called out. Silence followed and she felt she was alone. Arthuria shook her head, a shudder passing through her. The Sovereign and Kaina had slaughtered the Ancient Dragons, and Kaina had feasted upon them. It explained why an older Dragon like Nanabolele hadn’t recognised that Kaina was a Dragon. Arthuria sighed. “Zhurong, rest up,” she stated into her communicator. “We’re leaving first thing tomorrow. There’s something I need to find out. We’re heading for the Capital, so eat your fill – it’s a long journey.”

Seize the Seas Tales: Dire Times

Astris yelled as she dived forwards and rolled, straight into the doors of a wardrobe. She groaned as she lay there on the floor, her legs over her head, before yelping as the thing toppled over onto her. It was a moment later that it was lifted off her and the familiar face of Caelie looked down at her with concern. "I'm okay," Astris said with a groan, taking the younger girl's hand and letting herself be pulled to her feet. "What happened? Where?" Caelie questioned quietly, immediately walking to the window of the room they were in. "I don't know," Astris answered. "But I'm guessing – from the wardrobe – that we're not where we're meant to be."

It was late afternoon from the orange glow outside - they had travelled east, by a considerable distance at least. Caelie stuck her head out of the window and made a gesture with her hand, a swirling blue portal appearing behind them. Without hesitation Astris followed Caelie through the portal, just as she heard the stomping of feet as someone rushed towards the room they were in. They landed on a nearby rooftop, a city stretching before them. It was beautiful, full of white buildings with red roofs, but offset by a large district full of factories that spat out smoke into the sky. "Ah," Astris uttered. "We're in Diasta, the homeland of the Sovereign."

Caelie looked towards her, patting her clothes in clear panic. "What?" Astris questioned. "Things," Caelie returned, a short expletive escaping her lips before she crouched down and put her hands over her face. Astris frowned, looking down and reaching for her bottomless bag – in the place she always kept it. It too wasn't there, and with its absence was also her blood supply. "Oh no," she muttered, the soft sting of the sun on her face now a far greater problem than it had been in a long time. "You too?" Caelie questioned. Astris nodded, taking a similar stance to her and burying her hands in her face. "Big problem," Caelie muttered. "Really big problem," Astris confirmed.

She reached for her communicator, breathing a sigh of relief as she found it. "Still have this at least. Attention all Rising Aces, this is Astris and Caelie, can anyone hear me?" she questioned into it. Silence. "Anyone, can anyone hear me?" Astris questioned once again. "Jayce? Bjorn? Marisha? Ordo?" Astris questioned. More silence. "Oh no," Astris realised. Caelie's expression changed, half her face melting into the familiar demonic mask of Belial. "I cannot sense anyone else," he confirmed. "Then we have to follow our back-up plans," Astris stated, immediately snapping into gear and beginning to figure out a plan. "We need

accommodation first. There were some abandoned buildings near the factories last time we were here. It puts us a little close to the Mechanist, but it will help us to lay low. Caelie, can you get us there? Preferably out of the sunlight." Caelie nodded, opening a portal.

It didn't take them long to find what they were looking for, but by that point darkness had fallen. They sat huddled in an abandoned workshop. Most of the windows were broken and the building had long been stripped of anything valuable. Caelie sat in a trance as Astris kept watch. "Anything?" Astris asked as she emerged from it. Caelie looked pale, and a thin layer of sweat covered her forehead. She shook her head, her eyes towards the floor and an expression of hopelessness on her face. "He'll respond, we just need to keep trying," Astris reassured, getting to her feet and stretching.

Caelie reached up and grabbed Astris' hand. "No," Astris said firmly. "Rest. I'll be back. It'll just be a quick robbery and then we'll have enough money to fund travel north, okay?" Astris stated. Caelie looked up at her, worry in her eyes as she shook her head. "It'll be fine," Astris repeated, stepping forwards. "Nighttime is my playground. I'll be back, try to get some sleep," she commanded. "Astris," Caelie said quietly. She turned and looked at Caelie. "Don't leave me."

Astris grit her teeth as she hugged her side, desperately trying to stop the bleeding. She should have listened to Caelie. They should have done it together. She shook her head, leaning back and placing her head against the wall of the alleyway she was slumped in. "She's safe. And we've got the money. You made the right call," she assured herself, the wound closing, but a hollow hunger replacing it. Astris leant to the side, looking down at the puddle of water that had mixed with her blood. Her reflection stared up at her, her face pale and gaunt – her eyes a glowing crimson. "Fuck!" she growled. She needed blood. She needed to feed. Astris rested her head in her hands. "I don't want to do it," she muttered, an anxious guilt forming as she prepared herself for what she knew she had to do.

Lieutenant Graft paused as he and his fellow Null Legionnaires came to the site they had been ordered to. A groan came from his right before a crash followed as one of the new recruits toppled to the floor. "Check on him," ordered Graft, lifting his foot up and watching the blood drip from the sole of his boot before stepping forwards amongst the small group of eviscerated corpses. A terrified man sat huddled at the side of the road, rocking back and forth as he held his

hands over his ears. “Fangs, teeth, fangs, claws,” he muttered amongst a stream of traumatised panic. Graft scowled, shaking his head and ignoring the civilian. This sight was nothing compared to the war that most of the world seemed to have already forgotten.

“Corporal, assessment?” Graft questioned, crouching down next to the most intact Null Legion corpse. “Some sort of beast from the description,” came Corporal Monroe’s response. “A bear maybe?” came the foolish follow-up. Graft scowled, reaching for the collar of the corpse and peeling back the layers of clothing. A precise pair of puncture wounds shone in the moonlight. “No bear. Contact command, send a message to Strigon and the Sovereign. A Vampire is loose in the city and I want to know why it’s hunting our men. And then I want permission to put it down.”

Chapter 204: Amongst Strange People and Stranger Lands

Fenn took a step back from the wall he had claimed. "You know," he said, somewhat aimlessly to the darkness behind him, "I don't think I could count all of these scratches. I think we've been here years. A decade at least." The wall was marked with countless tallies. "It's been a month," Falconer said plainly. "Twenty-eight marks. No more, no less," he said, sitting in a meditative position, cross-legged on the floor. Fenn admired his work. "Definitely at least three months..." he muttered to himself. Falconer let out a sigh, shaking his head before he opened his eyes and stood up. "A guard is here," he stated firmly. "How do you know?" Fenn questioned back.

Falconer pointed at the guard stood by the door to their cell. "Ah," Fenn exclaimed. "Are we being released, or are you here to bring us food?" Falconer questioned plainly, the suit of armour stood on the floor rather than floating in the air. Silently the gate was pulled open, a strange slurp-like sound coming from inside the armour. A slow and heavy hand was raised, gesturing towards the vague direction of the exit. Falconer and Fenn glanced towards each other. "Play it safe, we do not know what awaits us," Falconer advised, stepping forwards. "Yeah, like I was going to do anything else..."

They followed the stairs upwards, eventually stepping out into the familiar courtyard they had been allowed to exercise in. Large walls surrounded them in all directions, but the number of guards were minimal and they were all placed in unusual spots – as if more for show than actual practice. Fenn let out a large groan as he stopped in place and stretched, taking the moment to glance at the guard following them. The djinn floated, like all djinn typically did, but this one only barely got off the floor. In fact, it seemed to be struggling to get up the final steps out of the prison. He smirked, glancing at the fake weaponry aimed downwards at them – the cannons depowered from the state of their glyphs, the golems stood unmoving, and the djinn that were suspiciously stationary and in positions where they could lean or rest.

The Scourge's antimagic effect – although Falconer had argued consistently that antimagic was the wrong term – was having an impact on the djinn far more than Fenn or Falconer. It also spoke heavily that Falconer and Fenn had been the only prisoners in the prison, but from Tempest's vague and unspecific conversations about his people that seemed more due to the djinn's habit of exiling anything they disapproved of. Fenn started forwards, catching up to Falconer with a few sharp hops.

"I think this place is hindering them far more than they've let on, probably why we've seen only their clones in recent times. This antimagic field could be our way out of here," Fenn said quietly to Falconer, the pair walking across the courtyard to a portcullis that rattled as it lifted up to let them through. "Homunculi was the term Tempest used. And again, it's not antimagic. The..." "See, even you don't know. Antimagic is the best term we have," Fenn countered. "No, this is more. There isn't life. It's missing magic, it doesn't negate it. The components for magic are absent."

A slurp came from behind, the pair turning to look behind as the djinn pointed ahead to a pair of armoured humans wielding spears. They were both identical, their helmets designed to obscure everything other than their eyes and covered with a harlequin-esq face bearing an expression of anger. "This way," instructed one of the guards, the djinn remaining in place as Falconer and Fenn continued forwards. They stopped in front of the guards, each armoured man gigantic in size and towering over them. "You are expected within the council chambers. Do you comply?" questioned the same guard.

"We get a choice?" Fenn questioned. Both pairs of eyes bore down upon him, and no response came. "We comply," Falconer answered, shooting a warning glance to Fenn. The guards nodded, turning their backs to the pair and marching forwards in unity. "Couldn't we just run?" Fenn whispered to Falconer, the guards not bothering to see if they were following. "For what end? We're at least hundreds of metres in the sky, our hands are shackled, and I need to find Wren." "Okay then... guess we meet this council."

They were led through the flying palace through countless hallways, passing numerous djinn who all turned to observe them, as well their homunculus servants – the groups or pairs of identical people all staring with little emotion or empty eyes. Eventually the guards escorted them to the base of the largest tower in the floating city, the pair of them pushed onto a small circular platform in a large chamber. They looked up, a retractable hole lay in the ceiling above them. "Mind your words," Falconer warned to Fenn. "Jayce once had a meeting with a djinn council, maybe even this one, they were... fickle."

The platform beneath them began to glow and then vibrate as it began to lift, before it then sputtered and crashed back down, sending Falconer and Fenn tumbling to the floor. "What the hell?" Fenn questioned angrily as he got back to his feet and looked at the two homunculi. They stood emotionless, unsure of what to do with the technical failure. The hole opened in the ceiling and an

unceremonious ladder was lowered. Fenn and Falconer looked at each other before back at the guards, the pair of them showing off their tight manacles.

With their bindings removed the pair of them began to climb, emerging into the base of a colossal and dark room. "Hello?" Fenn called out, Falconer's gold and green eyes sending daggers towards him immediately. "What?" Fenn questioned back. There was a loud clang and a gavel slammed to the floor in front of them, a loud slurp-like sound following from above. "I don't know djinn, but I think that was a swear word," Fenn said with a smirk, a suit of armour crashing to the ground afterwards in a heap and causing him to yelp and dart backwards behind Falconer. Falconer looked at the coward behind him, letting out a sigh and shaking his head. "Of all the people to be lost with..."

A cream-coloured slime slid down a large pillar, plopping to the floor before darting inside the armour. The empty suit of platinum armour then rose up, a faint red glow coming from inside the helmet. The armour leant back in an inhuman manner, looking upwards before saying something in the wet, slurping language of the djinn. Four more crashes followed, as armour fell from the darkness above. The suits of armour then vaguely floated over to them before standing in front of them in a half-ring - one djinn hastily retrieving their gavel before holding it awkwardly in their golden gauntlets. "Bow," Falconer said quietly, giving a gentle bow that kept all of the djinn in his eyeline. Fenn scowled and bowed as low as he could.

The foremost djinn said something in his language before faltering as Falconer and Fenn both looked at him with stark confusion. The armour sank a little in what Fenn could only presume was a sigh. One of the djinn floated towards the hole in the floor, saying something downwards, a female homunculus then climbed up and joined the semi-circle. She was a redhead, short and presumably quite young, her face obscured by a golden harlequin mask, this one showing an expression of laughter that was more than unnerving, her orange eyes visible through the holes.

"The council questions your intrusion into their city?" asked the girl, looking plainly at Falconer. "It was not by choice, I assure you all," he returned, the girl silent and the council seemingly understanding him. "We crashed here after a spell went wrong. We had no intention on intruding here," he answered. "They find it hard to believe," stated the girl, as the five djinn slurped to each other. "Yet it's true," Fenn stated. "Where's the bird, we'll be on our way and out of your... slime?"

Falconer sighed as the djinn all raised up to their full heights. "The Roc?" questioned the girl. "Yes, my companion. Where is she?" Falconer asked, as politely as he could. "She has been kept safe and under observation. Her kind is rare and as a specimen there is much that could be learnt. Samples have been taken and the bird will be returned to you, provided you answer the council's questions." Falconer gestured with his wooden arm for them to go on. "Firstly, what is your malady?" translated the homunculus, pointing at Falconer's right arm.

Falconer thought for a moment, trying to think of how best to even describe his blessing. Fenn stared at him with equal curiosity. "It is a blessing, granted to me by the essence of this world. A product of the Leylines and the power they hold," Falconer answered. "So you must feel the taint on these lands? What knowledge do you hold of this region?" questioned the girl, the gold djinn with a purple glow floating forwards. "I... do. I don't know much, but the Leyline at the border of the Scourge is... damaged, wounded. These lands have been killed, it's why this part of the world is devoid of magic. Why it is hostile to you. That is all I know, I do intend to investigate further."

Fenn raised an eyebrow, but Falconer dismissed it with a faint gesture of his hand. "They... understand, and thank you for the information. It opens a new line of inquiry for their researchers to pursue at a later time, once the great task is finished." Falconer and Fenn immediately looked at each other and then at the council. "What great task?" they both questioned. The five djinn turned away and spoke to each other before turning back. "The council seek lost assets. It is the only reason for our presence within these tainted lands. That is all that shall be spoken to outsiders."

Falconer nodded, despite Fenn's clear look of curiosity. "Your items and companion shall be returned to you. You may then depart. Should you discover more information on this region the council will gladly trade for it, but otherwise your presence is not expected or appreciated," the homunculus said coldly. "Fine by us," Fenn chipped in, turning and starting to walk towards the ladder. Falconer looked across the five djinn. "Have you encountered any other... intruders?" he questioned hopefully. The girl shook her head. "Understood. Farewell."

Wren let out a deafening cry as she hopped over towards them, all but tackling Falconer when he came close enough. She then screeched at him as loudly as she could, Falconer's vision blurring from the noise as he placed his arms around her

neck and buried his head in her feathers. "I am glad you are well," he told her before pulling back. If anything, she looked even bigger than he remembered and her injuries had healed. A homunculus handed him his bow and quiver and he slung it across his back before placing Wren's saddle upon her. He then turned to Fenn as he climbed aboard. "Let's leave this place. We have much to discuss." Fenn nodded and climbed aboard, grateful to be free of his collar, but unable to transform much to his frustration. "Out of the Scourge, please," he requested. "Not yet," Falconer stated, the trio taking to the skies.

They descended through the clouds, the colossal red expanse of the Scourge beneath them. "What do you mean not yet?" Fenn questioned, the wind whipping around them. "The crew is scattered, likely all across the world if it was a disruption to the teleportation circle spell. As a reminder, they will have apparated through any number of ancient teleportation circles, rather than our original destination. Hence why we emerged out of that sky knight palace, albeit slightly off course. Did the Captain give you any instructions in case of this eventuality?" Falconer questioned. Fenn shook his head. "Well I was."

"We've lost a month, but it is a safe assumption that the others will be looking for us. So we should make haste in our task," Falconer stated, tucking into Wren as she began to dive. "Which is what?" Fenn questioned, the pair of them heading south, rather than north. Wren pulled up, gliding forwards at a fast speed. "We're going to see if we can destroy the Scourge. We're going to try and revive the world."

Much further south, Jayce looked up at the skies. He had no idea how long had passed, but it had been at least a few weeks and food was running out, least of all water. His bottomless bag was anything but – it had served him well to start with, but between Little Witch and the two mimics he carried, as well as himself, his resources were dwindling. She purred in his arms as he rode RK, the cat feeling lighter with each day and distinctly skinnier. Time was running out, for all of them.

A chitter drew his attention upwards, a vague brown blob ahead of them amongst the red sands stretching in all direction. Jayce set the cat down and stood up, instinctively entering into Focus before yelling out in agony as he tumbled from RK's back to the floor as his cells gasped for fuel. He groaned as he forced himself off the ground, before panting heavily as he got to his feet. It felt unbearable every time and had become such a crutch for him that he truly struggled to live without it.

He stepped forwards, pushing past RK before picking up speed as he tore into a full sprint, Sola turning into a spear as he charged towards the brown blob. The creature rose up and he faltered, coming to a skidding halt as it spread six large arms wide in a defensive stance before leading out a screech and charging towards him instead of fleeing. The monstrosity was huge and, where pride may have caused him previously to charge daringly towards it, Jayce did not hesitate in turning around and running back towards RK.

The beast looked like a giant fur-less mole, only with a single cyclops-like red eye and eight limbs in total. It was at least three-metres in size, prompting Jayce to immediately question as to where it found such a consistent food and water supply to maintain its size. It bounded towards him at a terrifying pace and Jayce turned to face it, only as he reached RK, throwing a spear that landed far shorter than he had hoped. "Fuck," Jayce muttered, as the monster swiped Sola aside, sending the mimic spinning through the air. Jayce transformed Luna into a similar spear, the otherwise magical weapon completely devoid of any of its usual potency.

But RK wasn't going to let a giant mole get it's Captain. The giant rokken barrelled into the creature, a huge boom sounding across the desert as the giant creatures tussled. Stone versus flesh was only going to end one way, and whilst RK had the creature pinned, Jayce pierced the back of the monster's head with a solid and sharp thrust. It thrashed for a few moments before falling still, bringing great relief to Jayce, and seemingly greater relief to the three carnivores travelling with him as Little Witch, Sola and Luna tore upon to the corpse.

"A fortunate break," Paimon stated in Jayce's head. He nodded in agreement, letting the three have their fill before he began to carve up the flesh and siphon the blood as emergency fluids. The monstrosity didn't particularly smell very nice, but it served a purpose, and the bottomless bag would help keep the flesh clean-ish for him to cook later. He then took the bones, he was sure he'd find some use for them eventually. With a weary sigh he then continued forwards, resuming the long march.

He spent the night huddled around a fire made from anything he had left to burn, trimming the meat and hanging the strips over the fire to dehydrate them. But eventually he fell asleep, waking up as sunlight landed on his face. Cautiously he opened his waterskin, looking inside. A sigh of relief emerged from him as he found a modicum of water inside, the blood filtered by the sponge inside. The sponge however had turned an unhealthy shade of red, that immediately created

great concern inside of Jayce. He poured some water into his hand, offering it first to Little Witch who happily lapped it up, before then to Sola and Luna. With them sated only a tiny amount remained, that he did not hesitate to finish. "Perhaps it is wise to boil the blood and collect water that way instead," suggested Paimon. "I hate to agree, but I don't exactly have much left to burn, it'll be my clothes next."

RK let out a grumble and Jayce looked his way, the rokken looking ahead to a figure on the horizon. Jayce stood up, his eyes wide. It was a person, an actual person, from the general shape. He turned and picked out pieces of reusable fuel from the fire before mounting RK. "Let's go," he stated, trying his best not to become overwhelmed with emotion as they surged forwards. It was only as they came within a few hundred metres of the person that Jayce faltered. "Hang on," he stated, standing up as RK came to a halt.

His heart sank as he dismounted, stepping forwards cautiously with RK in tow. It was a figure, but the person had no skin, or muscle – it was a skeleton holding a rusty sword and shield. It took a step towards him. "What in the abyss?" he questioned, the creature approaching him and him it. "Be careful, there is magic weaved around that corpse," warned Paimon. Jayce couldn't believe it, it couldn't be possible for a walking corpse to be... alive in the Scourge. How could it possibly be functional in a land devoid of magic?

It broke into a run, charging at him. He transformed Sola into hammer, swinging as it came close and battering its right arm off its body along with the sword. Jayce then lifted the weapon to strike downwards on the skeleton, but without thought he pressed a burst of Focus into it. Jayce screamed as he collapsed, the skeleton dropping onto him and pressing its shield into his throat as it pressed down upon him with a surprising and terrifying force.

Jayce gasped for air as the creature choked him, but a heavy stone arm swept through the skeleton, turning it into dust and releasing him. Jayce sat up, clutching his throat. "That's... twice now. Thanks, big guy," Jayce told RK, standing up and leaning against the mini-mountain. RK grumbled something resembling reassurance before reaching for the discarded sword and shield. He then threw them into his open hole, consuming the metal in a desperate need for some form of food. RK then let out a warning grumble and Jayce turned. A haze lay in the distance, a haze that was only growing in size. "Oh, great," Jayce muttered, staring at the small army of skeletons approaching him.

“Fine then,” Jayce stated, mounting RK and pointing forwards. “If that’s where they’re coming from then perhaps there’s a mage of sorts somewhere in that direction. If they can use magic even here then they probably had a way to help us,” he theorised, RK slowly taking a lumbering step forwards. “Right?” he questioned aloud. “Potentially,” Paimon returned. Jayce scowled, ‘potentially’ was not the affirmative answer he wanted and needed. “Just tell me it is, lie if you have to,” he half-begged, RK building up speed as he charged towards the army. “Sure,” Paimon said unconvincingly.

They barrelled through the army of skeletons, the creatures unable to stop a moving mountain like RK. Desperately they leapt onto him, trying to climb and get at Jayce and Little Witch on top. Jayce swung at them with a maul, and if a skeleton came too close he would either shove them off or would drag them into the molten hole in RK’s back. They wouldn’t emerge from the literal lava vent. RK did not stop his charge, the weapons of the skeletons harmless against him, but eventually the horde began to part, letting them pass without attacking. “There,” Paimon eventually said, Jayce looking away from the skeletons to a small mound on the horizon, a dark castle sat upon it. “Now that’s what I’m talking about!” Jayce yelled.

A roar then drew his attention upwards, a colossal shadow covering him. “That’s absolutely not!” he yelled, as the bones of a gigantic Dragon flew down towards him. It dove towards him and he combined Sola and Luna together into a heavy mace. He braced, gritting his teeth and preparing to swing, but at the last moment the fleshless creature pulled up, soaring over him and out of his reach before flying back up towards the skies. His heart hammered in his chest, and he slowly knelt back down upon RK, his eyes watching the skies above, but a greater feeling of doom passing over him. “It chose not to attack,” Paimon warned. Jayce shook his head. “It was commanded not to,” he corrected.

They neared the base of the mound that actually turned out to be a far larger mountain than initially presumed, the flat lands around quickly identifying it actually as an island within a waterless sea. Jayce dismounted RK, the pair of them quickly beginning to clamber forwards up the slope. The castle was massive, made entirely of a black stone with large pointy towers and large surrounding walls. A colossal silver gate marked the main entrance, but it opened as they approached, only further adding to Jayce’s feeling of unnerve. Skeletons of animals observed him from petrified trees, skulls watched him from the battlements.

“This mage is incredibly powerful, I can feel their magic all around us,” warned Paimon as they entered a large courtyard with a pond in the middle. “Water,” Jayce gasped, abandoning all resolve and throwing his head into the stagnant pool. It tasted vile, but it didn’t matter to him. Little Witch did the same, the cat recoiling and batting its own tongue in distress before darting back to the safety of RK.

A pair of stone stairs curved upwards to a set of huge rosewood doors that opened as Jayce glanced towards them. The doorway was too small for RK to fit, and inside there was no telling of what would be awaiting them. Jayce shut his eyes, pulling away from the pool and taking a step forwards. He had no choice, it was this or the Dragon or the death-filled expanse beyond. “Little Witch,” he commanded, the cat jumping down and darting towards him. She followed him as he stepped forwards entering into the castle.

Torches ignited as he crossed the threshold, blue flames illuminating the long corridor and turning the long red rug and golden tapestries into colours of flickering purple and green. Jayce strode forwards, Little Witch following closely behind. Ancient paintings lined the corridor, the paint cracked and peeling, the images twisted into fallen visages of people and scenery. Jayce tried the nearest door connecting to the corridor but it didn’t budge. He carried forwards until the path split, it went onwards but also to the right. A skeleton stood waiting for him in an ancient butler’s attire as he looked to the side passage. “Hello?” Jayce asked, receiving no response. It bowed to him and turned, starting to walk forwards up a set of black and red stairs. Jayce gulped and followed.

The creature led him silently, ignoring him before eventually stopping in front of a set of red doors. It gestured for him to go forwards, opening the door for him. Jayce nodded and stepped through, emerging into a large dining hall where a fire burned gently in a fireplace and a long table lay strewn with food and drink. Jayce’s mouth fell open, and without hesitation he ran forwards, racing down the stairs and lunging for a hunk of meat before freezing in place as he felt a pair of eyes upon him. “A fool...” came a cold voice that crept into the back of his mind.

“Spooky,” Paimon said unhelpfully, in addition to the other voice. “So that’s what that feels like.”

“Hello?” Jayce questioned, pulling his hand back and quickly questioning what he was seeing in front of him. It couldn’t be real. It couldn’t possibly be real he rationalised, the banquet vanishing in an instant. Jayce pulled back and turned, looking across the table at the numerous empty seats. He then turned, looking

back at the fireplace he had raced past. A hooded figure leant against the fireplace, a pair of glowing blue eyes staring at him from within the darkness. Jayce froze, uncertain of what to do and sensing that a single wrong move would spell the start of a new future as a skeleton.

He felt movement at his legs and looked down, the hooded figure looking down as well before tilting their head in curiosity. "A cat?" she questioned, crouching down and extending a skeletal hand from beneath her black sleeve. "Pssp pssp pssp," she said softly, much to Jayce's bemusement as Little Witch stared at the lich blankly. A rattling sigh emerged as the lich looked upwards, a skull marked with black runes on the forehead beneath the hood. Her eyes were small balls of blue flame and they seemed to darken slightly, as if she was squinting, as she looked up at Jayce with caution and suspicion. He picked Little Witch up and held her closely. "Her name is Little Witch," he said simply.

The lich cocked her head once more, rising to her full height – about a head beneath Jayce – and looking up at him. "Little... Witch?" she questioned, her voice soft, feminine, and piercing into his mind. "On what cause did this dear creature earn such a title?" she asked in a somewhat eloquent and surprising manner. "It's a long story," Jayce stated. The lich shook her head and pulled down her hood. "Time is of little concern to one such as I."

"Then how about we start with names instead. I am Jayce Exarga, this is Little Witch and outside is RK-227," he stated cautiously. "We're a bit lost." She placed her hands on her hips. "Many lifetimes have started and ended since a name has been questioned of me. In fact... no, I remember still. Once I was called Rosalynn, but she has long since been dead. Now you may refer to me as the Archmage of Death."

Seize the Seas Tales: Homeward Bound

Jeanne let out a sigh as she leant over the edge of the Last Card, her fingers dragging in the cold ocean waters. It had been a few weeks of travel since they had stopped off at Yuthura's old home, and the experience had been eye-opening for them all: a cruel reflection into Yuthura's past, and a nosy opening that Jeanne and Bjorn had peered through to learn about their companion's greatest secret. Yet, despite the initial melancholy that the old woman had experienced, the experience felt like it had had more of an impact on both Bjorn and Jeanne.

Bjorn had dove into a heavy focus on their current task, spending almost all of his time practicing combat against Jeanne, often creating a frozen platform for

them to duel upon – he lost all bouts of course - or engaging in careful planning over their day-to-day sailing and longer voyage. Every stop they made had a purpose, and seemed to fill the ship with more junk, whether equipment, books, or long-term supplies for something that he refused to enlighten Jeanne on. It was annoyingly pleasant to witness, and a side she had never truly noticed due to his large presence often being hidden beneath the colossal shadow of Captain Jayce Exarga. He was as much of a leader as he was, and it was easily observable as to how much of a benefit the Right Hand of Exarga was to the crew.

She, on the other hand, had fallen into uselessness. On the larger ship her tasks were mainly supplementary, she often had little to do because ultimately – beyond her defensive and offensive skills, and supposed leadership qualities – she was, at her core, a poor sailor. It had always been a means to an end, and from the very start of her legend she had been so reliant on others to do the basal tasks that allowed her Paladin Order to function. She stared at her broken reflection, the sad girl looking back at her. She had needed her Sentinels: Rais, Baudricourt, Dunois, Pasquerel, Metz, Dauphin and Cauchon. They had been with her at the start, and, in a lot of ways, at her end as well. She had failed them. They had all died for her, whether the old her she had been or the new one she had become.

Her green eyes stared back at her, and in a blink they turned yellow, her black hair turning silver. The surface was disturbed and she returned to her actual form, not the blood-soaked tyrant. “Astris was right...” Jeanne muttered. “It never will go away.” She sighed. The non-humans she had slaughtered had just been the final corpses on a mountain she had built, all started because of a false crusade in a naïve attempt for freedom.

She raised her head, an island with a large fortress passing them by. They were in the Keeps, still a considerable distance from the Capital. Her face then twisted as a thought crossed her mind. “Um,” she said somewhat quietly, pulling back from the water and looking towards her Captain. Bjorn glanced towards her. “Could we change course?” she questioned. He tilted his head and pulled an expression of confusion. “I know we’re in a hurry, but... could we go home?” “Home? Your home? Why?” Bjorn questioned back.

Jeanne nodded, glancing from Bjorn to Yuthura, who was sat nearby. “I... need to put something behind me. My guilt,” she said softly. Bjorn shook his head but Yuthura looked at him and nodded. They stared at each other, exchanging silent words before both looking back at Jeanne. “This better be worth it, Jeanne.”

SEIZE THE SEAS

"I can't promise that, I'm sorry," she said honestly. Bjorn sighed and span the ship's wheel to the left. "Just great..."

Chapter 205: Ancient Knowledge

“What’s an Archmage?” Jayce questioned, sensing that the initial hostility the lich had posed had dispersed. She looked at him with a skeletal expression that he could only assume was bemusement. “Which century are we within?” she questioned back. “Uh, it’s been a little over five-hundred years since the world exited the Dungeons, at least that was the case in the New World,” he answered, leaning against the barren dining room table. “Most curious. This ‘New World’ - explain it to me.”

“Uh, it’s the lands beyond the Frontier. The far North of the world,” he answered. “And these lands are living and luscious?” Rosalynn, the Archmage of Death, asked. He nodded. “That is most relieving to hear. You have my gratitude. You may stay for as long as you need, I shall endeavour to provide food and water and there are rooms you may use. Bathe and return to me. I have many questions, and I have no doubt the same is true for yourself,” she stated, the skeletal butler descending the stairs into the room before gesturing for Jayce to follow. He nodded to her and followed after the butler, feeling her eyes on the back of his head.

“You were curiously quiet,” Jayce questioned to Paimon as they walked through the castle, eventually arriving at a large ornate bedroom. It was filled mostly with dilapidated furniture, except for a surprisingly well-maintained wardrobe and a gleaming bathtub that the butler promptly began to fill, the water emerging from some unknown source. “It is rare for me to be unnerved, that Archmage is... ridiculously powerful. Perhaps the most powerful mortal, if that is even the correct term, that we have ever encountered.” Jayce pulled open the wardrobe an unusual collection of fancy clothes inside. “Stronger than the Sovereign?” Jayce questioned. “Can you not feel it? The air is saturated with magic.”

Jayce entered into Focus: this time there was no feedback – he could use it freely. “How is that possible? This region is devoid of it, how can there be so much?” “It is likely that she holds so much stored mana that it has diffused from her to create this cloud. Or perhaps she has found a vein, a Leyline as Falconer puts it, and has a direct connection to it – one that she has breathed life back into.” “But we’d see more greenery, more life around us. Perhaps there’s more to magic than even you understand.”

Paimon scoffed as Jayce undressed and tested the water. It was warm, the perfect temperature, and he eased himself into it with a loud moan. “Oh that’s so nice,” he stated. “We are being observed.” Jayce glanced backwards towards the butler

still in the room. It stood staring at him and then somewhat awkwardly turned its head away. "You may go," he stated, dismissing the skeleton. It left rather hurriedly that drew quick suspicion to his mind. "She must be able to see through her minions, right?"

"Unknown, she didn't seem to notice Little Witch, but that could simply be because Little Witch was not a threat." Jayce shrugged, shutting his eyes and laying back in the water. "What is an Archmage?" he questioned to Paimon. "I confess I do not know. It's not a title I'm familiar with, but then again – most of your titles and nomenclature is alien to me. I would assume it is a mage of great power and renown, likely one from before your 'apocalypse'," Paimon answered. "Yeah, I think so too. She's old, not just old, ancient even. From before the end of the world, at least."

"Yet I sense... youth. Stunted growth at least," Paimon added. Jayce pulled a bemused face. "She's not that short." His head tipped to the side, hitting the side of the bath. "Ow, what was that for?" he questioned, rubbing his head. "That is not what I meant. I mean emotionally. She allowed us here with hardly any questions, she dropped hostility over the presence of a mere animal, and she's clearly a prude."

"She's probably lonely, it's been at least five-hundred years for her since she last saw another... a living person. Besides, most mages we've met have some sort of emotional and social difficulty." Silence followed. "Hello? Still there?" Jayce questioned inside his head. "Tread carefully," warned Paimon. "It's not just mages that struggle. And your obsession with collecting allies may cause us trouble."

Jayce lay in the bath until it went cold and the surface had turned a rusty red colour. Eventually, with his stomach growling he emerged from the waters, drying himself with a short spell before approaching the wardrobe. He donned himself in a pair of smart trousers, accompanying it with a white frilly shirt before wearing a pair of leather slippers to complete the look. Everything was comfortable and fit, surprisingly. He took out his sleeping bag and set it down on the floor, before rummaging through his various items and checking them over. He filled up his waterskin and left it to filter before departing the room, back in the direction of the dining hall.

Rosalynn was waiting for him. She too had changed clothes into a long black dress that was loose over her skeletal body, a purple feather cloak that lay across her shoulders, and a three-pronged golden tiara which sat mounted to her

hooded skull. Her flaming orbs appeared to fixate on Jayce as he entered the room and she gestured for him to sit opposite her on the table. A roasted animal lay in front her with a small accompaniment of various vegetables. Jayce did not recognise the animal nor the vegetables, but he had to make the safe assumption it was all edible – at the very least his Focus would help neutralise any toxins. “Was the bath to your liking?” Rosalynn asked, leaning on her hands as he sat down. A small bowl of scraps lay on the floor for Little Witch, the cat curiously approaching the meal. “Yes, thank you,” he answered, eyeing the food but hesitating. “Please eat. Do not wait on my account, or you shall be of an equal state to I.”

Jayce tore into the meal with desperate ferocity before reaching for a chalice filled with the greatest wine he had ever tasted. She watched him, the expressionless skull observing with an unnerving determination. He slowed down, sitting up more properly and wiping his hands before picking up the carefully laid out cutlery. “This is... good,” he stated nervously. She nodded, her voice sitting uneasily inside his mind. “It took some time to locate the spell, I am glad to know my effort was worth it.”

“Are you... able to speak, or only through telepathy?” he asked. She tapped her skeletal neck. “With what organs?” she questioned, her voice somewhat melancholic. “Ah, sorry.” She shook her head and looked around the room. “It is of no harm. A consequence of my duty, nothing more, I assure you.” Jayce continued his lone feast, before picking off pieces for Sola and Luna to consume. “You travel with curious company: a rokken, a cat, a Demon and a pair of failed spellswords. For what purpose have you entered these lands?” she asked.

“By accident, I promise. My crewmates and I were ambushed by a Dragon, we tried to teleport away and the spell was disrupted, sending me here,” he answered honestly. There were several moments of silence. “You are fortunate to have survived. I am sorry,” she said, earnestly and sympathetically. Jayce shook his head. “My crew live, I have no reason to believe otherwise. They are out there, somewhere, searching for me.”

She remained silent in thought. “You must have a strong connection to be so certain. They must be something special.” Jayce nodded, setting his cutlery down. “They are. They really are. But what about you, are you alone out here?” “In a way. My servants remain eternal, but I would hardly refer to them as good conversationalists.” Jayce forced a small smile. “I was hoping you could clarify the past for me. If it has been more than five-hundred years since the world was

reseeded then I'm nearing at least a millennia in age. What happened to my fellows?"

"Your fellows? Other Archmages?" he questioned. She nodded. "I'm sorry you're the first I've encountered." She looked down and silence once again followed. "I see. Nevertheless, the world continues so I must presume their success. So, please tell about yourself, your world, the people, the state of this time period? Spare no detail," she requested, sitting back in her chair and observing him curiously.

Jayce lost track of time as she bombarded him with ever more questions. He answered them all as best as he could, talking about the Old and New World, the Sea Sovereign and the fall of the Empire, his crew and his rise to fame. He spoke of his battles and adventures, of his friends and allies and greatest foes. He spoke for so long that his eyes began to close on their own and he lost his chance to ask any questions of the ancient mage. "Rest," she instructed, several bottles of wine empty on the table. He had questions he wanted to ask but, after days of walking, the promise of a safe sleep was too much. "I am grateful for all you have told me, Jayce. I look forward to our further conversations. Good night." He could hardly argue, the skeletal butler all but escorting him back to his room. He crawled into his sleeping bag, Little Witch doing the same. His eyes falling shut on their own.

Jayce woke the following morning far more rested than he had been in a long time. He lay in his sleeping bag looking up at the dark ceiling, cracks of sunlight entering his room, wondering about his friends and the new acquaintance he had made. Eventually he sat up, looking to the closed door before opening it for the cat to escape and wander through. He then returned to the centre of the room and sat down, closing his eyes and descending into the underworld.

"Jayce?" came a voice from behind him, as he found himself stood on the familiar dark sands of the Abyss. He turned, his eyes widening as the familiar form of Caelie floated in front of him. "No..." he muttered in horror, only for her to attempt to tackle him in a hug and phase straight through him. "I'm not dead!" she stated loudly as he turned on her, a sharp rush of relief passing through him. "Thank the Gods! Where are you?" he questioned.

"Uh, long story. We landed in the Sovereign's homeland, we're currently on our way north," she said firmly and comfortably, in a manner that she could only do in the underworld. "Hang on, I'm with Astris," she stated, vanishing. She returned several moments later. "She wants to know where you are?" Caelie asked on Astris' behalf. "I'm in the Scourge, at a Necromancer's castle," Jayce

answered. Caelie faltered before disappearing. "What?" she questioned when she returned. "That's from both of us," she added.

"Long story but I have Little Witch and RK with me. Is anyone else with you?" he questioned. She shook her head. "No, but a Republic invasion has supposedly begun, we're heading there to help. The others might be as well." Jayce frowned. "That sounds risky, it might be more sensible to meet up with the others first." Caelie disappeared and reappeared. "Astris says we've had no contact. And the Republic is our best connection. She apologises, but it is Alara's fleet that we're going to aid."

"What?" Jayce questioned. Caelie vanished, and didn't reappear. Jayce exited the underworld, only to scramble backwards as a tattooed skull stared into his face. "A Spirit Monk trance? You intrigue me more and more. Apologies for the intrusion, I was concerned you had passed away," Rosalynn stated. "There is some food on the table for you. Unfortunately I will be away from the castle for some time, but food will still be available in my absence. I would advise taking this opportunity to train, given your conflict with this... Sovereign. I will return, farewell." She turned and departed, the door closing behind her.

Jayce sat for a while on his own. Alara was part of an invasion, and the others were scattered. It was worrying but he knew there was little he could do. He sighed and stood up, departing in search of food. After obtaining a small meal of peculiar taste, he stepped out into the courtyard where a statuesque RK lay on the floor. "RK?" Jayce questioned, the rokken grumbling as his stone body grinded against itself as he rose up and turned to Jayce. "I'm okay, you?" Jayce questioned. A grumble came back. "We're staying here, at least for a while. This is the only place we can contact the crew, and it's suicide out there."

The rokken either took in the information or ignored him, Jayce wasn't sure of which. Shrugging Jayce turned his attention to the open space, he concentrated on his Focus and began practicing his techniques. But he faltered, Rosalynn could use magic even in an area as devoid as the Scourge. Could he use Focus? Could he learn to channel it, even on the faintest of magical energy? It was worth a try. It had to be.

Rosalynn didn't return to the castle for over a week, and when she did return she immediately entombed herself within the largest bedroom of the castle, warning Jayce not to disturb her. She didn't emerge from her room for almost another week afterwards, but periodically – as Jayce ventured to the edge of the mana zone – he spotted her watching him from a window, her expressionless skull

confusingly friendly. But eventually, his questions having long since festered in his mind, they got another chance for dinner together, albeit her watching him eat.

"I have seen you venturing to the edge of the castle, is there a purpose in your expedition?" she questioned, almost immediately as he sat down. "Ah, apologies, please eat," she swiftly followed with. He must have shown an expression of disappointment or annoyance as she sat up straight and immediately rescinded her question. "No, um, sorry, I was hoping to ask some questions myself," he eased cautiously. "Ah, of course. Well, please do ask away."

"No, you asked and I should answer. I've been experimenting with using Focus at the edge of the mana border. To see if I can utilise it even in the Scourge, without feedback. You can use magic even here, so perhaps I can use Focus," Jayce proposed. She folded her arms and nodded, looking down at her lap. "A curious hypothesis. This... Focus, do you mean martial arts?" she questioned. Jayce nodded. "Ah, given your periodic uses of magic I took you for an apprentice mage, rather than a warrior. I should have some ancient manuals around her somewhere that could be worth your time. But I do agree with your theory, it is not unfounded and would perhaps follow something akin to what I do myself," she stated.

"Which is?" he questioned, opening a bottle of wine before curiously cutting open a thickly skinned wheel of cheese. "My... sister once referred to it as 'going infinite'. A childish term that fit her style of magic. Ultimately it requires one to engage as conduit for magic, rather than a store. An expert mage can cast continuously this way and at speeds that seem impossible to a lesser spellcaster. Think of it as rather than breathing, you allow your cells to absorb the oxygen needed for respiration. It seems impossible, and I confess it is preposterously dangerous as well."

"How so?" Jayce questioned, trying to visualise what the Archmage of Death was describing. She thought for a moment. "Picture a lightning storm and standing in its centre, allowing each and every bolt to hit and pass through you as you redirect it onwards towards your foes. Think of the heat and the energy passing through you. You have to expunge it all, for - if even one percent remains - that is then added to by another bolt, then another and another, until..." She placed both hands either side of her head before miming an explosion. "Many geniuses fell to this method, both in practice and victim. I see little reason for you not to be able to do the same with your... Focus."

“Couldn’t I suffer the same...?” Jayce mimicked the detonation. She shook her head. “No, it’s not exactly equivocal. Your martial arts rely on a heavy method of absorption, it’s how the mana is utilised within your body. It’s dispersed throughout you, rather than stored within Spirit Fonts – are you familiar with this term?” Jayce nodded, thinking back to Wicke’s lectures. “Good, well – I would imagine something more along the lines of disintegration or instantaneous cell death, but it’s unlikely. Due to such a heavy void of mana this would be the ideal conditions to practice a method. If mastered here, then outside there is little reason for you not to have fully mastered Focus for all it’s worth. You would have done what many take decades to achieve in a matter of months, if not weeks. Perhaps it would put you on par with this... Sovereign, as you called her.”

“Can you help me with this?” Jayce requested. She shook her head, looking around before leaning over the side of her chair. There was a hiss and Little Witch darted out from under the table to Jayce’s side. “It’s hardly my area of expertise. I can however provide with an expansive array of targets to practice against. There are some legendary warriors within my collection that would be more than a challenge for you.”

“On that, I have to ask – why? Why do you have a horde of skeletons, even a Dragon’s corpse, under your control? For what purpose, I mean – there’s nothing here,” Jayce questioned. She sat in silence for a few moments before standing up and approaching the fireplace. She knelt in front of it, staring into the flames. “Long before you were born, this world was full of power. Islands flew in the air, cities lay above and below the waters, magic was everywhere and everything. We rivalled even the Demons.”

“Ridiculous.”

“But it drew the attention of creatures beyond this world. Something far worse than any Dragon, Giant, or Demon. Something primordial and twisted. We called them the Entrasites. Creatures of shadow from a world not our own. They fed on magic, eradicating it, and were our perfect predators. They consumed us wholly, taking our own might and making it theirs. Acting as mimics, not unlike your blades. With every loss they grew in size and strength, taking our dead as their own. Ultimately there was little to be done, little to stop them, so my companions led the charge for humanity, creating bastions and sealing the doors behind them – erecting the Frontier, as you called it. But I stayed and fought. In a lot of ways I was the perfect foe for them. The Entrasites did not take the corpses, they copied

them, so - even when our greatest soldiers fell – I was there to keep them in the fight. I held the line. I still hold the line, awaiting the command to stop fighting.”

“These... Entrasites, are they still around?” Jayce questioned. She shrugged. “Potentially. When the world hid, they departed, deprived of their food. I slaughtered those that remained. Maybe one or two lay somewhere, slumbering as they await their queen to command them to arise once more.” Jayce paused. “Then, if you haven’t seen them, could you not leave this place? Leave the Scourge. I need to go north, you could come with-“

“No!” she stated firmly. “No,” she said more softly. “I-I cannot. I cannot risk all that I’ve done, all that we did. I must remain here, until the other Archmages give me permission.” Jayce sat in silence, thinking over what he had just been told. It was like nothing he had ever heard before, nothing anyone had heard before. She stood up and started to climb the stairs out of the room. “I’m sorry. I... need rest. Goodnight.”

Seize the Seas Tales: Old Ties

Arthuria did her best to avoid being spotted as she and Zhurong made their journey north from the Frontier to the Capital. It wasn’t always successful: sometimes a ship would spot them and they would hear the alarm bells begin to ring as the panicked crew saw a Dragon for the first time, but for the majority of the way they seemed to go undetected. However, that went straight out of the window as they approached the Republic Capital.

There was a crackle of red lightning, something sailing through the air towards them before a boom of thunder resulted in the swift appearance of a redhaired woman dressed in a red and white uniform. Arthuria yelped as an axe was swung at her and Zhurong, stopping about an inch or two away from her neck. “Explain now, and explain fast,” warned Fleet Admiral Exarga, a fury on her face that sent shivers through Arthuria’s body.

They landed on the Isle of Duty after flying over a sizeable armada placed in preparation, presumably for Arthuria’s arrival. “We have not encountered any of your crewmates, but your presence is a relief,” Cassandra Exarga stated, standing down her forces before looking Zhurong over. “Are there any others available in his model?” she swiftly asked, nodding in approval of the red Dragon. Arthuria didn’t quite know how to respond. “Uhm, I’m not sure. This one is mine, sorry.”

"Pity. Unfortunately I genuinely do not have any helpful information for you. Wicke departed not long ago with her own group, but otherwise I've heard nothing." "Wicke was here?" Arthuria questioned. "Where is she headed now?" "Indeed. She and Damian caused a real stir when they collapsed the Dungeon. I believe they were heading east, but that's not for certain. Anyway, I have duties to tend to and a report to make on... this," she stated, gesturing to Zhurong. "Keep the Dragon in check, and preferably away from ordinary folk. There's enough worries as it is." Arthuria nodded and Cassandra vanished in a flash of red lightning.

With a sigh, Arthuria turned to Zhurong. "You can stay here for a bit if you want, but only here. Otherwise go for a flight and find some food. Wild food - don't be lazy," she instructed. The Dragon let out a huff and took to the skies, leaving her alone with a small crowd of onlookers who immediately rushed to question her. Eventually she escaped the curious Marines and Navy, making her way on the advice of a local to the nearby Convent.

"Arthuria?" questioned Meredea, hurrying to the doorstep after being summoned by another Sister. She embraced Arthuria tightly before pulling back with her hands on Arthuria's cheeks. "I was worried that you'd fallen, rumours speak that your crew was destroyed. Are you okay?" she asked gently, taking Arthuria's hands. Arthuria nodded, her body tense. "I... yeah, fine. It's messy, we were separated, but I have faith in the others. I just need to find them," she answered. Meredea nodded. "I understand. Well, your sister was here not too long ago. She spoke to Gujin," Meredea stated with a reassuring smile. "My sister? Morgana was here?" Arthuria questioned. Meredea frowned and shook her head. "No, uh, Morgause was her name."

Arthuria unsteadily sat down on a stool that was rushed to her side, Gujin and Meredea easing her down to sit on it. "You're telling me..." she said shakily, "that my youngest sibling was in the Order, as a Squire? And I wasn't informed?" Arthuria questioned, her disbelief transforming into anger. "It was only towards the end that I learnt of your connection," Guhin stated. "And afterwards she was in hiding. I'm sorry, Arthuria - I would have told you sooner."

Arthuria sighed and placed her head in her hands. "Where is she now?" "She is travelling with a group, they are investigating the Dungeons." Arthuria scoffed. "So she's with Wicke. Of course, how could she not be... Well, that's the best place for her right now. Association with me will only put her at risk, I guess it's a future problem," Arthuria stated, forcing herself to her feet and shaking her

head. "No one's past evades them forever," Gujin warned. "We all have to face it eventually. Have you thought about returning home? Now would be the time."

Arthuria looked at Gujin. It was something she really didn't want to do. She had burned her past quite literally. It was not something she wanted to dig up. But it might have been something that Morgana would have done. "I guess I have to. I guess now is the time to track down my father."

Chapter 206: Inheritance

It was a considerable journey to the Old World. A journey that had been absolutely wonderful for Ohno, and a complete nightmare for Marisha and Morgana. They had first made their way to the Mysts, utilising a small dose of nepotistic connections to commandeer fuel and the Guild's communication systems, along with the added mass of Ohno and the ferocity of Soteria where conversation failed to acquire what was necessary. With a message sent, a transceiver stolen, and enough fuel to more than make the journey, the quartet then headed to the Frontier. But rather than through, they went over.

Marisha had swiftly settled into her role as pilot of the Gambit, with Morgana and Soteria often flying alongside to ensure the flimsy flyer's protection. It gave Ohno a chance to just sit and watch the world around them. And whilst Morgana and Marisha fretted about Dragons and other predatory beasts attempting to snatch the flying vessel out of the skies, he instead enjoyed the greenery beneath his feet: the colossal trees almost within an arms reach as Marisha weaved the Gambit between balls of webbing, plumes of flame and globules of flesh-melting acid. He couldn't help but grin as his stomach churned, the adrenaline coursing through his body.

But eventually the greenery fell away, replaced by an endless expanse of ocean beneath them. "Ohno, take over," Marisha commanded, the large panda groaning as he stood up and sauntered over towards the cockpit. He took the controls and she stepped away, wiping tears and sweat from her face as she let out a sigh of relief. "We made it," he said simply to her, as she leant against the wall of the main hold. Marisha nodded, taking a moment to process their surprising survival. "And now comes the actual hard part," she stated, more to herself than to Ohno, as she sat down and took out her new transceiver. "What are we doing?"

She shook her head. "I told you yesterday, remember?" she questioned, locking away her frustration towards his simplistic mind. "Uhm... no," he answered, lowering their altitude, locking the controls before entering the rear hold and sliding open the side door. Soteria and Morgana flew promptly inside, taking a rest from their combat duties. "Morgana, Soteria, thanks. We wouldn't have made it through that without you," Marisha said immediately, her eye locked on her transceiver as she listened to it through a headset and tapped away and flicked several switches. "No problem, most fun I've had in a while," Morgana stated sarcastically. Soteria let out a huff and immediately curled up on the floor,

exhausted from the encounter. "Could you remind Ohno of the plan, please?" Marisha requested as Ohno returned to his seat in the cockpit. "The plan, or...?"

Marisha looked up at Morgana with a weary expression. "Ah," Morgana uttered quietly, stepping closer to the cockpit and looking up towards Ohno. "We're going to use the Guild to look for the others. So we need to ingratiate ourselves. We need to get access to everything they have." He simply shrugged before looking back at them. "So what gifts do we have for them? I don't really carry chocolates, I normally just eat them," he questioned. Morgana chuckled and shook her head. "We may need something a bit more significant than chocolates," stated Marisha.

It was truly breathtaking to see the Guild Citadel once again, and even more unnerving to see it docked in what the Serpent had called the true Guild Bastion. The ginormous flying battleship had docked at an island, one the size of a djinn palace, that in turn was bound to three other floating islands - all held together by colossal chains. It was alien, magical, ancient - and spoke strongly of the Guild's power and influence that such a location was far from common knowledge. It had been a few weeks of flying to locate the Guild Headquarters, and even longer to procure what they needed in preparation for their arrival, but Marisha guided the Gambit into a colossal hangar located on the eastern island.

They landed amongst a hundred other flyers and larger flying ships, following the guidance of the brightly-coloured workers, and their heavily-armed guards to an empty berth. As Marisha depowered the Gambit, she turned to Ohno, Soteria and Morgana. "I don't know how long we are going to be here for, but I don't think it's worth leaving anything behind. If there is anything you are worried about losing, take it with you. And if this goes wrong, get out - whatever way you can," she said firmly and seriously. Ohno and Morgana nodded as Soteria let out a yawn and stretched. "We're right behind you," Morgana stated.

They stepped out of the Gambit, the wind howling around them amongst the deafening roars of the numerous flyers coming in and out of the colossal hangar. Immediately a young ginger woman began an approach towards them, her sides flanked by two gold and green armoured guards. "First time?" she called over to Marisha who nodded back. "I thought-so, I don't recognise the colours of your flyer, nor it's name. Hangarmaster Heeley, and you are?" questioned the Hangarmaster, herself dressed in a more officer-like golden uniform, her guards looking curiously from member to member before both tensing as they spotted

Soteria. The young woman also flinched on seeing the reptile, but she immediately held up a hand – indicating to her guards to wait for her orders.

“My name is not a requirement,” Marisha returned firmly. “I am an expected guest, and expect to be treated as such – Hangarmaster. I have already transmitted my clearance, we will pay the fee and be on our way.” A small smile spread across Heeley’s young face before she shrugged. “Information is power. My apologies, your business is your own – Marisha of the Rising Aces. Your mother will be expecting you, I have no doubt.”

Marisha’s expression hardened: it was not meant to be common knowledge of her relationship with the Serpent. In fact, she doubted there were even many members of the Guild alive to remember her as a child, yet a mere hangarmaster knew. As if noticing the change in her expression, Heeley’s smile spread even more as she knew for a fact she had hooked Marisha firmly. “You stand out,” she warned, “and where your crew goes there are often big changes. I make it my business to know everything and everyone that goes through this hangar. That includes who uses which and what codes. Remember that. Hundred pearl and I’ll factor it in for any future visits,” Heeley stated.

Ohno glanced between Marisha and the Hangarmaster before folding his arms and stroking the fur on his chin. Something was up between the two, but he had no idea what, so instead he turned around and began to walk towards the edge of the hangar. The wind dragged him forwards, threatening to pull him out of the large cavern-like area, but he ground his feet and edged cautiously forwards before peering over the side of the metal floor. The fall was astronomical, the clouds parting to show ocean far below.

“Ohno!” called Marisha, as Heeley and her guards departed. He turned and hurried back, frowning as he noticed Morgana staring curiously at Marisha. “See anything interesting?” Marisha asked, drawing his complete attention back to her. “Uh, that is not the way out of here,” he warned. “A very long fall,” he added. She smiled, nodding approvingly. “I would most certainly agree. Now remember, I need that intimidating figure by my side. Let’s see that action face.” He pressed his face into an awkward grimace and let out a soft growl. “Good enough,” Morgana inserted, placing a hand on Ohno’s forearm and drawing Marisha’s gaze. “We’ve got business to do, and perhaps not an indefinite amount of time. Let’s go.”

They departed the hangar, following numerous large glowing arrows on the walls until encountering a set of large elevators, the cables visible and the doors consisting merely of metal gates with latches. Marisha pressed the button with

the highest number and the elevator began to rise, eventually breaking through multiple layers of darkness to reemerge in bright sunlight. They stepped out into the middle of street, either sides strewn with shops displaying all manner of magical items, technology, jewellery and clothes – so many clothes.

People stopped and stared, all of them dressed in luxury or clearly-identifiable Guild uniforms, but as quickly as they looked at the unusual quartet they turned their gaze away, carrying onwards with their lives with little care. But one individual remained and stared: a tall man, with a well-groomed beard and shiny golden armour. He approached, towering over the group – other than Ohno – and staring directly at Marisha. “Lady Marisha, please follow me. The Serpent is waiting for you.”

The large man led them wordlessly through the city, straight towards the nearest of the four visible palaces scattered across the four islands. Guards didn’t stop him, they didn’t question him, they dared not even look at him, only throwing more questions into Marisha’s mind as they were led onwards by their clearly high-ranking escort. They passed through countless ornate hallways, past endless statues, paintings and busts before finally entering another elevator, this one far more luxurious with mirrors in almost all directions.

With a ding they emerged into a platinum hallway lined with guards, a pair of huge maroon doors on the far end. Their escort continued forwards, Marisha continuing to stare at the back of his head with distinct curiosity. She definitely didn’t recognise him, yet there was something about him that was familiar, but she couldn’t grasp what exactly that was. “The Serpent is inside,” he stated, knocking on the door. “Mind your manners, even if she is your mother. I will not tolerate disrespect.”

In an instant Marisha recognised him, the same coldness came through him just without a serpentine veil that the therian had previously had. “It’s you,” Marisha growled, thinking back to when her mother had abducted her and the Stacked Hand, forcing Jayce to come and rescue her. He was the cobra therian who had been her mother’s enforcer. He nodded, a faint smile that radiated only cold warning crossing his face. “Go on in,” he told her, opening the door.

They stepped inside into the Serpent’s personal office. It was almost exactly as they all had imagined: a lair that was fitting for a Dragon. Trophies, treasures, gifts, artifacts and art were displayed in all directions. The room was twisted so that the doors connected to the corner of the cube-like room, allowing the far two walls to be entirely made of glass, showing an expansive and glorious view of the Guild Bastion and the world beyond. In front of the glass was a colossal

wooden desk made of a black, shiny wood. A pair of large L-shaped sofas sat in front of the desk, forcing the occupants to sit facing the desk and look upwards at the mistress of the room.

The Serpent sat waiting for them behind her desk, but she promptly stood up and walked around it, opting instead to lean against the front of the desk as she gestured for the group to sit. It was the first time that Morgana and Ohno had seen her, and, if picked out of a crowd, they would most certainly have been able to identify her as Marisha's mother. The resemblance was uncanny, she was a definitively older and unscarred version of Marisha.

Morgana glanced between the two, the photos of Marisha from the crew's earlier days showed her with shorter hair, and she had grown it out – now almost matching her mother's stomach-length light-brown hair. They shared identical orange eyes, and Marisha appeared to be slightly taller and was certainly more muscular. But as Morgana glanced from the distinctive serpent-theme jewellery across the Serpent's hands, ears and neck, her eyes landed on Marisha's right middle finger, where an ouroboros ring lay, one identical to the Serpent's. A cold and wary feeling passed through Morgana's mind: who was using who? Was it Marisha? Or was it her mother?

"Mother," Marisha greeted softly, standing in front of Ohno, Morgana and Soteria. The Serpent cocked her head, looking curiously at the Dragon at the back of the group. She let out a soft hiss, opening her mouth barely. Soteria perked up with confusion, starting forwards before leaping onto the sofa and then the Serpent's desk, she then lay down curling around the Serpent's waist to put her large head in her hands. The Serpent gently scratched Soteria's head, a faint smile spreading as she then looked challengingly towards Morgana. "How?" Morgana questioned in confusion.

"Quite simple. All animals have signs of identifying their mothers, a sound, a tone, a feeling or a scent. Mimic it and they all obey. Even people," she said coldly. "Soteria, come back," Morgana commanded, the Dragon immediately slinking away from the Serpent to return back to Morgana's side. The Serpent shrugged, her point had been made. "It is good to see you Marisha, I worried that you had been annihilated by the Sovereign along with the rest of your crew." Ohno's face fell. "What?" he questioned.

Marisha held up a hand to draw his attention. "It's an exaggeration. We're just... scattered, for the moment," Marisha corrected, nodding to the others and taking a seat on the nearest sofa. They followed her lead, sitting as well. "I thought so,

yet the Betrayer Kaina seems quite proud of the fact that your Captain is suspiciously missing. So I presume that is why you are here? You want my resources to locate your peers?" the Serpent questioned.

"Yes," Marisha answered plainly, leaning forwards and looking firmly at her mother. "Why should I? What purpose does that provide? It doesn't help me." "Because it means that I am here, by your side, until I find them all. I am selling myself to you, mother. That's my offer," Marisha stated. There was a brief expression of shock that crossed her mother's face, but hardly an amount that compared to Morgana and Ohno's. "What?" they both questioned. Marisha didn't look at them. "I need something more to tide over the other Guild Masters. You are a weakness to me, my daughter. I want you to be a strength, not something that others will use to try to exploit me."

"Hang on a moment, Marisha, this was not-" Morgana attempted.

"Ohno, the gifts, please," Marisha commanded. The panda therian faltered before reaching for his bottomless bag. He took out a trio of sealed scrolls, at least one of which had splatters of blood across its surface. He stood up and nervously presented it to Marisha's mother. She took them and read them over. "This will do nicely. I accept your terms daughter, you have access to my resources. Make use of them as you will but do not think that you will have time to use them. I have more pressing things for you and I to attend to," stated the Serpent. Marisha nodded. "I expected nothing less, that's why I have these two with me," Marisha stated, turning and smiling at Morgana. "This wasn't the plan," Morgana whispered. "It always was, just not the plan I shared. I will help where I can, find our crew Morgana. I know you can."

Seize the Seas Tales: A Fox's View

The fire crackled between Fenn and Falconer, a heavy periodic huff pushing the smoke in Fenn's direction as Wren slept with her huge beak in Falconer's lap. It had been weeks of travel for them, with an immediate journey north to retrieve supplies before a fast return to the Scourge. From there the pair of them had begun their investigation into the Leylines - or more accurately - Falconer had begun *his* investigation into the Leylines, whilst Fenn sat and watched.

With the magic void of the Scourge, they had been forced to manually track for traces: something Fenn had no clue how to do, and Falconer had no idea how to teach him to do. Fenn let out a huff nearly as heavy as the roc's snores. Falconer glanced up from the fire, the golden crosses on his green eyes boring into Fenn's

face. Something that normally could have been disguised with his fox appearance lay completely bare for an inquisitive eye. "What's bothering you?" Falconer questioned, his voice low and steady and bristling with genuine concern. "I-it's nothing... don't worry," Fenn returned, looking briefly up from the fire before back into its golden core.

"Typically, from my experience, every person I have encountered who has said that has been lying. I will not press you, but it appears we will be travelling closely together for the foreseeable future. Just something to ponder on," Falconer stated gently, adjusting his position and prompting a slumbering whine from the giant bird as she was disturbed. Fenn opened his mouth, but he stopped himself and shook his head. This was not Bjorn, nor Marisha, and it certainly wasn't his brothers. It was not Falconer's problem – it was not his business.

"I just want to know if the others are okay..." he eventually mumbled, deciding at the least that the guy in front of him may have some words of comfort. "I do not know," Falconer said unhelpfully. Fenn scoffed and shook his head. "But I like to believe that they are," Falconer continued. "I have faith that they live and that we will see each other again." Fenn shook his head, looking up from the fire. "Faith means nothing, just lies and deceits made to yourself."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. It is always hard to tell, but would it not be fair to say that our experiences so far have been blessed with luck and fortune?" Falconer questioned. Fenn gestured around at the dead lands surrounding them. "You call this luck, fortune? What sort of crazed existence have you been living? My life has been nothing but bad luck and misfortune and this is just the latest shit that I've been dropped in."

"We are still alive. We have a purpose and an objective, a fire, food and bedding - that is not nothing. And we have also survived against countless misfortunes so far. We could be in a far worse situation..." Falconer suggested. Fenn shook his head, looking up at the stars far above. "Do you not have faith in your brothers?" Falconer questioned, the words cutting through Fenn like an axe. "I do... I... I do..."

"Then why not believe in them? And if not them, then at least, yourself?" "Because we are so out of our league, Falconer. Ever since we joined we have been. We're nothing but... but... boys along for the ride in an adult world – always have been. We get told what to do and we do it. We fight enemies we don't make for reasons we don't understand. Even now, why in the abyss am I here - in hell? Literal hell that makes it hard for me to even exist in the only way

I know. Because you told me, because you sound like you know what's going on."

Falconer chuckled and Fenn grit his teeth in anger, sitting up and glaring at him. "I have never pretended to know what is going on. Ever since I was young I have failed to be in the know, I just go where the world takes me in the best way I can." "Yeah, lucky for you..." Falconer tilted his head, his gaze curious and pressing in a manner that made Fenn question what exactly he was seeing. "I could drop you off somewhere, you could leave this life behind – start anew," Falconer offered. "Not without Ohno and Wam."

"You're very close to your siblings," Falconer observed. Fenn shrugged and pulled a face. "Yeah, duh, who wouldn't be?" he returned somewhat absent-mindedly. Falconer raised his hand. "I am not particularly close to mine," he said softly. "Why not?" Fenn questioned, genuinely confused by the comment. "We had differing ideologies, and it turned us against one another. It's not something that can be fixed."

"I'm sorry..." Fenn said quietly, looking back at the fire. Falconer shook his head, his hand grasping the ruby necklace around his neck. "It's alright. I gained something more: this crew, this family... How did you meet your brothers?" "Meet them? I... don't know, I don't really remember – we were so young. We just... came together. We were all abandoned and placed in an orphanage. And I guess we just stuck together. Sometimes one of us would be adopted, and we'd be given back not long after, or we'd run away and find each other. There was one time where all three of were adopted - this real rich guy and his really, really hot wife – but, he just wanted us for photos, to use us for pity and for votes in his bid to be mayor. We were given away as soon as he lost. We thought... well, it doesn't matter now... it was a long time ago."

Falconer shook his head. "Not that long. I am truly sorry." Fenn nodded and let out a sigh. "Whatever. Let's just... let's just find this Leyline thing. Goodnight," he stated, laying back onto his side and shutting his eyes, a wave of buried memories flooding back through the darkness.

Chapter 207: Maiden's Dawn

Jeanne sat in deep meditation within the dark and tiny hold of the Last Card. A single lantern jingled above her, painting her periodically shadowed face in an orange glow. Her eyes were closed, her rarely-removed armour in a neat pile next to her. She felt the rocking of the small vessel, listened to the waves hitting the hull and the creaking of the wood around her, but her mind lay elsewhere. Her thoughts wandered through her memories, through bloodstained battlefields, fallen foes and friends, guilt and glory. She ran her fingers across the flat-side of her sword, feeling the energy of her oath mingling with the imbued magic Tempest had given it. It spoke to her, but it did not sing like her old sword once had, back when they had first taken their steps together.

"Jeanne," cut Bjorn's voice, her yellow eyes opening before fading back to green. She glanced back and looked up at him as he stood at the top of the stairs to the hold. His face lay in the shadow of the evening, an orange beam shining across his brow. His eyes were muddled with concern, anger, curiosity and fear. The final traces of silver hair fell away into black, her outward appearance returning to normal. "We'll arrive at your home within the next few hours. Is it worth waiting until the morning?" he asked her, stepping down into the faint light. His expression was of sympathy and care. "I... I don't know," she answered in almost a whisper. "Tomorrow then. Get some sleep," he told her, turning and leaving her to her meditation.

She didn't sleep well, but then again – two out of three of them typically didn't sleep very well. Yuthura struggled with the discomfort of a hammock, as well as her own wandering thoughts - the elderly woman often waking early and going to sleep late. And between Yuthura's difficulties, Bjorn's snoring, and Jeanne's own solitary thoughts, sleep often struggled to be agreeable to Jeanne. She lay on her bedroll staring up at the ceiling, the waves particularly frustrating thanks to the full moon. But then she blinked, the sleepless night ending as Bjorn groaned and got to his feet.

The sun had barely risen, the air cold and frosty for the Gardens, with a thin veil of mist floating across the surrounding ocean. As always, they tucked into their supplies, eating a breakfast of simple fruits and grains. Cooked meals were usually saved for the evening, reserved as a special treat for the end of the day since none of them were particularly creative when it came to cooking, nor particularly talented at it. The veil eventually faded, revealing a large island on the horizon.

The island itself was curious to see: it was concave – dipping in the middle rather than rising – leading to a ring of land around the edge. A town ran halfway around the island, the rest dedicated to farmland and forests that were a deep brown and orange colour, the leaves falling for the autumn. For a location deemed almost legendary it looked feeble, weak and almost ordinary, yet as they sailed closer Jeanne couldn't help but look down at the wrecks decorating the ocean floor. The island had been demilitarised, its walls torn down, defensive cannons removed and central castle demolished. Jeanne didn't remember leaving it that way. It had never been that way.

Yuthura observed the ex-Paladin Elder as she stared in shock and slight horror at her old home. Jeanne had been anxious the entire journey - that had been immediately obvious to both Yuthura and Bjorn - but it was also more than that. The meditations, the recanting of her old oaths, the revisiting of her old battle-memories – Jeanne was journeying through her own history, and both Yuthura and Bjorn couldn't help but worry about what she was rediscovering. The Jeanne that she had become versus the Jeanne that she had once been were two very different individuals – Astris had seen to it.

They docked at one of the more discrete piers at the edge of the town, at Jeanne's request. Bjorn frowned as he looked down at Jeanne. She wore simple waterproof clothes, her armour left behind below deck. Her sword and banner were stowed in their item forms: a pair of silver and gold bangles on her wrists. "Anything we should be aware of or concerned about?" Bjorn asked her softly, picking up a few empty sacks and stuffing them inside his bottomless bag. "I don't know. We'll see," she answered, approaching the edge of the Last Card and dropping onto the pier. Yuthura and Bjorn glanced at each other before following after her.

They followed the natural ascension of the pier inwards towards the edge of the town of Maiden's Dawn. The buildings were formed of a rough grey rock, the roofs either red or blue slate and much of the town had been crafted to give a consistent view outwards. The houses sat above one another on the outside of the ring, with only larger, taller buildings, such as the town hall and a church, nesting on the inner part of ringed mound, but Bjorn kept noticing signs mentioning a castle, that was distinctly absent.

The three of them walked the streets, numerous cautious eyes naturally falling onto Bjorn. The subtle and unsubtle discrimination towards therians hadn't been something he had missed. They passed numerous statues and monuments to the old Church, the relics of the past talking about notable people who had come to

see the place that Jeanne had been born. Jeanne would periodically stop and look up at a statue, mumble something under her breath and then move on.

For the most part Bjorn didn't recognise them, but he certainly recognised the names: Jean de Dunois, Charles Dauphin, Pierre Cauchon, Jean de Metz, Robert de Baudricourt, Jean Pasquerel, and Gilles de Rais. The seven Sentinels were all in the same state: someone had been maintaining them, keeping the bronze shiny and the placards clean. Jeanne seemed to appreciate it, but her expression remained practically identical the entire way as they walked from one end of the town's arc to the other.

Eventually they reached the end and she turned to face Bjorn and Yuthura, glancing briefly towards the old woman. "Do you need rest?" Jeanne asked with gentle concern. "What do I look like: some old woman who can't walk more than an hour?" Yuthura grumbled. Neither Bjorn nor Jeanne bit at her trap. "No," Yuthura clarified. "Okay," Jeanne said quietly, stepping past them and walking onwards.

She led them towards the old church, stopping briefly outside of it before looking at Bjorn. "Please... be careful," she asked him. He frowned as she stepped towards the doors and then went inside. He followed, the heavy metal doors creaking as he pushed them open. His chest immediately tightened, his jaw clenching. "I thought this was meant to have been... dealt with?" he questioned to Jeanne quietly as he joined her inside, several of the believers inside all looking at him with alarm. "It's not like there has been a chance to check," she returned, the pair of them looking up at countless imagery celebrating the beliefs of the church.

Bjorn growled as he looked towards a painting of the Pope, his urges tempting him to break every window and tear every painting glorifying the organisation and people that had caused him so much harm. But he resisted as Jeanne stepped forwards, the young woman looking towards a large stained glass display over the central altar. Someone had damaged it, a stone or something heavy having broken through the centre of the image of seven knights. An eighth knight was above them, the faint traces of a golden halo remaining around the faceless and headless individual, where the glass had been broken.

Yuthura tapped Bjorn's leg with her cane, the large polar bear looking down at her as she gestured to several empty displays. He nodded in acknowledgement, understanding immediately what she was pointing out. "Demon," hissed a voice from the pews, Bjorn and Yuthura immediately glancing towards an old woman

staring at them. "Come on," Yuthura said quietly to Bjorn. "Let's not stain your clothes," she said with reinforced and vocal threat. The stranger turned a ghostly shade of white.

Eventually Jeanne joined them, a distraught expression on her face as she approached. "Are you okay?" Bjorn questioned to her. She shook her head, before forcing a blank expression and taking a deep breath. "It's... not worth wasting my time on. I have a few more stops, if you don't mind?" she asked gently. Bjorn nodded and Jeanne continued forwards, heading further towards the centre of the island.

They eventually arrived at a huge statue, one that was almost twice Bjorn's height and made of a golden metal. It was of a woman dressed in a short dress, a large longsword in her arms, a halo over her head and her left hand outstretched with what looked to be beams of light extending from her fingers. It was plainly Jeanne, but the placard had been defaced and the stone pedestal had numerous words carved into the surface – none of which were pleasant. She sighed, looking down at the floor as Yuthura began to circle the statue, dragging her cane through the dirt.

"Seems... harsh," Bjorn commented, as he read the numerous words and phrases calling her a traitor. "No..." Jeanne said firmly. "I... deserve it. I let down my Sentinels, and my people. When I left here, I... I failed to do what I promised. And my friends, my followers, suffered for it. They have every right to blame me for the fall of the Church," Jeanne turned to look at Bjorn, "regardless of whether or not it was right or wrong. I'm surprised it's still intact, but I guess it's more of a warning to them than anything. A monument to my failure."

"Hmm," Yuthura uttered, finishing her scribbles on the floor. "A waste of good materials," she stated, placing her hand to the statue and her thumb to the philosopher's stone in the handle of her cane. There was a flash of red light, both Jeanne's and Bjorn's eyes going wide as the statue disintegrated and reformed into a series of metal bars and stone blocks. "What have you done?" Jeanne questioned, a spade clattering to the ground behind them. The trio turned to find an older man in overalls, his knees covered in mud. He stared at them in shock and horror, his eyes fixated on Bjorn before they fell to Jeanne. He stood and stared before a shaking finger rose to point at her and he gasped. "You," he realised, immediately turning and beginning to scramble his way back towards the town.

“Why?” Jeanne immediately questioned, ignoring the man and looking back at Yuthura with anger. “Because I’m not going to indulge your self-pity, it’s pathetic and unbecoming, and you are not going waste your already-fragile mental health on trying to appease these savage morons. You can blame yourself, that’s your right, but they are not entitled to your misery out of feeling slighted for following the cruel and xenophobic dogma of the Church. It fell. Good riddance. Now, you had other stops – I sense time is running out if you wish to go unbothered by the locals,” Yuthura lectured. Jeanne desperately tried to think up a retort, but nothing came. Instead she shook her head and marched forwards.

They travelled towards the fields, heading towards a small cluster of farmhouses, but Jeanne stopped in her tracks, shook her head and turned around. “It’s gone,” she mumbled, both Bjorn and Yuthura glancing towards each other before following after her as she took off in the direction of the church. As they walked, Bjorn couldn’t help but notice the new and multiple sets of eyes watching them from afar. Word had clearly spread and he doubted that was a good thing.

Jeanne walked around the old church to its associated graveyard. She then began to walk through the rows, glancing at each headstone until she found a pair next to each other. She knelt in front of them, her hands clasped in prayer. “They’re there!” called a voice not too far away, both Bjorn and Yuthura immediately turning to look before facing each other. Bjorn tilted his head towards Jeanne and Yuthura nodded, stepping towards her before pausing as she read the names of the graves: Isabelle and Jacques d’Arc. Yuthura sighed, looking back towards Bjorn as he paced anxiously, then shook her head.

The gate to the graveyard opened, a small group of men and women, young and old, entering the area. Bjorn stood firm as he looked down at the cluster. “You know why we are here,” stated a middle-aged man, stepping forwards with a wooden club in his hand. He looked up at Bjorn, the giant therian towering over him. “I don’t read minds. Use your words or there will be no conversation,” he threatened. “We want to speak to Jeanne,” cried a female voice from the group.

Jeanne stood up, turning and looking at the group before approaching without caution. “It is you,” stated the foremost man in disbelief. “I-I don’t believe it. Why? Why have you returned after all this time?” he questioned, the club falling limp by his side. “I’m sorry,” Jeanne said quietly. He shook his head, the others all looking at each other. “I don’t want or need your apologies, we want answers. It’s been years, why did you abandon us? The Sentinels returned, but you never did. You never came home. Why now?” questioned the leader.

Jeanne shook her head and shrugged. "I didn't get a chance to, that's why I sent them here. I tried. I failed. I am sorry," she said quietly, her body shaking. The group looked at each other, all of them confused and uncertain how to respond as she stood in front of them. "You tricked us," stated one of the voices. Jeanne shook her head. "No. Gille de Rais did. He created me, made me your champion. I was never what you believed me to be. I never really wanted any of this." "Gille de Rais was a good man, you lie!"

"He most certainly was not," Bjorn scoffed, Yuthura immediately stepping forward and placing a hand on his folded arms as the locals glared at him. "Gille de Rais betrayed the Sentinels. He sacrificed them for his personal glory, he was a cultist pacted to an evil creature. I am sorry, but that is not debatable - it is fact. The others were more... heroic," Yuthura stated, telling the truth and then lying through her teeth. Jeanne looked at her, her eyes wide and uncertain.

There were murmurs amongst the group, a few individuals turning and walking away. "But why now? Why have you come back now?" questioned the leader. "Because this was the first chance I could," Jeanne answered. "Only now and not for long. We'll leave, you'll never see me again. I've said my goodbyes," she stated. The leader sighed, looking at the floor and shaking his head. "You're still the same child that once danced through the fields, I guess we adults were the fools with our heads full of dreams. You do not have to leave. Even this... man can stay. At the very least, you could help defend against that Dragon that's been spotted near here," he stated, turning and beginning to leave.

"Wait, a Dragon?" Bjorn questioned. The leader looked back and nodded. "It was huge, a giant red creature. It was seen on an island not far from here only a few days ago. They claim it had a rider, an armoured warrior." Bjorn, Yuthura and Jeanne all looked at each other. *Arthuria*, they all thought. "Are there supplies we can purchase?" Bjorn questioned with urgency. The leader staggered backwards. "Uh, yes, near the harbour," he said with a hint of panic in his voice. "Which island saw the Dragon?" Yuthura questioned with similar urgency. "Uh...."

Arthuria knelt in the ashes of her old home. There were no actual ashes, only mud, but it felt somewhat appropriate. She had burnt the house long ago. She hadn't needed it after all. Her bastard father had abandoned her mother. Elaine had left before then, out of frustration towards the fake love between their parents. So when Arthuria's mother had died from sickness there truly was nothing she wanted more than to erase the past in the most violent way possible.

She could still feel the heat of the flames on her skin, hear the crackle of the fire - a rare positive memory of her past.

But once the emotion faded she stood up and began digging, striking the ground hard with a shovel she had borrowed from an ancient and confused neighbour. The locals of her home island had been shocked to discover her identity, and even more shocked to realise that the red Dragon was not there to eat them. Eventually she felt and heard a thud, her shovel hitting something solid. "Zhurong," she commanded, pointing at the ground. The Dragon ignored her, rolling onto his back and scratching himself on the floor. She scowled and continued digging, eventually dragging a chest out of the ground.

She smashed the lock and opened the lid, pulling out stacks of documents, photographs, toys, and other items she had presumed she would have needed later on in life. She shoved the junk into her bottomless bag, it was something to sort later... at some point. Instead she flicked through the documents detailing ships going in and out of the island's harbour. A few destinations had been circled, locations her mother had guessed Arthuria's father had fled to. Arthuria put them in her memory and then put the papers away along with everything else. "Come on Zhurong, we're off to our next stop."

"Have you seen this man?" Arthuria questioned, holding up one of the few photos of her father: an image of a tall man with grey messy hair, stubble and golden eyes.

"No."

"No."

"No."

She let out a sigh as she tucked into a ball on Zhurong's huge back, the night sky twinkling above her and the cold wind whipping past her as they flew through the darkness. It had been hopeless and a waste of several good weeks of her life. None of the locations had been a match. Not even her father's original homeland. She'd found no trace, nothing, which wasn't too surprising given it had been almost fifteen years since she had last seen him. "It's stupid," she muttered to herself. "Why would I even want to see him? What would I say? What would be worth saying?" She shut her eyes, her silent tears getting dragged away by the wind.

The glow of the sunrise prompted a groan out of her. The sound of someone calling her name snapped her eyes open. "Arthuria? Zhurong? Can you hear us? This is Bjorn. Are you nearby?" Arthuria bolted upright, almost falling off Zhurong's back as she scrambled for her necklace. "Bjorn? Bjorn is that you? This is Arthuria. Where are you?" she questioned, her heart racing and a deep relief flooding through her.

Arthuria grinned as she spotted the Last Card sailing beneath her. It had taken several hours of searching to find them and finally the promise of company had come to fruition. Zhurong tucked into a dive, landing on the edge of the vessel and immediately forcing its bow underwater as Arthuria leapt off and rushed into the arms of Jeanne. "Off now!" Bjorn yelled, shooing Zhurong away from the Last Card. The Dragon took flight and the ship rose above the water once more. "That is going to be a problem," he stated, pointing at the Dragon as he huffed and began to circle. "I don't care, I'm just glad to see you all," Arthuria stated, tears streaming down her face as she held Jeanne. "Anything to report?" Bjorn asked. Arthuria shook her head. "Nothing urgent, you?" she questioned back. "Nothing worthwhile. Let's find a dock, we need to talk about how we're getting to the Capital." She nodded, shutting her eyes and resting her head onto Jeanne's. "We're safe," Jeanne said quietly. A smile spread across Arthuria's face. "Yeah, we are."

Seize the Seas Tales: Blood and Brutality

There was a crack as Thalia threw her fist harder and faster, again and again into Elenor, the armoured warrior on the floor beneath her as the crowd cheered Thalia's name. A groan came from beneath Elenor's helmet, a hand slowly reaching out towards the sword laying in the sand next to them. "Not... over," bubbled the bloody voice from beneath the helm. Thalia threw another heavy punch, the helmet denting inwards and the body beneath her going limp. The crowd roared, Thalia stepping backwards and raising a fist to the sky.

But she staggered, looking down at the wound in her side, her blood seeping from a hole in her waist. She grit her teeth, ignoring the pain and looking up to the observation box. She had won the fight, but not cleanly, and a victim like Elenor was hardly a champion like Athena, and hardly a monster like Oni. Thalia swore, dropping to her knees as her vision went blurry before going dark. She had a long way still left to climb. Her face slammed into the sand.

Chapter 208: Through The Wall

“Are you sure we don’t time to pick up a Dragon or two?” Lieutenant Commander Riley questioned, as she leant against the railing of the Courier tuning her sniper rifle. Alara looked up at the canopy far above them – they were deep within the Frontier sailing near the middle of the large fleet heading to the Old World. “No,” Alara stated firmly, sharing in Riley’s disappointment but also well aware of the importance she and her crew had within the greater fleet.

Forty-five ships were sailing for the Old World, forty-five crews all prepared for war, with more due to follow. Last time they had left with their tails between their legs - this time that was not an option. Too much was at stake: her parents, Jayce and his missing crew, and even the Republic. If Alara failed here there would not be a do-over: she would be dead and so would her parents. That was not going to happen. And she was not going to fail, no matter the cost.

“But come on, a Dragon would be so useful. Just picture me flying above like Falconer does, only with my rifle and a creature that spits fire or lightning,” Riley whined. “Okay, let me just turn around the entire fleet. Delay our journey by however long it takes us to find this Dragon nest and then give you however long you need to capture and bond with a Dragon,” Alara returned sarcastically. Riley pouted before sticking her tongue out at Alara. “Rude,” she mumbled. Alara rolled her eyes, glancing back to the main deck as her Marines and Navy made their final battle preparations.

“Nervous?” Riley questioned, looking down at her rifle and finishing her tweaks. Alara glanced back towards her. “You could say that...” Alara said quietly, her heart hammering away in her chest, so much so that she could see the vibrations through her Commodore uniform. “Yeah, not surprised. I still don’t understand why we don’t have at least a Rear-Admiral with us,” Riley said quietly. Alara shook her head. “We’re the vanguard. Our job is to wipe out the Sentries so that the following invasion can commence. We’re not expected to hold them, nor is this expected to be the most fierce of the battles to come. Those that follow have to take control of the territories we are passing straight through. The Admirals will be needed for that,” Alara answered. Riley shook her head, looking outwards through the trees. “I still have a bad feeling about this.”

“Ahem,” came a voice from next to them, the pair turning to face Captain Volker. “Commodore, Commodore Cyrenna Kai says we’re nearing the exit. Your orders?” he asked, the usually stoic man sweating somewhat profusely. He was nervous, and Alara was not surprised. The scouts had informed them that an

armada awaited them. "Speech time," Riley stated, slinging her rifle over her shoulder and patting Alara on the back before walking off. Volker nodded to Riley before setting his gaze back onto Alara. She sighed. "I need a channel to our fleet."

Alara stepped up next to the Courier's wheel, her crew looking up to her, her friends and trusted aides around her. She looked across the faces she had been with since the start, the faces who had joined her when she first took command, the faces who had joined her only recently. She held all of their lives in her hands. She held their hopes. Their dreams. Their futures. Their fates. They trusted her implicitly. She looked beyond her ship to the others in her fleet followed behind. Each crew was there because she had chosen them. Because she had asked them to join her in this personal battle, a fight for her parents. They all knew what it meant to her, and just how dangerous this mission was. Yet they were here anyway.

"Thank you," Alara stated firmly and openly. "Thank you for coming with me. We face perhaps our second greatest mission, second only to erasing the taint of the Church from our Republic. This mission is a turning point in our dealings with the Sovereign. It is a chance for us to take back not only our New World, but also to free the Old from the Sovereign's and her Betrayers' grips. It is a chance for us to deal a meaningful blow so that our brothers and sisters that follow stand a greater chance at succeeding in their own missions. It is a chance to return two of our own back to the fold: Admirals Silas and Victoire Vanathur, a chance to bring my parents home. We will succeed. We must. And I ask only three things of you: your trust, your loyalty, and your unwavering courage."

"Do I have your Trust?"

"Oohrah!"

"Your loyalty?"

"Oohrah!"

"Your unwavering courage?"

"Oohrah!"

"Then let's show the Old World that we will not turn our backs anymore!" Alara yelled. Her crew and the neighbouring crews cheered, cannon fire thundering ahead from the front of the convoy. "Battle stations!" Alara declared, turning to Witchford, Wulf, Brett, Volker and Riley – lying down on top of Alara's quarters

alongside her other snipers. Riley winked at Alara, before firing the first shot. A beam of cyan fire flew through gaps in the countless ships ahead before emerging out of the Frontier into a tsunami of artillery, a hurricane of flyers, and a wall of ships bombarding the entrance. Somewhere, high up within the fortress island of Final Bastion, a commander slumped to the floor – killed by an impossible shot.

One by one, the fleet flooded out of the entranceway of the Frontier, dropping out of the darkness with a crash into the flowing rapids, the light bearing heavily down upon them. Volker took lead, blasting out orders to his sailors as the Courier and its trailing fleet spread out into formation behind Commodore Cyrenna Kai's forward fleet. They immediately took a three-rowed arrowhead formation, the largest and most durable ships at the front to take the heaviest of the artillery. "Vanathur," came Cyrenna's voice. "You're up!"

Alara nodded. "Wulf!" she commanded, pointing portside to Final Bastion. "Wipe out those guns!" she ordered. He roared, darting forwards with his fellow therians over the side of the Courier, the squad surging across the top of the waters, numerous other therian squads joining their charge towards the island from their own ships. "Riley, protect them!" Alara commanded, surveying the battlefield. "Aye!" Riley yelled, her snipers turning and changing their targets, the flyers darting downwards from the skies in an attempt to gun down the charging therians as well as the cannoneers aiming at the advance.

A crescent wall of ships surrounded the entrance and exit to the Frontier, an armada only just larger than Alara's own, but unlike Alara's, it was also reinforced by the defensive battle island of Final Bastion. Cyrenna's strategy was to blitz through the wall, then to head perpendicular to Final Bastion and blast through the ships near the edge of the crescent. It gave them an advantage, they had no need to deal with Final Bastion, and it also gave them the broadside of their ships to launch cannon after cannon back at their enemies. However, it meant creating larger targets for Final Bastion and the enemy to target. It also meant the rear side of the assault could not use their cannons, as their allies were between them and the enemy. It was bold, but Cyrenna was completely right on the strategy. They did not have to win. They only had to break through.

An explosion drew Alara's attention to the front of the Fleet. Armistice, one of the largest ships in the fleet, had detonated from within. Alara bit her lip. "All survivors of Armistice, abandon ship and make for any other vessels. Those that fall behind will be left behind!" came Cyrenna's cold and brutal voice. Alara looked ahead: the wall was remaining firm – the ships were larger than hers and

most of them were more heavily armoured, but she could see Cyrenna fighting on the main deck, wielding her father's gauntlets and tearing through each Null Legionnaire that approached her.

A shadow slowly shifted across the shining waters to their left and Alara immediately looked up. A huge airship was amongst the clouds, flying as high as it could to avoid detection as it prepared a bombing run on the fleet. "Riley, up!" Alara commanded, crouching and readying to jump. There was no way she could make it there in time, but she could reach it if she had to. Riley rolled over, aiming her rifle upwards and shutting her eyes as the sun blinded her. She held her breath reaching out with her Focused senses and ignoring everything else on the battlefield. She was completely defenceless. Riley pulled the trigger, her armour-piercing round sailing upwards, reinforced with a cyan flame.

Alara couldn't see from her position, but one of the large propellers on the side of the airship came loose. It tilted, still functioning but dragging the ship sideways into the beginning of a roll. "Gotcha," Artemis stated, firing a following shot straight into the hangar of the airship. A flash of orange followed, before the entire airship seemed to swell, resulting in a colossal detonation. Alara could feel the heat on her skin even from the deck of the Courier.

The airship began to fall, quickly gaining speed as the flaming carcass dropped from the sky towards the ocean. It hit the water hard near the enemy fleet, sending a colossal wave that slammed ships into ships, washing sailors overboard, before finally flowing towards the Courier. "Mages!" Alara yelled, her newly added Navy Sorcerers chanting quickly before freezing and shattering the wave, successfully defending the fleet.

Alara tensed, her body instinctively moving to defend itself as it sensed danger. Her eyes immediately darted towards Final Bastion, a figure leaping away from the island and darting across the numerous decks of the end to end ships. Alara glanced back towards the front of the fleet, Cyrenna was still battling, her forward ships still getting closer to the edge of the wall. Alara gripped her glaive, leaping over the edge of the Courier and darting forwards on a direct intercept to the enemy warrior.

She met him two-thirds of the way, leaping onto the enemy ship and unleashing a wave of Panic as she vaulted at him with a heavy downwards swing of her glaive. He stopped and turned, darting into her swing to catch it early and before it found its full momentum. He towered above her, a giant of a man dressed in a Null Legion uniform that looked almost indistinguishable to the others – the only

difference being faint traces of golden markings across his shoulders and chest. He hooked her glaive with a nook in one of his two large double-bladed axes, immediately swinging his other axe towards her waist in an attempt to disembowel her.

Alara twisted the handle of her glaive, the runes glowing before unleashing a bubble of defensive energy. It hit him, blocking the blade and sending him backwards away from her. A barrage of gunfire immediately peppered her shield from all directions as the Null Legionnaires around her regained their composure from her Panic. The bullets shattered on the shield, the clear blue colour slowly turning yellow before eventually red. The Null Legion Commander paced in front of her, waiting.

But Alara didn't wait. She crouched and leapt upwards, cocking her glaive and ejecting the almost drained magic stone inside – the shield melting away. She twisted, roaring as she pushed off the air in a fast and ferocious downwards lunge. She slammed into the deck, the wood rippling and shattering in an outwards blast from the impact. Shards of wood shot outwards, impacting unlucky Legionnaires whilst sending others tumbling below or off the deck. The Commander lunged at her, swinging both axes at her, but Alara leant backwards, bending her glaive as she kept it wedged into a beam.

She released the weapon, the glaive swinging back, straight into the Commander's masked face, cracking the lens. He groaned, staggering backwards across the beam – more shocked than anything as Alara dove forwards, twisting her glaive free and swinging it towards him. But it missed and he looked at her with distinct confusion, his masked face tilting to the side, her glaive the wrong way round. She fired a bolt of energy from her glaive, blowing his head clean off his body in a bloody splatter. The giant toppled, falling off the beam and crashing below deck.

"We're through!" came Volker's voice in Alara's communicator. She turned and darted, resuming the Null Legion Commander's trajectory towards Cyrenna. "Retreat to the fleet!" Alara commanded Wulf and his troops, the therians immediately surging away from their positions across the surface of Final Bastion back towards their ships and the greater fleet. Alara herself darted across the ships in her path, swinging and firing her glaive with brutal precision against all foes that met her charge.

"All ships do not stop!" came Cyrenna's voice from up ahead, the ship she was standing on in flames and a ringed pile of corpses around her, her black uniform

shiny with blood and her metal gauntlets oozing crimson. Alara leapt, rolling across the deck to land next to her. They both stood panting, watching each other's back as ship after ship flooded through the gap they had forged in the armada's wall. "Go!" Alara commanded, the final ship breaking through. Cyrenna charged forwards, leaping onto the back of the ship with Alara, and Beowulf, close behind as he joined them from the other sinking enemy ship.

"Now comes the fun part!" he stated, his expression grim but a faint bloody smile at the corner of his mouth. Alara shook her head, the enemy ships on the far side of Final Bastion beginning to turn in pursuit. "Fun is not how I would describe it," she stated starting forwards to the bow, the other two Commodores walking with her. "Losses?" Beowulf questioned to Captain Aran, stopping by the helm. "Four ships in total, the Armistice, Merciless, Ranger and Fearless," answered the Captain with a grim expression. Beowulf sighed and shook his head, stepping forwards to join the others.

"Vanathur, can you spare the Halo to make up for the Merciless and the Fearless?" Beowulf questioned, as he landed on the next ship and caught up with Alara and Cyrenna on their journey forwards to their ships. "Both of them?" she questioned. He nodded. "Damn, that's as heavy of a loss as the Armistice," she added. "We also lost the Ranger," Beowulf added. Cyrenna threw a heavy punch through the nearest crate, shattering the wood and exposing the contents inside. "Halo, you're reassigned to Commodore Beowulf Kai's fleet. Warspite, you're moving to reinforce Commodore Cyrenna Kai. Acknowledge," Alara commanded. "Aye Commodore," came the responses from both Captains, the ships moving out of position to join the two other fleets. "Thanks," Cyrenna and Beowulf both stated to Alara. She nodded, it was a heavy sacrifice on her behalf, but it was a necessary one.

They landed on their individual ships, and Alara immediately began to read through the reports on losses. For her fleet it had been minimal, but the casualty reports from Cyrenna and Beowulf's ship were harsh, but ultimately within expected parameters. She hated the loss of life, she hated the relief that it had only been what it was, but she quickly set aside her feelings and walked to the edge of the Courier, looking backwards towards the pursuing enemy fleet. It was only a few ships, but they were likely reporting her location so that an ambush could be laid for them.

"I think this is it," Alara stated into her communicator, looking out towards Cyrenna and Beowulf's fleets as they separated firmly from her own. "Agreed,"

Cyrenna stated. "We'll see you on the other side," Beowulf stated, his fleet angling east whilst Cyrenna's angled west. Alara tried to speak, but her voice got caught in her throat. Silence followed from the other two Commodores and eventually she turned her attention instead to her own fleet.

Alara sat in her room as darkness fell. The enemy had fallen away into the distance as Witchford and Volker had predicted. They simply did not have the resources to pursue them and, with the breaking of the armada, fears of an even larger assault would only grow, the paranoia driving them back to assist the defence of Final Bastion. She sipped a glass of white rum, a farewell gift from Philip Exarga. It was smooth, clear and already almost empty, but Alara knew there wouldn't be much time for casual drinking when they arrived at their target. She sighed, looking up at the ceiling and thinking on the battle she had survived and the lives she had given and taken.

A knock prompted her to sit upright. "Yes?" she questioned, the door opening and Brett and Braze stepping inside. "Alara," they both greeted. She looked at Brett with curiosity. He had changed over the months of preparation, training hard to better fill the role he had originally co-opted for himself: a scout. He looked physically stronger and had shrugged off his confident façade for a genuinely confident demeanour only built through rigorous training and practice. He had grown into a far better Marine than he had been before. He looked down at her, his icy blue eyes glancing briefly towards the drink in her hand and then towards her desk before finally back at her face.

Alara couldn't help but still feel a twinge of guilt whenever she saw him. The shiny red scar covering the right-side of his face hadn't gotten any better throughout their years of sailing together, and his milky-blue eye still slightly unnerved her. He brushed his gloved hand through his short blonde hair before glancing towards his companion and tilting his head towards Alara, as if gesturing for him to say something.

Alara looked towards Ashton Braze. He had been with her since the start, a survivor of the original Wolfpack, but - as much as it pained her to admit it - she still felt like she didn't truly know him. She trusted him implicitly and he had always been there when she had needed him, but he had always been quite reserved. He was almost equal in height to Brett, and like Brett wore scars of his own. A black eyepatch sat over his left eye, a diagonal scar running from his scalp to his lip. His hair was cropped and dark brown, matching his thin eye. He was a muscular man, with far more scars beneath his uniform than just the main one

on his face. He had always loved being in the front of battle, and as the years had gone on he had only become more and more willing to volunteer for the riskier assignments, often working closely alongside Brett.

“We wanted to ask about when you wanted us to depart?” Braze questioned. Alara hesitated. “As soon as possible. I need accurate information, so I’m counting on you and the others to obtain it. We’re going to slow our approach, we need to time our invasion with the others to prevent the enemy from collaborating their targeting systems against us. But rest for now. Today was a big success and there’s no point getting ahead of ourselves,” she stated. They nodded to her and stepped towards the door, shutting it behind them.

She sighed, looking down at the floor. Sending any advance was likely suicide, if she sent Brett and his scouts ahead, they were unlikely to make it back. She didn’t want to send them, but she knew she had to. For the good of the greater fleet, and the Republic’s interests in the Old World.

Seize the Seas Tales: Taking from Life to give to Death

“Hang on!” Falconer yelled as Wren broke into a dive, the air around them erupting into flashes of fire as they were shot at from below. The giant roc tucked her wings in, unflinchingly diving down towards the dark fortress covering the Leyline they had targeted. Fenn held onto Falconer’s waist as tight as he could, the wind blinding him as they dropped towards the ground. “Why are they attacking us?” Fenn questioned, yelling into the wind.

Wren twisted, weaving between the blasts before spreading her wings at the last moment. “Does not matter, this is the territory of Alberta Armin. Nothing here will be friendly,” Falconer warned, preparing himself to jump as Wren glided quickly from a low angle towards the castle’s main gate. “Stay close, I will guard you,” Falconer stated, aiming with his bow before unleashing an arrow. “Jump!” he yelled, dropping off the side of Wren and landing hard in front of the main gate, just as colossal roots and vines slithered between the metal bars and tore the gate open for them.

Fenn rolled to his feet as he landed behind Falconer, a long curved knife materialising in his left hand as his bracelet transformed. “So the Leyline is under this castle?” he questioned. Falconer nodded, launching an arrow at a vaguely humanoid creature charging at them from the shadows. The arrow entered the cannibal’s boulder-like misshapen skull before erupting outwards in large thorny vines and bright blood-covered flowers. Falconer held his bow in his wooden

arm, gesturing with his free hand towards the plant. Screeches came from the shadows of the overcast day as more of the cannibals rushed towards them, only for the thorns to lash out from the corpse and impale the creatures too slow to avoid them. Falconer dispatched the rest with three quick and well-placed arrows.

Falconer led Fenn forwards, walking calmly through the courtyard towards a curved, barren and crooked tree abandoned in the stone. He aimed and fired arrow after arrow, destroying each overlooking cannon emplacement in a large detonation of greenery. The monsters that survived then swarmed down from the battlements, each of them twisted forms of humans - varying from short, stubby hunchbacks, to taller, skeletal, gaunt and barbaric creatures, with blank black eyes, distended stomachs and wide toothy maws. Falconer finished the chanting he had been mumbling under his breath and touched the lifeless tree.

The wood twisted, growing and changing before two large legs made of roots tore themselves out of the ground. The branches clumped together into three large arms, the trunk splitting at the top to form the vague form of a head. "Exterminate them," Falconer commanded. The tree struck with horrific speed, causing Fenn to flinch defensively as the giant tore apart their enemies. Between swinging with its colossal arms, the impact leaving little more than broken splatters behind, stomping with its legs, squishing those too slow to flee or dodge, and the creature grabbing others with tendril-like roots and dragging them screaming into the plants growing from, it was a massacre.

Fenn stared in shock at the scene, only for a body to hit the floor next to him and cause him to leap back with a yelp. He looked up just as another screaming corpse splattered into the stone. "Don't worry. Wren will protect us," Falconer stated almost subconsciously, his eyes following the trail of green energy through the air. He set off forwards, the giant tree continuing to fight even without his command. Fenn desperately ran after him.

"Hold them off!" Falconer commanded, approaching the crack in the floor with caution. "Huh?" Fenn questioned, his mouth falling open. A twisted beam of green energy was flooding out of the crack in the stone floor, the cavern beneath the castle already filled with bones and rotting flesh. "They've tainted it," Falconer stated. "I must purify it. Guard me, pull me out if you feel you need to. Guard me, Ace."

Fenn couldn't help but stand slightly taller at the acknowledgment of being a crewmate, but it still didn't take away from the task. "For gods' sake. Fine!" he

yelled, turning and holding his blade closer to his chest. "Guard him!" Falconer commanded, the heavy stomps of their tree companion bringing both unease and reassurance to Fenn as the colossal creatures dragged itself into the cavern. A scream startled Fenn, a red glow painting the walls from behind him. He turned without thought, staring in horror as Falconer's arm pulsated and twisted, the wood growing and digging deeper into the man's flesh. "Falconer!" he yelled, starting forwards. "Behind you!" Falconer yelled, his eyes shut as he fought against the agony.

Fenn dropped to his knee, a sharp pain in his shoulder and a heavy weight on his back. A growl filled his ears, a wet drool dampening his fur along with a healthy mixture of his blood as the cannibal bit into him. "Die in the abyss!" Fenn yelled, immediately stabbing the creature. He struck once, twice, three, four, five times, before pushing its corpse off his shoulder and mounting it, stabbing it further even as it lay dead. He screamed at it in frustration, only for another to slam into him, knocking his blade aside.

Fenn screamed at the cannibal as it screeched at him, dragging itself towards him in a bound with its claw-like fingers scraping the ground as it ran on all fours. He leapt, driving his knee into its chin before digging his own claws into its skin and throwing it without thought. The creature passed through the Leyline, dropping to the floor beyond Falconer and immediately beginning to retch. It threw up a bloody cocktail before grabbing its stomach, the mostly exposed flesh pulsating and moving before the creature detonated outwards from within in a spiky explosion of twisted bone and wood.

Fenn's eyes landed on Falconer, his body floating in the Leyline, green and red energy swirling around him. His arm had grown to monstrous proportions, the wooden mass almost as large as Falconer's entire body. His body lay fused within the wood, the weapon itself far larger and easily as tall as Falconer. Glowing green veins spread throughout Falconer's arm, before stretching further into his body and neck. Fenn could see the wood had burrowed into his chest, the growth only continuing to corrupt more and more of Falconer's body. "Falconer!" Fenn yelled, rushing forwards but faltering as he held his hands a few inches away from the Leyline. Falconer did not respond, continuing to float in the energies as the last traces of red faded away, replaced only by what Fenn assumed was the normal green of the Leyline.

"Gods dammit!" Fenn yelled, grabbing Falconer and trying to drag him out of the energies. It burnt, feeling like he had thrown his hands into fire, and Falconer

remained trapped in the Leyline. "Come on! Fight it!" Fenn yelled, pulling with all of his might. Suddenly it seemed to let Falconer go, the twisted man dropping out straight onto Fenn. They both hit the ground hard, Fenn groaning as Falconer rolled off him. "Are you okay?" Falconer immediately questioned, his face full of pain. "Am I- are you?" Fenn immediately returned, looking at the blood oozing from the new growths across Falconer's chest and the colossal arm pulling his entire body to the side.

Falconer groaned as he stood up, rolling the arm that reached all the way to the floor. He lifted it up, pointing at the tree that had guarded them before in turn at the Leyline. The giant strolled into the beam, immediately blossoming with countless flowers before rapidly growing in size, eventually crashing with the rock of the cave ceiling before pushing further upwards and outwards. "We need to go," Falconer commanded, his bow folding into his arm, grabbing Fenn and pulling him into the creature's shadow as the entire mountain above them split open to reveal daylight far above them. Boulders, cannibals, and the castle above started to crumble and fall down towards them as the tree continued to grow upwards. The rocks landed around them and a cry came from above. Falconer whistled and Wren landed next them in a flash of feathers. "Come on," Falconer stated, mounting Wren's back before extending his human hand to Fenn.

Fenn faltered, continuing to stare in shock and mild horror at what had happened to Falconer. But he shook it off, taking the hand and climbing on. "Come Wren, back to the Scourge. Let us try to revive what has died," Falconer stated, the large bird spreading her wings and launching them upwards through the falling mountain.

Chapter 209: Sacrifice

Alara sat on her bed early in the morning, the darkness still surrounding the Courier and her greater fleet. The air was cold and frosty, ice covering the windows of her quarters. Tilly lay on her lap, the cat sleeping but restless as Alara cradled her. It was here: war, the day that her invasion of the Sentries begun. She hadn't slept. She couldn't sleep, no matter how hard she had tried. Brett, Braze and the others hadn't returned from their reconnaissance. They could be dead for all she knew, their whole mission exposed and all their preparations ruined. She simply didn't know.

Her eyes lay on the Wolfpack's tree, the various tags of her fallen friends shining in the low light. It had haunted her for days, far more than it had before, but equally in someways it felt almost inconsequential. Alara had thirteen ships under her command, the smallest of which had a crew of one-hundred and fifty souls on board. She held lives in her hands in the thousands. A significant chunk of which she knew with almost certainty would be lost within only a few hours. They were crewmates, comrades, friends.

A knock came from the door and she immediately stood up, Tilly leaping off her to safety as she strode to the door and heaved it open. Brett stood in front of her, mud across his face and a trail of blood leading down from his nose to his chin. He held out a tag in his hands, his face vacant and eyes dull. "A fleet waits for us, and the Sentry is surrounded by a fortress manned by mages, Null Legion, and remnants of Brunxchume military. We outnumber them, but they hold the defensive advantage."

Alara looked down at the tag, shakily taking it from Brett just as his knees gave out and he dropped to the floor. She knelt in front of him, placing a hand on his shoulder before sliding it to his face. He looked up at her, his skin cold, wet and pale – his eyes shining with held-in tears. "How?" she asked quietly, cradling Braze's tags in her hand. "We and the others were setting up traps, something to help our offensive. I... we went in too deep, we sabotaged their communications, I have the detonator, but on our way out we were spotted. He led an offensive, a trick to distract the enemy so that we could get out. I... volunteered, but he stole the chance from me. It should have been me," Brett confessed. Alara shook her head, taking the tag and approaching the tree. She hung it with the others, lifting the tiny tree up and placing it gently inside her bottomless bag. "I need you Brett. I need you to help me finish what Ashton and the others started. We can't mourn

him now, we don't have time. Rest – if you can. And Anson, thank you for surviving.”

Alara stared at the island ahead of them. She couldn't see the array from their current position, it was too far inland, but the fleet assembled at the island's main access point gave a distinct clue that there was more to the island than it initially appeared. Brett's mission had given them more information than she could have possibly asked for. The entire landmass was sloped, with the Sentry stationed inside of a fortress on the far, elevated end. The associated cliff face was rugged, steep and trapped with runes and explosives – a death trap with guns pointing downwards. The rest of the island was covered with forests and defensive stations, with a singular road leading from the island's edge to the fortress.

She had debated an assault from the air. Taking the Sentry that way would have helped to eliminate the main danger, but likely at the cost of the assault team that had gone inside, alongside the destruction of the target they had been sent to capture. She needed the Sentry to rescue her parents. So that meant they needed to make landfall, and fast, before the Sentry destroyed them from afar. She let out a short puff of air, adjusting her peaked cap as she looked to Captain Volker. He nodded to her, a silent understanding that once she and her Marines departed it would fall to him to keep the Courier afloat. She then turned to her forces.

“Fight until the end!” she yelled, raising her glaive into the air. Her troops roared, rushing to their stations. “Forwards!” she commanded to her fleet, the largest warship – Absolution – leading the way. Alarm bells rang across the fleet, every sailor and Marine ready for battle. “Commodore, enemy ships are moving to intercept, five have remained behind to form a defensive line, the other six are on direct approach!” informed a Lieutenant.

Alara turned and looked at Brett. He looked ready for battle but she saw a weariness to his eyes. “Give them hell,” she told him. He pulled a cylinder out of his pocket, a red button on top which he immediately pressed. Several loud booms rang out in the distance as the explosives detonated. “Communications are down between the fleet and Sentry. Not forever,” he warned. Alara nodded appreciatively. “For Braze,” she said softly. “Sniper division, target all enemy Mages. Mage division, defend our ships from enemy spells. All ships, fire at will!”

Riley remained by Alara's side, her snipers operating without her. “Sever their leadership,” Alara instructed coldly. Riley nodded, bounding a fist to her chest before darting to the edge of the ship and leaping overboard. Wulf stepped up.

"I should go with her," he said quietly to Alara, Absolution taking their first shots at the approaching enemy fleet. Alara shook her head. "Riley is a big girl, she can handle herself and too much attention will put her in greater danger. I need you here for the ground invasion," she stated firmly. Wulf nodded, stepping back. "Witchford, Brett, prepare the Marines." Brett and Witchford nodded, rushing off below deck.

Cannon fire erupted from the Crusader, the Blood Moon, Azure and the Iron-blooded, as they entered firing range. Alara's heart thundered in her chest along with the guns, her eyes locked firmly on the island ahead of them. "Commodore!" came Artemis' voice. "There's a Mage, he's being guarded – we can't stop him!" she said, panic growing in her voice. Alara clenched her fists – Artemis didn't panic.

A golden ring surrounded the Absolution before the clouds above parted and colossal beam of golden light slammed down onto the ship. It tore a hole straight through, the ship erupting into flame as its crew and Captain were instantly disintegrated by divine wrath of the heavens. "By the Gods!" uttered Volker. "Riley! Priority target!" Alara yelled, her largest ship completely destroyed. "Roger!" came the response. Explosions peppered the oceans around them as they entered accurate range of the enemy ships, Alara's forces desperately separating as they were forced to sail around the remains of the Absolution.

"Commodore!" Wulf stated firmly, Alara looked at him, her knuckles white as she clenched her glaive. "They have too much space," he stated. "If we don't make it to the shore then this is all for nothing." Alara agreed completely, but if her troops were exhausted before they even made landfall then they were screwed. "Riley needs an opening," he stated. "Let me go." Alara blinked, her mind flashing to the expression Brett had held that morning. An image followed of her own grim expression held in a mirror as Wulf's tag hung from her grasp. She couldn't lose him. "Commodore... to the end," he stated.

Alara nodded. "Boys, we're going hunting!" Wulf declared into his communicator, striding away from Alara. She reached out to him wanting to desperately beg for him to come back alive, but she couldn't. Several hundred Marines and Navy were dead already. She couldn't afford the luxury of personal feelings. She snapped her hand back to her side and turned to face the enemy just as another golden ring enveloped the Crusader. The ship desperately swerved to the side, the golden beam tearing an opening in the hull that immediately forced the ship to roll as water began to flood in through the catastrophic damage.

“Crusader, abandon ship!” Alara yelled into her communicator, another ship lost. She grit her teeth, taking a step forwards only for Volker to place a hand on her shoulder. “Commodore,” he said simply – the reminder of her title enough to snap her back to her duty. “Captain Egan, take your survivors and seize an enemy vessel. Any survivors of the Absolution are under your command.” “Aye, Commodore – I’m sorry.”

“Lieutenant Dawnstar to the Helm now!” Alara called into her communicator. A young woman in armoured robes ran across the main deck and up the stairs, standing at attention before Alara. “What is that spell? Can it be stopped?” Alara questioned. “It’s called Wrath of God, Commodore. It’s... a tenth tier spell.” “By the Gods,” Alara muttered. “Can they cast any more?” she asked. Lieutenant Dawnstar bit her lip. “I’m sorry, I do not know. There is a chance it’s not a singular Mage. Our defensive spells may hold out for a moment, but... only a moment,” she explained. Alara nodded, dismissing her with a single gesture. “Artemis, are there others?” Alara called up.

“Unknown. They’ve taken that Mage inside, but they appear to be readying another,” Artemis answered from her position, continuing to take precise shots at the enemy. “All Mages, prepare to block enemy spell of mass destruction, Helms you’ll have one chance to avoid the Wrath of God,” Alara commanded. A cyan bolt of energy flew across the ocean from the west, entering the cabin of an enemy flagship. “Archmage eliminated,” Riley stated, cheers erupting across the decks of multiple ships, only for a golden ring to envelop the Azure. Time seemed to freeze as Alara watched the golden beam of devastation drop from the skies, walls of water, air, and energy desperately formed between the beam and the Azure. The golden beam tore through the first three shields without hesitation, but it stopped on the fourth for a moment before faltering on the fifth, golden cracks appearing through the translucent wall. The Azure desperately veered to the side, the beam crashing into the ocean next to it as the ship survived the assault.

Alara stared ahead as an enemy ship erupted into flames, Wulf and the other therians assaulting it with everything they had. “Snipers, cover our wolves!” Alara called out, her snipers changing their targets to better protect Wulf. The foremost enemy ship swerved, turning into the heading of another ship. Captain Egan was getting his revenge for the sinking of his ship. “All ships, engage and destroy!” Alara commanded, the enemy fleet coming within close range.

The battlefield erupted into chaos, the eleven surviving ships of Alara's fleet separating into battle groups and each targeting an enemy vessel of their own to annihilate. The enemy in turn, their ships mostly uniform in their design, abandoned their strategy, instead dispersing and aiming for any of Alara's ships that were close. They were swiftly gunned down by the precise gunnery of Alara's forces.

The casualties were minimum, with Captain Egan jumping ship back to the safety of the Iron-blooded along with the other survivors. Alara folded her arms. The damage hadn't been minor, almost all of the fleet had taken significant hits, but given the overwhelming success it seemed strange that the enemy hadn't broken their defensive line to assist the other half of their fleet. Instead, the five ships were still in position in front of the Sentry's island.

Alara turned, looking back at the wreckage of the sunken enemy. Her eyes widened and she turned back. "They were all Brunxchume military," she realised. "They were used to soften us up!" she yelled. The skies roared with fire as an armada of enemy flyers descended from the skies, the Null Legion warships unleashing their heavy guns in artillery barrages towards Alara's forces. "Concentrate fire on the enemy flyers!" Alara commanded, bullets peppering the deck of her ship as the swarm descended upon her fleet. Her gunners moved from the cannons to the anti-air guns, the air above them erupting in fiery blasts of flak that shredded the wings and cockpit of any vehicle caught in the gunfire.

A line of explosions rolled across the waters towards them as bombers dropped their loads onto her fleet from high above. Screams of panic surrounded Alara in all directions, her wounded ships being devoured one by one by the sudden influx of enemy ships. "Charge the line, we must break through! Marines, swarm the enemy ships!" Alara commanded, looking to Volker, who nodded. She dropped her hat and leapt upwards, vaulting through the skies with Artemis close behind as she charged through the air towards the bombers high above. "I'm with you!" Artemis yelled, firing shot after shot at any flyer that charged towards them.

Alara ignored the flak and the hailstorm of bullets. She had a job to do, she needed to save her ship, her crew, her fleet. She continued to leap, the air thinning and her body burning in agony as she used her Focus to fight against gravity beyond anything she had done before. She reached the first bomber, screaming in fury and frustration and grief with her Focus-enhanced glaive. She cleaved the

wing of the bomber, sending the vessel screaming towards the ocean far below. She lunged towards another, crashing into its cockpit and landing inside.

She swung, painting the metal room with the blood of the pilots before she fumbled for a grenade on her belt and embedded her glaive in the floor. She activated the rune, kicked open the door to the hold and threw the grenade towards the occupants and the undetonated bombs. She then ran back, grabbed her glaive, and dove through the broken window back out into the sky. The bomber detonated behind her in a series of explosions that caught others in the flying formation, igniting them in a chain reaction.

Alara fell, spreading her arms and legs wide as she surveyed her surroundings. Her remaining nine ships were engaging the Null Legion, but there were likely reinforcements on the way. She dove, angling towards the foremost Null Legion ship. The wind whipped past her face, her eyes watering and the taste of blood in her mouth. A bolt of cyan light soared across the battlefield, hitting an enemy Commander on the deck of the foremost Null Legion ship. But then the entire battlefield was painted in cyan and Alara stared in horror as the Iron-blooded was bombarded by the Sentry they had come to conquer.

“Communications has been reestablished, I repeat communications has been reestablished – the Sentry is operational!” Brett yelled uselessly across the battlefield. Alara changed her trajectory, landing back on the Courier with a heavy thud, Artemis landing closely behind. “Commodore, I can disable them once more,” she stated, slinging her sniper rifle across her back. Alara nodded to the Ex-Emperor’s Fist. “Do it!” she commanded. Another barrage of cyan obliterated the Azure.

“All ships, evasive manoeuvres!” Alara commanded. “Get to that beachhead! Put yourselves as close to the Null Legion ships as possible!” The remaining ships in Alara’s fleet immediately surged forwards. “Alara,” Volker stated, drawing her immediate attention. “We can get you there. Just give the command,” he told her. She looked at the Captain. There were still five enemy ships, all helmed by experienced soldiers, with the backing of the Sentry. She knew what he was suggesting, what he was telling her had to be done. Alara nodded to him and he stepped forwards to the Helm, taking over the wheel. “All Marines, prepare for island assault!” she commanded, as the Courier charged the blockade.

The other ships all pulled forwards, joining the charge towards both the island’s defensive guns, the five Null Legion ships – still unloading their cannons even whilst Wulf and other forces were boarding them – and the Sentry. Another

barrage of cyan energy lit up the sky, striking the ship to Alara's right, but the Courier continued forwards. It crashed into the centremost Null Legion ship, glancing off its hull and allowing the Courier's gunners to unleash a devastating barrage of cannon fire point blank into the enemy. The ship then carried on forwards, charging directly towards the beachhead, even as heavy cannons tore apart the front of the ship, the Mages on board desperately throwing up defensive shields and the snipers picking off the enemy gunners one by one. "Go! Go! Go!" Captain Volker yelled, the Courier slamming into the sand and beaching itself.

"Charge!" Alara roared, vaulting over the edge of Captain Volker's ship and charging the guns with her Wolfpack running after her. She reversed the grip on her glaive, firing off bolts of condensed magical energy at the gunner emplacements. Bullets tore up the ground around her, her Focus shrugging off the worst of the damage, her armour taking the rest. She met the first bunker, taking a grenade off her belt, throwing her glaive over the bunker, pulling the pin and throwing it inside before running past, recollecting her weapon and carrying onwards as it detonated.

A bolt of cyan energy flew past her, a heavily armed warrior dropping before she could reach him. A howl sang behind her, followed by an entire pack's worth as Wulf and his therian joined her charge. Still she continued, ignoring her feelings as a cyan blast flew over her. She felt the ground shake, knowing exactly where that blast had hit and who and what she had just lost. But she continued forwards, taking the next defensive line as her forces secured the beachhead and her other ships began to truly engage the four remaining Null Legion ships in what she knew would be a longer drawn out conflict.

Finally, as she reached the end of the beach, and the top of the initial slope, Alara slid to the floor, dropping behind a concrete wall and taking cover from the hail of bullets still flying at her. Her Marines joined her, the few remaining Mages immediately raising a wall of mud to create trenches. She lay there panting heavily, her Marines catching their own breaths and looking to her for her leadership. She looked past them, all the way down the beach. What remained of the Courier lay burning on the beach, the crew that had remained aboard to offer defensive fire for the other Marines to land all gone in an instant. "Volker," Alara said in barely a whisper. "Thank you."

Alara looked up at the evening sky. She could only wonder just how Cyrenna and Beowulf's offensive was going. She shook it off. It didn't matter. There was

a long march still to go. "All remaining ships, mop up, deploy your forces and then maintain speed. Hold out for us. We'll get the job done. I swear," Alara stated. An explosion shook the island ahead of them, Alara immediately peeking up from her trench at the enemy ahead. A ball of fire had lit up the darkness. "The way is clear. Communications have been cut," Artemis said through her communicator.

A droplet hit Alara's cheek, followed by another and another as rain flooded from the skies. She turned, glancing to her exhausted troops, several of them getting desperate sleep in preparation for the next assault. She herself felt exhausted, but in the darkness – glowing brightly thanks to their panning spotlights – she could see a staging outpost. One just begging to be taken in the name of the New World Republic. "Flare," Alara ordered, taking the gun and loading it before standing up and firing. A solitary blue flare lit up the darkness. Alara stepped up and out of the trench, running forwards towards the danger.

Seize the Seas Tales: Old World Connections

Morgana tapped her spoon against the side of her teacup, a purple, dream-like fluid swirled within the black and gold cup. Slowly she lifted it up to her lips, taking in the sweet scent of the tea, only to then grimace at the bitterness to it – even after copious amounts of sugar added to it. "You'll get used to it," stated Marisha, a weary expression on her face and a gold and green uniform covering her body, her eyepatch shiny and golden. Morgana shook her head, tipping the drink into a nearby plant pot and folding her arms. "I doubt it. Ohno, can you get me a cola?" Morgana requested instead, the large panda letting out a sigh and getting to his feet.

"There are easier ways to get him to give us space," Marisha said quietly. "But you should trust him more." Morgana shook her head, leaning back in the padded chair and looking out towards the other patrons of the café. "I trust him with my life, but I trust his lips like I would trust paper to hold water. He talks without thought, it only makes me understand more as to why his brothers taught him to speak only to them. Anyway, you don't have time for casual talk."

Marisha nodded, a faint smile spreading across her weary face. "No, you're right. I've been doing some digging, or perhaps it's all an exercise in trust to test me - I don't know anymore – but I've found something. The Sovereign has her own network within the Guild. An entire structure of business created purely to send information, items, resources, people, across the world without any oversight or

public knowledge. Even the Guild Masters seem to know very little about it, but they're dealing with their own internal issues at the moment."

"Such as? Thank you," Morgana stated, smiling to Ohno as she took her drink and gesturing for him to sit. "Corina Liu," Marisha said softly, causing Morgana to cough on her drink. "That...?" She leant forwards. "The Empress?" she questioned. "Now officially Gryphon, she's a Guild Master. He took an early..." "Retirement?" Morgana concluded. Marisha nodded, taking a sip of her tea with barely a grimace. "Cold, but not surprising if Jayce's stories are real." "Oh they are, I can guarantee you that."

Ohno leant forwards to set his own glass of apple juice on the table between Marisha and Morgana. "So what does that mean?" he asked as softly as he could. "It means opportunity," Morgana answered, Soteria snoring away on a bench nearby. "How?" Ohno questioned, loudly dragging his chair closer to them. Morgana's face twisted into a look of annoyance, but a small smile spread across Marisha's. "It will take even Corina time to settle in. A Guild Master has a lot of duties, and a lot of power, the others will be trying to butt in – to take over duties that Corina may not even be aware of yet. And with the consistent destruction of the Dungeons – something that is Gryphon's domain – all of the Guild Masters will be distracted," Marisha explained.

"Do we know if she is the cause of their destruction yet?" Morgana asked quietly. Marisha shook her head. "I haven't asked, I don't want any accidental attention put on that group. If it is them then better that they are left to it until we can actually do something to help them. The Guild as a whole is... furious at the situation." Morgana nodded. Losing a crucial supply of magic stones would be devastating on a global scale, the sale and distribution of magic stone powered technology was practically what the Guild had been built for. "So they're vulnerable," Morgana ascertained. Marisha nodded.

A shared smile spread between them. "So now would be the chance for a rival to appear?" Morgana suggested quietly. "A Syndicate of sorts?" Marisha glanced away from her, covering her mouth with her cup. "I need you to pay our first employees a visit. Myra has been redeployed from Final Bastion – something about a Republic fleet smashing a blockade there. She and Holli coincidentally have been requested to visit here of all places to give a report on current business. They'll be expecting you."

"And you?"

SEIZE THE SEAS

“I have my own business to tend to. The Sovereign is stocking up on and selling explosives. A lot of them. I need to find out who they’re going to.”

Chapter 210: Price of Success

Alara grit her teeth as she lay in the mud. Her body ached, numerous sores lay in uncomfortable places, and sleep had been cruel to her the last two weeks. They had taken the island, piece by bloody piece. From what she knew, her forces still had control of the beachhead, with the enemy ships sunk and ocean control uncontested. The consequence of that was that the Sentry had taken to bombarding her and her forces somewhat blindly.

The fortress still stood, its walls unbroken and guards getting more and more desperate. They now no longer showed their heads above the walls, having learnt the hard way just how precise Riley, Artemis and the other snipers were. Even now, Riley and her snipers lay at least a kilometre away, waiting for a moment's opportunity to cause real damage to the swiftly dwindling defensive forces. Alara wanted it to be over. She needed it to be over.

She turned, movement drawing her attention away from the fortress. "Commodore," Brett greeted. He looked exhausted but, then again, who didn't at this point. "Hey," she said quietly, taking a sandwich he offered in one hand before taking a box with a handle from him in the other. "Are we sure this will work?" Alara asked, taking a bite of the stale sandwich. Brett nodded. "It's got enough explosives in it to blow open almost anything – fortress included."

She smiled grimly. "One last charge then?" she questioned. He nodded. "One last charge and we can enjoy an all expenses spa-day, courtesy of the New World Republic and a crap-ton of medals that would turn the eye of any gal or guy either side of the Frontier," he stated, deluded by his own fantasies more than anything. "Steak," Alara muttered, practically drooling as she stuffed the remainder of her sandwich into her throat. *Jayce*, she thought more significantly. Surely he had returned from whatever voyage he'd been on. She shut her eyes, picturing his irritating grin just once more. "Witchford, you there?" she asked through her communicator. "Yes Commodore. I am preparing the supplies, they will be ready within the hour," he stated, somehow reading her mind once again. "Is he watching me or something?" Alara questioned to Brett. He chuckled, pointing upwards. "I think he's always watching us."

A gentle nudge startled Alara awake an hour later. "Ready, Alara?" Wulf questioned. "Huh?" she questioned, her spa-day dream, steak and Jayce included, vanishing before her eyes. "The wolves are ready. Are you?" he questioned, concern in his eyes. She nodded, stretching before shooting upwards

to a crouch. "All forces, prepare for final assault," Alara stated, crawling back into the main trenches before getting to her feet and walking to the improvised command centre.

Captains, Commanders, Lieutenants – they all saluted her as she walked in. "We're ready and waiting," the Weapon stated, looking to Alara for his orders. Alara smiled. "Are you implying I don't get to participate in this one?" she questioned. "Never, Commodore. It wouldn't be like you to be anywhere other than the front line, but this time, if it's not too bold, perhaps you could let someone else blow open the doors." There were a few laughs and Alara folded her arms. "Perhaps. First one there gets to hit the button. How about that?" "Oohrah!" came several voices.

Alara crouched at the edge of the trenches. It had all been silent for suspiciously long now, on both sides. She turned to Wulf, to Brett, to Witchford, the Weapon, and the others. They looked to her and nodded and she smiled back at them. "Until the next dawn," she stated, turning and vaulting over the edge alone. "Charge!" she yelled behind her as the guns opened fire at her. Alara weaved through the hail of bullets, her forces opening fire with everything they had at the enemy.

She leapt over mines and runic traps, darted through enemy spells, and deflected bullets and cannonballs with her glaive. She slid into enemy trenches, cutting down the few survivors still within, whilst ignoring the stench of blood and death from injured soldiers who had either taken their own lives, perished from their wounds, or been killed out of mercy. The conflict had taken its toll on both sides. Alara had seen enough to last her lifetime and she had said goodbye to enough friends. "I surrender," cried an enemy. She grabbed his rifle and disarmed him, before forcing him to his knees and leaving him to her Marines.

She carried on past injured soldiers, only slowing once she was certain she was out of the range of the enemy guns. A wall of corpses lay outside of the gates to the fortress, the bodies of the enemy that had been abandoned by their own and sealed outside. Alara shook her head. "Brett," she stated, turning to her friend. He charged past her and placed the explosives amongst the corpses. "Let their deaths be the end of this fortress," he said in an almost prayer-like manner. "Clear!" he yelled, hitting the button and blowing open the gates.

Alara charged forwards, ignoring the defenders on the inside and instead charging straight towards the lighthouse-like building in the centre of the fortress walls. It was tall, with a circle stairway running up and along the outside of the

pale tower. At the very top was a bulb-like control centre, where Alara immediately spotted figures inside pointing at her before yelling behind them in a panic. "Stop them!" Alara yelled, surging forwards and leaping upwards towards the guards desperately defending the stairs. The Sentry itself was massive, and Alara could feel the entire ground beginning to rumble as it began to charge up energy for another barrage, likely on itself.

She darted forwards, knocking guards over the edge of the railing, cleaving others in half. She didn't stop, she didn't listen. It didn't matter if they surrendered or not, she didn't have the luxury to think, she had to save the Sentry from falling or it was all for nothing. She ran up out onto the top platform, charging inside and immediately unloading her glaive on every person inside. She slaughtered each lab coat-covered individual, only stopping as the final technician fell still. "Alara..." came Wulf's voice from behind, horror buried within. "Commodore, we must deactivate the system. We cannot allow it to fire," Witchford stated, ignoring the bodies and immediately rushing to the consoles and beginning to analyse it. Alara stepped back and let him work, her eyes slowly falling to the unarmed workers she had murdered.

She dropped her glaive, sitting in a chair and holding her head, the sound of gunfire continuing to ring out as her Marines finished securing the base. Slowly the energy began to disperse, the glow of the blue glass around them disappearing as Witchford deactivated the Sentry. Finally he stepped back, nodding to himself before dragging over a seat and sitting down upon it. "It's over. We won," he concluded. Alara shook her head. It didn't feel like a victory, they had lost so much, and there was so much more still to come... "That was just the beginning," she confessed.

The celebrations were short-lived. The communications to Beowulf and Cyrenna's fleets informed Alara that she had been the first to conquer her chosen Sentry and that they were both broiled in a drawn-out offensive. There had also been no sign of General Barca Khallid's fortress. So, with little other options, Alara reactivated the distress beacon of the Sentry and dug in. Funerals were held, toasts made in honour of the success and in remembrance of those that fallen to ensure it: Braze, Captain Volker and the Courier amongst them. A little over two weeks later, over a month since the start of the offensive, Alara heard her name be called across the communicators.

"He's here," Witchford stated, pointing out of the viewscreen at the Fortress Ship on a direct heading to them. Alara's chest tightened. It had been repaired since

Jayce had last damaged it and, if anything, the Fortress Ship looked even nastier than before. But that didn't matter to Alara, her parents were there, right in front of her, and she now had everything she needed to ensure she could rescue them. "Prepare target lock," Alara commanded, looking towards Witchford and the other Marines in the control room of the Sentry.

"Commodore, something is off," Witchford stated, pointing out towards the ocean. Alara faltered, he was right. The beacon was on, still calling for help but the Fortress ship had stopped. "Target lock, now!" Alara commanded, panic rising inside of her as an alarm bell began to ring. Alara heard rapid feet coming up the stairs behind her. "Alara, Beowulf's Sentry has fired on us!" came Riley's voice through the communicator. "No!" Alara yelled, staring at the Fortress Ship as it turned and started to move away.

"Everyone out now!" Witchford commanded. "Alara go!" he ordered, the Marines racing out of the room as Wulf raced in. "Get her out of here!" Witchford yelled. Wulf grabbed Alara's waist, dragging her backwards and leaping off the Sentry down to the ground. "Wulf! Let me go! He's there, we have to finish the mission!" she cried. He let her go, the entire tower beginning to glow as it charged up.

"Go! Go! Go!" Witchford ordered, declaring the target parameters to Beowulf's still unconquered Sentry. Alara was clear, he had ensured that and the others were evacuating. "Sir, you need help!" stated Lieutenant Pharax, one of the two other Marines who had stayed, immediately rushing to a station to control the power output whilst the Lieutenant Heroe headed to the firing sequence and began to prime it. Witchford looked at them and they nodded to him. "Go sir!" stated Lieutenant Pharax. "It's been an honour," cried Lieutenant Heroe.

"Witchford!" cried Alara, still stood at the base of the Sentry, waiting for him to emerge. "Alara! We have to go!" screamed Wulf from behind, only to physically be dragged away by Boot and Channing. "Alara! Alara! Alara!" Wulf screamed, desperately fighting to break free as she stood screaming up at the Sentry for Witchford. The entire sky began to glow blue, a heavy boom thundering the ground as the Sentry fired, another glow darting across the sky from the east.

Witchford raced down the stairs of the Sentry, running with every ounce of strength he had remaining in his body as he stared at Alara as she stood moronically close to the target of the enemy barrage. He tasted blood, felt his hairs begin to crackle with energy. He dove from the stairs, still at least twenty metres up from the ground. Witchford crashed into the ground hard in front of

Alara, his glasses broken, his ever-cool expression broken into desperate panic as he stared up at her.

Alara stared at Witchford in horror as he crashed to the ground in front of her. He scrambled towards her, tearing up the ground beneath him as the barrage landed, obliterating the Sentry behind him. He dove, his arms outstretched towards her as she reached out to him. He knocked her arms aside, slamming his shoulder and arms into her and pushing with every piece of strength he had left. Alara flew to the side, her vision immediately falling into darkness as the entire world erupted in front of her.

Alara groaned as she came to, her vision blurry and the sky grey above her. Pain was all she could feel, but Witchford was all she could think about. Alara put her arms down, pressing to sit up only to topple over to the side. She frowned, her face twisted into shocked confusion as she struggled to even sit up. Her vision cleared, the Sentry was atomised, nothing remained by a bloody patch in front of her - a pair of cracked glasses sat within it. Alara stopped breathing, her entire body felt like it had collapsed into itself as she reached out in broken desperation looking for Witchford. She cried his name, nothing coming out as she looked for anything more than blood and his broken glasses. But she saw nothing. She reached out, her eyes looking forwards before her gaze fell closer to her. She looked to her right arm, but it wasn't there.

She screamed in agony as she clutched her torn and bloody stump. She screamed in agony at the loss of one of her closest friends. She screamed in agony at the loss of maybe her final chance of rescuing her parents.

But then the screaming stopped, replaced instead by a cold whimper as she felt her life draining out her. She fell down, laying in the grass as silent tears rolled down her face. Her vision darkened and large hands grabbed her body, lifting her up. Garbled voices surrounded her and she felt herself swaying as she hung across the furry back of something warm. Something familiar. Something that was sobbing just as she was.

Alara's vision slowly began to clear as she repeatedly opened and closed her eyes in groggy exhaustion. A heavy weight lay on her chest, her breathing challenging and laborious. "Ugh," Alara groaned, barely able to lift her head up to look down at the furry mass on her chest. "Tilly?" she questioned, the immediately turning her head to look towards Alara before beginning to purr as she shakily stood up. Alara's eyes widened as she saw the stitching on Tilly's shoulder, where her arm had been amputated. "Oh, Tilly, I'm sorry," Alara said softly, reaching up with

both arms to pet her cat. But Alara then faltered. "Oh..." she said softly, staring at her bandaged stump a little over half-way up her arm. Her eyes then fell onto the Wolfpack tree, presumably taken from within her bottomless bag. Witchford's cracked glasses lay at the bottom. "Oh..." Alara said more brokenly, the noise catching in her throat as she lay back in defeat, looking up at the roof of the hospital tent she was within.

Tears fell silently. She wanted to scream, to sob, but it didn't feel real. None of it did. She had lost so many and Witchford was just another body on the pile she had built. Tilly hobbled up to Alara's head, falling down with a thump and nestling herself into Alara's neck. Alara immediately grimaced, reaching up with her bandaged left hand to her face. Even through torn fingertips she could feel fresh wounds and stitches – all across her neck and chin.

The tent opened and Riley stuck her head inside, her brown eyes immediately widening as she spotted Alara awake. "Alara!" she cried, practically throwing herself on top of Alara. Alara groaned in pain, Tilly immediately rolling to the floor with a thump before hobbling away with a hiss. "Lieutenant Commander Riley! Off my patient!" growled Lieutenant Laine. She was a somewhat grouchy middle-aged woman who knew how to handle herself in a fight. She was no Yuthura, but there was no other Yuthura. "How are you feeling Commodore?" she asked, once Riley had removed herself from Alara.

The tent opened and Wulf and Brett both stepped quietly inside. They both stared at her with distinct relief. "Honest opinion?" Alara questioned to her Ship' Doctor. Laine nodded. "Like death. How long have I been out?" she asked, nervous to hear the answer. "Six days," Riley answered before the Doctor could. Laine glared at Riley. "Si-six days?" Alara questioned, forcing herself upright, only for her body to force her back down. "Careful, you've taken a lot of damage. I'll get you some pain meds, do not move."

Lieutenant Laine departed and Alara immediately sat back up, cautiously bringing her feet over the edge of her bed. "Alara, don't. You need rest," Wulf stated. "No, I need to prepare our next offensive. What's the status of the other two Sentries?" she immediately questioned, looking to Riley for support in standing up. She shook her head, tapping her metal legs before folding her arms. "You told me off, now it's my turn. Rest, Alara," Riley stated. Alara rolled her eyes. "Status?"

"Beowulf has finished his offensive thanks to some external aid. The Sentry was destroyed by Witchford... Cyrenna is still fighting. Her Sentry received

reinforcements but she is still holding them off and also progressing along the mainland. It's unknown how much longer she can hold out though," Wulf said honestly. Both Brett and Riley looked at him. "What? She'd just order someone to tell her," he pointed out. They sighed and shook their heads. Slowly, every gaze in the room eventually fell on the glasses. "I can't believe he's gone," Alara muttered. "Nearly you too. Stupid decision from the pair of you," Brett stated. Riley and Wulf glared at him. "No, he's right... it was lost. I needed to let it go, and Witchford may have just made this whole offensive harder for us. He did what he did to protect us, not for the good of the mission," Alara admitted.

The tent opened and the heavy footsteps of the Weapon followed after Lieutenant Laine. "Commodore," he greeted. She gave a weak smile and Lieutenant Laine gestured for Alara to lie back down. Alara instead tried to stand, only for Riley to push her back down. "Don't be stupid," Laine stated, sticking a needle into Alara's leg. "Ow!" she protested. Laine ignored her and began to unravel Alara's bandages. "I shouldn't wasted a healing potion on your arm, would have kept you down properly," Laine lamented.

"Next time," Alara grumbled. Laine glared at her and then shook her head. "You have at least another day of bedrest. It's scarred over nicely so I will fit you for a prosthetic, but you'll need proper rehabilitation," she warned. Alara nodded appreciatively. "That can be sorted on route to Commodore Kai. Weapon, you're being promoted to my Commander. Get everyone moving and get everything in order."

"Commodore, I can't replace Commander Witchford. Should it not be either-" "No," Alara said firmly. "You're not great with the troops, but neither was Witchford. He and you both possess the ability of getting things done, even if they upset people. I need that. Get it done. I want us on the move within the next three days, understood?" she commanded. He stood to attention and nodded, leaving the tent. "Why not one of us?" Brett questioned.

"Do you want to take over from Witchford?" Alara asked, looking across Wulf, Riley and Brett. "No," they all answered quietly. She nodded to herself, laying back on the bed as the medication kicked in. "No one can, but Weapon will do his damned best to surpass the unsurpassable. And unlike you three, he'll follow my orders even when I'm like this. The time for mourning is over. I'm angry. It's time for a counter. It's time to put Barca Khallid in the ground."

Seize the Seas Tales: Reunited

The Gambit roared beneath Marisha's feet, the ocean rolling beneath them as she, Ohno and Morgana darted from cloud to cloud through the skies. "Are we certain?" Morgana questioned once again, as she leant near the cockpit. Marisha nodded. The information was too good to be true, but she had no reason to doubt it's validity. The Stacked Hand had been seen. It was intact, crewed, and heading north, and most importantly – not far.

"Crew of the Stacked Hand, come in – it's Marisha. Stacked Hand – come in. Stacked Hand – please respond," Marisha attempted, her mind running through the possibilities of who was on board. Bjorn? Jayce? Yuthura? Where had they been, what had happened to them? She needed to know – what had she missed in the last five and a bit months. The clouds cleared. "Marisha?" came Wam's voice. "Marisha, is that you?" She practically screamed with relief. "Brother, Wam, it's me!" Ohno cried into his communicator, the Stacked Hand sailing far beneath them.

They landed the Gambit in the waters next to the ship, attaching to the, almost unchanged, Stacked Hand before clambering aboard. Ohno tackled his brother in a tight hug, the pair staring at each other before bouncing with joy at their reunification. Marisha turned to Tempest, breathing a sigh of relief at the faceless expression of the djinn before being wrapped in a hug of her own by Gaea. Morgana nodded passively to Red, extending a fist to him which he lightly tapped with his own. The greetings and celebrating swiftly dwindled, the joys of the crew of the Stacked Hand immediately replaced by the shock and horror of the Gambit's passengers.

"It's... just you four?" Morgana questioned, dropping to her knees in horrified shock. Gaea immediately sat next to her and held her as Morgana began to cry. "Technically six," Wam and Asmodeus said in unison. Marisha glared at the pair in Wam's body. "A conversation and an explanation for later," she told them warningly. "Has there been any contact with anyone else?" Tempest asked. "I was going to ask you the same thing," Marisha said quietly, sitting down on a frost-covered deckchair and holding her head in her hands. "Then that is a no. A pity. Still, we are reunited for the moment, and this moment is a strong foundation."

Marisha and Morgana both looked at the djinn with a mix of anger, frustration, curiosity and bemusement. "How so?" Marisha questioned, sitting back and folding her arms and crossing her legs. "We have access to air travel and ocean

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travel. I have also spent extensive time these last few months making modifications to our communication devices. They should now function at far greater ranges, with hope even across the world,” Tempest explained. Marisha nodded approvingly. “Good, thank you. That should help us narrow down the others. I will return to the Guild. Morgana and I will communicate and we’ll search out traces of the others. We’ll reassemble the crew, piece by piece.”

Chapter 211: Blood and Bonds

Thalia rolled her shoulders as she strode into the arena once again. It had been months since her arrival and in that time she had beaten her way up the ranks through broken bones, broken teeth, bloody knuckles and with an indomitable spirit. She grinned as she raised her fist high, the crowd chanting, but not for her. They didn't cry and scream for her, they screamed for her opponent. "Athena! Athena! Athena!" cried the audience.

She stood waiting for Thalia, her chest puffed out, her clothing simple and functional, wrappings across her hands and her black hair cut short and held back out of her face by a simple band. Athena cracked her knuckles and rolled her head, her entire body stretching in a rhythmic pattern as she warmed up every sinew of muscle and every joint with barely a movement. It still unnerved Thalia just how much control Athena had over her body. Every joint could be dislocated and reattached. To a degree, Athena even had control over her organs, able to purge poisons at will and accelerate and slow her heart at a command. It was inhuman, and as Thalia stood before her she couldn't help but question if she was facing the greatest monster she ever encountered, bar the Sovereign, and Oni.

"So here we are," Athena said, matching Thalia's menacing grin and beginning to circle her. "So we are, my friend," Thalia returned, the words genuine and meaningful. Athena had been far more than that to her, but there was also a mutual understanding to hold each other at arms' length. Athena's grey eyes shone, the dirty black smear of makeup down her eyes intimidating and fitting of her appearance. "What will you do if you win?" Athena asked genuinely, ignoring the crowd and the announcer – their noise practically silent in her ears.

Thalia glanced towards the noise, before looking back towards Athena as she felt a subtle probe of Focus drawing her attention back. "They're not going anywhere," Athena stated, continuing to circle Thalia who in turn began to mirror her prowl. "If I win? Don't you mean when?" Thalia returned, the noise overwhelming but not worth her attention. "When is brave. Foolish too. You see, babe, I like you here. Perhaps I'm not ready to see you leave me – especially if Oni challenges you to a death match."

"Sorry, that's not in your control anymore. I was always going to leave. If my crew are dead then it's up to me to avenge them. You could come with me?" Thalia offered. Athena shook her head, glancing up to the arena box. "I have a duty - I wish I could. Truly. It would be fun," Athena answered. Thalia nodded

and clenched her fists, taking a defensive stance. But rather than mirror her, Athena relaxed, putting her hands behind her and almost leaning into herself.

“Now, once upon a time, when I was little, myself and the other little assassin cubs liked to play a game with each other. We called it ‘To Ten’. It’s simple, a bit of a show of control and endurance, but also a measure of metal. Back then we would take turns hitting each other. Your aim was to avoid your opponent and score hits, with each hit you would strike harder. You would raise the power ‘to ten’, with the tenth hit being lethal. Most of the time people would bow out at six or seven. Personally I would wait until nine if I hadn’t won by that point. But I remember watching one bout between Oni and another assassin. They went to sixteen apiece. So, Thalia, what number can you last to?” Athena questioned.

She shimmered and Thalia staggered backwards clutching her stomach. “One,” came a whisper in her ear, the pain agonising from the deliberate and precise strike to her liver. Thalia swung wildly, Athena stubbornly standing still as Thalia missed her. The friendly grey eyes that had been such a strong and consistent source of affection were cold steel, Athena’s face a blank slate of grim intensity.

Thalia’s vision blurred and she growled and shook off the pain, raising her fists defensively. Athena charged her, her hands down by her side, fingers flexed. She leapt, vaulting into a twist before pushing off the air to dive her heel down towards Thalia’s collarbone. Thalia blocked with both forearms, catching the blow that felt like an anchor had been dropped on her. Her knees buckled and Athena struck with her other leg, catching Thalia’s temple and sending her tumbling across the floor. “Two and three,” Athena stated, walking over towards Thalia’s dazed body on the floor.

“What happened to a scale?” Thalia groaned, blood dripping down her chin as she forced her head upwards to look at Athena. “Did you not feel the difference?” Athena questioned. Thalia hated that she had. It was agonising, all three blows, especially as they had all been targeted towards physical weak points. Athena was toying with her. Thalia hated being toyed with. “Come on, get up. I took far worse than that as a child. I didn’t wrestle in storms against therians, I wasn’t the princess grandchild to a Pirate Lord. I was an assassin designed to be sacrificed and thrown away at a command. Fight me Thalia, or you will die. If not to me than alone in a back-alley somewhere with hardly a name worth saying.”

Thalia growled with fury, a faint grin crossing Athena’s jaw before being forced away. “Come on berserker, use that rage.” Thalia struck, not at Athena but at the

Arena beneath her. The entire surface rippled like water before sand was thrown up in a giant cloud. "Blinding me does nothing!" Athena warned, her eyes locked on Thalia even through the sand. But Thalia hadn't done it for her. Thalia slid her bracer upwards, the heavy weight transforming into her anchor.

"Stupid and pointless, that won't hit me!" Athena goaded as Thalia grabbed the chain and swung the colossal weapon, the cloud of sand getting dragged into her personal hurricane. Athena then faltered as a tooth cut her cheek, drawing blood. Her eyes widened as she spotted countless fragments throughout the storm. She surged forwards only for a huge chunk of stone to fly her way as Thalia picked up a piece of the fractured arena floor and threw it at her. Athena smashed it with her fist, her body bracing as Thalia's huge anchor followed the rock, smashing into her.

An entire spectrum of Focus radiated from Athena's body in an instant as she desperately defended herself from the full impact strike, a strike that Thalia had used before to shatter ships. Athena tumbled backwards, bouncing into the storm before slamming into the arena wall. She slid to the floor in a heap, coughing blood as she quickly got to her feet and leapt back into the storm. But as she fought her way through the rocks, teeth, and broken weapons towards the centre of the tempest, she quickly picked up on Thalia's voice – a loud chanting coming from the eye of the storm.

"Oh great!" Athena complained, as a bolt of lightning crashed down from the skies and hit Thalia. Sparks and bolts of lightning flew off Thalia's anchor into the storm, the building static erupting into a ring of golden energy that completely surrounding Athena. She screamed as she was electrocuted by the storm she was enveloped within. But still she carried forwards, protecting her face as best as she could as her very muscles fought against her control.

She emerged into the eye of the storm, darting forwards towards Thalia and sliding under her wild lightning-charged swing. She struck hard, throwing a flat fist into Thalia's knee. "Four!" Athena cried, Thalia's leg twisting and buckling. "Ten!" Thalia stated, turning her leg and dropping her knee as she threw a thunderous fist straight downwards onto Athena. Athena splattered into the ground, bouncing off the stone – her eyes wide, glazed over and unseeing as she landed and lay still.

The storm dispersed, leaving behind a panting Thalia and a groaning Athena. "Stay down!" Thalia stated, clutching her dislocated knee and quickly fixing it with a yelp. Athena continued to lay at her feet before a gentle chuckle emerged.

"Ow!" she complained. "You cheated. You start with one, not seven, eight and then ten." Thalia wasn't sure how to feel about how quickly Athena was recovering from a wound that most certainly should have been fatal, even with the healing pillars engaged in the arena.

Thalia reached down and rolled Athena over, the pair looking at each other with soft smiles and genuine respect. "I was never going to win your way," Thalia stated honestly. "Yeah, you don't say," Athena returned, taking the hand that was offered to her and getting to her feet to the cheers of the crowd. They slowly limped their way to the exit, but by the time they had entered the familiar and cold underbelly of the arena their wounds had healed.

They made their way up to the fighters' box, but where Thalia was expecting to find Ming waiting for them she instead found a familiar, eye-patched face. "So this is where you've been hiding?" Marisha questioned, her arms folded and an unhappy glare on her face. "Uh," Thalia uttered, flummoxed by the sudden appearance of her crewmate. The emotions immediately disappeared as she stepped forwards and hugging Thalia tightly. "I'm glad you're okay," Marisha said quietly.

Thalia nodded, looking from Marisha to Athena. "So, I take it this is your crewmate?" Athena questioned. Thalia and Marisha both nodded before Marisha paused and looked Athena up and down. "Athena, wasn't it?" she questioned. Athena raised a singed eyebrow, looking towards Thalia. "I listen to my crewmates' stories. An Emperor's Fist with a large tattoo of a waterfall, a dragon and a snow leopard is pretty distinctive," Marisha commented. Athena chuckled. "I suppose it is. So have you come to collect this one then?"

Marisha nodded. "What of your fight?" Athena asked. "Oni will have seen that, he'll be waiting." Thalia shook her head and Athena flinched. "What?" she questioned in disbelief. "My crew need me. The holiday is over. He'll have to wait," stated Thalia. Athena sighed and shook her head before stepping back with her hands raised. "Whatever, you do you," she stated, turning and beginning to walk away.

Thalia lunged forwards and grabbed her arm. "Come with us. Your mission is over, it doesn't need you. We could use you. Arthuria could use you," Thalia pleaded. Athena shook her head. "The mission is never over. Goodbye, Thalia. Good luck with your own mission. Perhaps we'll see each other again someday." Athena pulled her arm away and continued to stride away, her eyes to the floor and shoulders low.

Thalia collected her things, her money, and then met up with Marisha at a dock not too far away from the arena. "Ready?" Marisha questioned. Thalia nodded, giving one last longing look at the place she had made her home. She turned and boarded the *Gambit*, sitting unusually quietly in the back of the hold. She didn't say anything for over an hour but eventually Thalia stood up of her own accord and approached the cockpit. "What have I missed?"

It took a considerable length of time to fill in Thalia on everything that happened to Wam and his group, Marisha's own encounters, as well as the newly formed Syndicate that was the reason why she had found Thalia in the first place. "The Captain?" Thalia questioned. Marisha shook her head, drawing out a long sigh as Thalia leant back. "I guess I'm the Captain then?" she stated. Marisha scoffed, drawing a soft smile that a year ago would have been replaced with bloody fury.

"So what now? Where are we headed if you're still working for your mother?" Thalia questioned. "We're going East to meet back up with the *Stacked Hand* and the others. Rumours have been circulating: something about a blue-haired Bard causing trouble for the local vampires and cannibals," Marisha stated, Thalia's mind immediately thinking of the only person that description could fit. "Of course she has."

"We need to hurry," Astris stated, her face pale as paced back and forth in front of Caelie. Caelie looked up at her, shaking her head – her face clammy and body cold. "No good exhausted. No good to anyone," she stated. Astris stopped in her tracks and looked down at Caelie. They had been travelling together for some time, slowly making their way from port to port on their journey north. Between hiding in cargo holds, stealing small boats, and crouching in shadows – the fact they had made it this far without major problems had been remarkable.

But Astris still hated it. She hated being forced to either ambush innocent people to drain their blood, or only being able to travel at nighttime. It made her feel disgusting, an animal, a monster. Least of all the fact that, now that they were isolated, she was the leading problem as to why they couldn't be there to aid Alara or Cyrenna or Beowulf. "Nightfall won't last much longer. We're not far from the eastern campaign, we can make it." But Caelie wasn't listening to her, her eyes were shut, her head on her chin. "Caelie..." Astris said softly, sitting down next to her and leaning into her for warmth.

"Incoming!" cried Commander Dorma. Beowulf tucked down into his trench, the skies glowing cyan as the Sentry unleashed another barrage on their position. The ground shook before falling still. "Commodore, enemy reinforcements are

arriving, and Commodore Vanathur's forces are reporting the presence of the Fortress Ship. We should abandon our position and regroup. The target is the Fortress Ship, if Vanathur can--"

The skies glowed cyan as the Sentry unleashed another barrage, but this time the blasts were not coming their way – the blasts were sailing through the skies to the west. "Fuck!" Beowulf yelled. "Send an immediate warning to Vanathur – tell her to get her forces out of there!" His Marines ran off the relay the message, his eyes turning back to the fortress that had been a consistent thorn in his side. "We push forwards! We have to take that Sentry!" Beowulf yelled.

"Sir, look! West, the enemy ships – they're turning." Beowulf turned, it made no sense – at their current position the enemy had a perfect angle to deliver a deadly bombardment towards them. Why had they abandoned their angle, why were they turning away. One of the four Null Legion ships exploded in a colossal fireball, the burning wreck sinking into the ocean before falling out of the sky through a large swirling portal directly onto another ship. Beowulf's eyes widened. "Reinforcements!" he cried. "Reinforcements are here!"

A red haze descended on the other two ships before one after another they both erupted into flames. A moment later a swirling blue portal appeared in front of the Fortress, a lone woman stepping out. She held a pair of pistols, her hair half black, half silver – albeit now sticky with blood. She turned away from the fortress, a storm of bullets peppering the ground around her. Some hit her, but she ignored them, so gorged on blood that the wounds regenerated instantaneously.

The sky then glowed cyan, the fortress detonating as a barrage descended upon it. Beowulf stood stunned, in complete disbelief that the Sentry he had been sent to conquer had been obliterated before him. The Vampire Lord then vanished in a cloud of red mist, a red haze descending on the equally stunned enemy forces between Beowulf and the broken fortress. Screams filled the air as she danced her way towards him, tearing apart everything in her path before she apparated directly in front of his trench. "What are you doing in a hole, brother? Father would be most disappointed," Astris said with a bloody smile.

"It's Astris Kai!" came a voice from along the trench. "Commander Kai is here!" cheers rang out and Astris crouched down, offering a hand to her brother to pull him out of the trench. "The battle isn't over," Beowulf stated. Astris tilted her head, a swirling portal appearing next to her and a young skinny, masked

women emerging out of it. "Are you sure?" Astris questioned, a white flag flying from the top of the enemy fortress.

It took a considerable amount of time for Beowulf's forces to finish cleaning up the invasion. By all accounts it had been nothing but a failure. He had failed to seize the island without Astris and Caelie and he had failed to capture the Sentry. His forces were decimated, only a few of his ships remained, and none of them were truly seaworthy. "You did your best," Astris stated, as she sat in his command tent. "That sounds less and less like a compliment each time I hear it," Beowulf complained, taking a seat and looking towards his remaining Captains and Commanders, and Caelie as she span in a chair she had stolen from the fortress.

"So what is the situation?" Astris questioned, the other Navy and Marines looking her with a mixture of awe and unease. "Commander," Beowulf warned. Caelie's expression changed, the demonic white mask covering her face, the eyes black and dripping gold. "For the sake of ease, treat us as you would Jayce Exarga. Commodore," Belial growled, with a thinly-veiled demand for respect. Beowulf raised a hand as hands went for weapons. "No, fair. Commander Kai, you have special dispensation from Admiral Exarga – I should respect that. Belial, you need not stay, this is a Republic matter."

Caelie returned, continuing to spin in her chair. "The situation is that we were requested to conquer three weapon emplacements. We have failed two of them. Both Commodore Vanathur and myself have failed to seize control. This leaves one final Sentry remaining. It appears Barca Khallid is throwing as much resources as he can to ensure that it remains in his control," Beowulf explained. "Then we need to head there to reinforce Cyrenna," Astris stated adamantly. Beowulf nodded. "I agree wholeheartedly, however we have a lot of wounded and not many ships. Vanathur is in a similar situation, but..."

"What?" Astris questioned. Beowulf faltered, internally debating how much information to reveal to her. He needed Astris, he needed her here, not dashing across the oceans to aid Alara. "Vanathur was wounded. She is fine, but her advance is delayed. They will arrive before we do. Reinforcements are also on their way from the Capital, but they too will have to get past Final Bastion's enhanced blockade."

"Then Caelie and I will leave immediately," Astris stated, standing up. Beowulf shook his head. "Astris!" he said firmly, she turned and looked at him. "I need you here. Your... powers. You can heal our injured, save them from perishing

due to a lack of resources. And Caelie can help us to scavenge what we need to prepare our second advance. Commodore Vanathur can handle herself, but we will be of no use to Commodore Kai in this state. Please," he asked earnestly. Astris looked around the room, numerous desperate eyes falling to her. "Fine," she stated begrudgingly. "We set off as soon as possible."

Seize the Seas Tales: Stubbornly Forwards

"Falconer," Fenn said softly, helping him steadily to his feet. "Any more and this will kill you," he stated. Falconer looked at him: half of his face had turned to wood, his right eye completely consumed and replaced with a glowing green bulb. Falconer wheezed as he stood leaning against Fenn. "It's not enough. The Scourge needs more to be cleansed," Falconer said quietly, the pair of them staggering through the snow towards Wren.

They had travelled to the Scourge before making a journey west, to the land of the therians. Falconer had practically bathed in the damaged Leyline, the consequences clear and agonising. "I will not be an accessory to your suicide. I can't do that. I won't!" Fenn stated firmly, helping the man onto Wren. He immediately slumped into her feathers, exhaustion taking over him. Wren cooed to Fenn and he shook his head. "I... I don't know," he answered, tucking closer to support Falconer as Wren took up into the skies. "Take us south."

It was several hours before Falconer awoke, his body in agony. He immediately turned, looking back towards Fenn. "You will die if this continues," Fenn said quietly, looking out into the night sky. "Maybe. But I will have saved the world from a slow and inevitable death. Is that not worth the cost?" Falconer questioned, as much to himself as to Fenn. "No. Your life is for living, not for sacrificing. It's never worth it. Nothing is worth sacrificing yourself for."

Falconer shook his head. "You'll find something someday. Something that means more to you than your own life. But... you're right. I cannot do this alone. We'll make one last stop, a final preparation, then we will track down the others. I'm sure they are waiting for us."

Chapter 212: Red-handed

The journey to Kraken's Grave had taken far longer than Wicke had liked. With the Mysts having previously been a region heavily under the influence of the Church, it had become the centrepiece for rebellion within the New World. The carnage brought about by the Republic's swift and thorough extermination of all loyal to the old ways had left numerous holes within the typical trade routes that had previously been open. Between military checkpoints, the threat of piracy and terrorism, as well as general refusal by sailors to simply take them, it had been a nightmare to make their way east. But eventually the familiar sight of what had once been the heart of the Mysts came into view.

"You look nervous," Damian said, a little too loudly for Wicke's liking, as he came and stood next to her near the bow of the passenger ship. "Hmph," she uttered. "Thanks," she added sarcastically. He shook his head and rolled his eyes. "No, I meant- ugh, never mind." He turned to walk away but she reached out behind her and caught the sleeve of his jacket. "This place... it's not got particularly nice memories for me. It's where we first learnt of the golems." Damian nodded, turning back and looking out towards the island. He placed an arm across her shoulders. "It'll be alright. In and out and then we'll never come back." She shrugged his arm off her shoulders, giving him a side-eye along with a faint smile. "Yeah. In and out. No problems," she stated, thinking back to Jayce saying exactly that last time.

They disembarked, stepping into the smog-filled city with a cautious and careful attitude. For once, Wicke didn't lead the way – leaving it instead to the far too excited Cinderlee. "Why are you all so glum?" she questioned, practically waltzing through the narrow, dark, damp and claustrophobic streets. "The air is poison," Enki stated, a thick scarf around his mouth and neck. Someone threw up in an alleyway nearby, Morgause immediately gesturing with her thumb in the vague direction of the noise. Wicke didn't dignify the question with a response, whilst Damian and Sabine both shrugged – equally curious about their new alien environment and cautious about what potentially awaited them.

"That is the smell of industrial progress. It's the smell of the future!" Cinderlee stated. "The future can wait a little longer if it stinks like this," Morgause stated, looking out towards the Navy and Guild ships in abundance in the harbour. "Just what are they manufacturing here that is so toxic?" she questioned. Wicke paused, glancing across the numerous posters plastered to the walls of the alley. They were mostly bounties: ex-Navy, Pirates, general scum – but there was also

advertisements for employment within the Guild or within the Republic. She took a step back – the entire wall seemed to be competing between the two, the advertisements either for the New World Republic or for the World Guild. “It’s the Republic,” she clarified, turning and continuing to follow after the group. “Their factories. Probably ammunition, weapons and armour. The Guild wanted Dungeon delvers, not anymore it seems. The posters are all old.”

“They may have closed the Dungeon,” Damian stated, folding his arms and thinking to himself. “A consequence of the others falling apart, no doubt,” Enki added. “In which case we’re going to need to break in. Should we wait for nightfall or is it worth attempting the front door?” questioned Morgause, looking to Wicke for an answer. “We’ll try the front door first. I have an idea, and there’s always a chance it’ll work.”

They continued to walk through the city, stopping off at various shops to procure all the supplies they needed for their next attempt before eventually making their way to the remnants of the Imperial base at the centre of the island. “Identification papers!” commanded a gold and green guard, holding his hand out to stop them on approach. “We’re from Caedom,” Wicke stated. “We were delvers there before the whole thing collapsed.” She handed over the identifications they had used then. “These are no good here. No outsiders. And we’re not hiring, so turn your arses around and jog on,” he growled, his hand on a pistol by his side. They could probably take him and any other guards on the other side, Wicke theorised – her eyes glancing to Morgause’s hand readying to strike. “Fine,” she stated. “Your loss. Let’s go.” She turned and began walking away, waiting until they were out of earshot and eyeline to speak to her group. “Nightfall. It’s not worth being identified, not yet.”

With that decided, the group separated – heading out in various directions in search of food, a bathhouse, and other sources of relaxation whilst they waited for the night to come. Wicke sat in a busy restaurant, listening to her food grill next to her as she sorted through her latest grimoire. The abundance of new spells she had been given by the two Archmages from the Dungeons had been overwhelming. It had taken her weeks on weeks to simply process what she had been gifted, and she had no doubt that it would be years before she had finished compiling her favourites into a singular grimoire. In the meantime, she had unceremoniously glued the two books together – a temporary measure that would probably result in her being shunned by most magical societies. “Here you go, miss,” stated the chef in front of her, sliding a healthy portion of various grilled meats towards her. She nodded and dug in, using her spare hand to

withdraw her other tome before flicking through it until she found what she needed. "Gotcha."

"Come again?" Morgause questioned, as Wicke unveiled her great plan. "It's simple. We're going to walk right in. It's winter – a blizzard is likely, no?" Wicke questioned. The group looked around to the distinct lack of snow, or even distinct cold in the air – the heat from the factories had eliminated any. "So a sudden blizzard is going to shield us, that still doesn't answer how we are going to get through that wall," Sabine stated. Wicke reached for her bottomless bag, pulling out a pair of large scrolls. "I'm going need a volunteer."

Damian's teeth chattered as he stood on the nearest rooftop to the Guild wall. Wicke's spell had worked, he could barely see his hands – the snow and wind, heavy and fast. "This is so stupid," he muttered, taking the scroll in his hands and beginning to chant. He guided his hands forwards, the snow on the ground clumping together before freezing solid as he built himself a staircase to the top of the wall out of ice. Damian then began to climb, taking out the second scroll and beginning to chant – this spell far more complicated than the previous one. He reached behind him, pointing at the rooftop. He then stopped at the top of the wall, pointing to the base of the Dungeon. A pair of blue portals formed in both spots, his party rushing immediately through the copy of Caelie's portals.

"Hey!" came a voice from someone just beneath him. Damian kicked, hard, a scream following as the person on the other end fell off the wall. He then leapt forwards, trusting in his senses as he crashed through the wooden roof of a shack and then broke into a sprint towards the Dungeon. "Hey, someone fell off the wall!" came a voice behind him. "Sound the alarm!" Damian ignored it, weaving through the blinded patrols before sliding along the ground under a barrier. He could feel the others at the doors of the Dungeon, a faint crack open just for him. He dove through and they shut it closed behind him. "I am not doing that again!" he panted, the others beginning to walk forwards. Morgause offered a hand to him and he took it. "With luck we won't need to," she reassured. He scoffed. "Yeah, right. I have a bad feeling about this."

Damian couldn't help but feel he should have listened to his earlier feelings. Right from the first floor of the Dungeon things felt different. The layout seemed alien, alien to the design of the other two. It had warped, turning what initially had been simple encounters into ones where even the environment seemed out to get them. "Be careful," warned a returning party, heading in the opposite direction to where they were heading. "It's all changed again. Whatever

happened to the other two Dungeons, it's probably happening here as well – it could collapse any day now," they stated to Wicke and Damian. It wouldn't, but they didn't need to know that. "Have you got updated maps?" Damian questioned. "Were you not given any? Here. Good luck."

There were bodies further in. Damian did his best to ignore them, as did Wicke, but he could hear her muffled sobs during the nights. The increased difficulty was their fault, that was undeniable – the extra casualties were theirs, regardless of whether the explorers knew and accepted the risks. There was little he could say to comfort her, he knew that better than anyone, but they carried onwards – the days falling into weeks.

Damian clutched his stomach, dropping to his knees – his vision blurry, body heavy, and distinct agony coursing outwards from within. "Damian!" Wicke cried, the headless knight raising its halberd to behead him. "Come on," he growled, lunging forwards to roll between its large legs. He ignored the trail of blood he was leaving behind, throwing an armoured fist into the back of the monster's knee. It buckled and he dove onto it, knocking the heavy suit of armour to the floor as the others rushed to aid him. "Back!" Wicke yelled. Damian rolling away as she encased the creature in a large block of ice before Sabine smashed it apart into tiny fragments with her mace. Damian's vision darkened and he did not get back up.

He awoke with his head in someone's lap, long red hair dangling over him. Wicke's eyes were shut, fatigue plastered across her face and her breathing soft. "You alive?" Morgause questioned quietly, from the other side of the recovery alcove they were in. "Just about. What floor are we on?" he asked, hopeful that they had somehow carried onwards without him. "Seventy." He swore and let out a deep sigh. "We're not going to make it with just us." Morgause shook her head. "No." Her eyes glanced towards Enki, his back to the entire group and headtails tensed in an aggressive manner – a telltale sign that he was at a breaking point.

"What are our chances of getting back in if we get out?" Damian asked her. "Next to none. The blizzard worked because it was winter. It won't be by the time we get out. There's a chance we'll be identified as well. Enki is not discrete." "Not my fault," he protested, glancing back towards them with a sullen face. "Not saying it is. None of us are. Well, perhaps you Damian," Morgause returned. "Thanks..."

“What’s her thoughts?” he asked quietly, looking up to Wicke. Morgause and Enki looked at each other, before back at Damian. “She wants to keep going.” “Of course she does. We’ll make our way back to the surface. We’ll head north. It won’t be what she wants but it will be our safest option. There should be a ship heading that way. Or something we can use to go that direction,” he stated. The other two nodded in agreement.

Wicke was not happy with the decision made without her, but both Cinderlee and Sabine were immediately in agreement with Damian, Morgause and Enki. “We’re outgunned. We’re not ready for this. We need better equipment or we need new bodies. It’s too much for the six of us,” Damian rationalised. Wicke held her tongue, her face and immediate pacing laying out a silent essay of frustration. “You know I’m right.”

“Two years...” Wicke said quietly, eventually standing still and looking directly at Damian. He nodded. “It will be more than that. Jayce isn’t done with his fight, not by a long shot from the sounds of things,” he returned. “We’re not done either, and even if Jayce was ready for us, would you want to return to him like this? With a job half-done? I’m not ready to give up either but we’re no good dead. We need a new approach – especially if these Dungeons are only going to get even harder.”

And that settled it for them. With a foul temperament, Wicke led the charge back to the surface. Throwing away her cultivated resources - that she had set aside for the final thirty floors - she burned and froze their way back to the surface, completely ignoring the abundance of magic stones they previously would have desperately scavenged. Damian did his best to stay out of her way, her fire often lapped a little too close to his ankles and he was well aware that although she agreed with his viewpoint it didn’t help to eliminate her frustration at the group’s failure to keep up with her. She knew the others could and would leave if she was too harsh on them. Damian wouldn’t, because at the end of the day, without his brother – and through him, her - he had nothing.

She placed a hand on his back as they made their way towards the final set of stairs leading out of the Dungeon. “Hold up. Something’s wrong,” she said softly, just for him to hear. He glanced back towards her and the others, the group weary, drained, and exhausted from the fury-march back to the surface. “We’ve passed no other groups,” she stated. He looked at her with confusion before his eyes eventually widened. “Shit. You’re right. They’ve locked down the Dungeon. They’re going to be waiting to see who emerges on the other side.”

“So how do we get out of here?” Sabine questioned, rising panic in her voice. “I have a spell, but I can’t cast it until we’re out of the Dungeon – I already tried and it failed. I need cover – a smokescreen,” Wicke stated to the group. Sabine and Morgause looked towards Enki and Cinderlee. “I can create a cloud, but it will not erase our presence from those versed in Focus,” Cinderlee stated. Enki withdrew his paintbrush. “I can handle that,” he added. Damian looked to Wicke. She gave him a soft but nervous smile. “Defend us,” she told him. “As if I wouldn’t.”

They made their way up the final stairs, stopping in front of the metal doors with Morgause and Damian at the front. “There’s a chance there’s no one waiting for us, right?” Sabine questioned in a near whimper, standing just behind Morgause. “Doubtful, but hiding our identities still isn’t a bad thing,” Morgause answered, looking to Cinderlee as she shook two glass vials in her hands. “Fair point...” Sabine muttered, looking to Wicke and Enki both getting into their own positions. “Now,” Cinderlee commanded.

Damian pushed the incredibly heavy door open just a little bit, enough for Cinderlee to throw the vials out. “Someone is coming out!” yelled a voice from the other side just before the two vials shattered, releasing a pair of thick and explosive clouds of grey smoke. “Come out with your hands up or we will open fire!” came a command. Damian ignored it, reaching out with Focus and immediately getting a response back from dozen guards stood waiting. Wicke began to chant as Enki painted in the air, a metal barricade materialising and crashing to the floor between them and the Guild guards. “Mage! Open fire!” came a command from the lead guard.

Sabine, Enki and Cinderlee dove forwards, ducking behind the metal barricade whilst Wicke continued to chant. Damian and Morgause stood in front of her as bullets began to fly towards them. He used his metal gauntlets, changeling his Focus to block the impacts, whilst Morgause angled her huge sword like a shield. The seconds slowly ticked away, a giant purple ring spreading out around them. “Teleportation Circle!” Wicke cried, a bolt of purple lightning crashing down on them all.

A moment later they were stood on solid ground, looking into their apartment within the Republic Capital. “That felt too close!” Sabine immediately cried, holding her head in her hands and rocking on the floor. “We were fine,” Morgause stated coolly, crouching next to Sabine and placing a gauntlet on her shoulder. “But it does raise a few worrying points to discuss. Most notably that

they knew we were still inside, and that our faces were seen by other explorers. They may have our identities.”

“Then we’re going to have to be extra careful on our next attempt,” Wicke returned. “Which is going to be where exactly?” Enki questioned. The group looked towards Wicke. “I... don’t know – yet. Give me some time to think it over. There’s a lot to think over...” she said somewhat dejectedly. The various eyes flickered over towards Damian. He nodded back and stepped towards the windows. “I’m thinking- wait, what’s that?” he uttered, faltering before walking towards their room’s balcony.

The others followed him as he unlocked the door and stepped outside. Smoke filled the air, fires burned on the waters – the ruins of numerous ships drifting across the surface of the ocean. “A battle?” Sabine asked nervously, looking towards Morgause. She shook her head, waving her hand across the wreckage to the Navy fleet beginning to set sail south. “A war.”

Seize the Seas Tales: Burden of Loss

“Commodore, if it was any other person, I would be recommending weeks, if not months, of rehabilitation. You’ve suffered a great wound, least of all the scarring to your face and neck. People do not just shrug off losing a limb, or a friend,” stated Lieutenant Laine. “You’ve lost your right arm, in more ways than one.” “Do you think I don’t know that, Doc?” Alara returned, massaging the still fresh scar tissue over her stump as Lieutenant Laine looked over her. “I’m just suggesting that it may not yet be time to be... leading, fighting – you should be resting.”

Alara shook her head and reached for the metal prosthesis that had been hastily prepared for her. “Allow me,” Laine attempted, moving closer to help with the straps but Alara pulled back. “I can do it myself,” she said, a bit too aggressively for her own liking. An awkward silence passed before Alara turned her right side towards the Lieutenant. “Sorry...” she said quietly. Laine nodded, helping to equip the prosthesis. “It’s okay. You’ve been through a lot.”

“We’ve been through a lot, all of us. But duty does not wait for us to be alright. Commodore Kai is counting on us, on me, to bring her help,” Alara stated, getting to her feet and moving her metal arm around. Alara caught Laine’s side-eye glancing around the adjusted Captain’s quarters of the Blood Moon – the ship Alara had taken as her own. Their fleet, for the most part, had been destroyed – the ‘reinforcements’ they were bringing were minimal. “We’re better than

nothing," Alara asserted, stepping towards the door. "And sharing bedrooms is far from my biggest problem."

She sighed as she stepped out into the open air. Her body felt in pain, a constant and numb aching sensation across her skin: mainly in her neck and lower jaw, but also across her absent right arm. She also felt heavy, an invisible pressure pushing down upon her shoulders, despite having gone through arguably the most radical weight-loss of her life. But she could see that the weariness was not exclusive to her, so she forced a smile, stood up straight and stepped forwards towards the Helm. "It will be sometime before we arrive at our destination, Commodore," warned Lieutenant Suni, as she turned away from the ship's wheel to look at Alara. "I know... but hopefully it'll be in time to matter." *It better be*, she thought.

Chapter 213: In Deepest Darkness

Ordo groaned as he rolled onto his back, his vision dark and blurry, and the ground cold and damp. His sides hurt, he could taste blood and his heart thundered inside his head. "Jayce?" he questioned, a pair of glowing red and pink eyes looking down at him as his vision slowly cleared. "Not quite," stated Mai Lu, a look of clear disappointment across her face. She extended a hand down to him and he took it, allowing her to pull him to his feet. "Where are we?" he questioned, the darkness still consuming his vision. He frowned; regardless of where they had landed it should still have been daytime.

"We're East. Old World," Mai Lu answered. Ordo looked around. They were out in the open at the top of a grassy mound, with a large jagged rock laying on its side nearby. Huge evergreen forests sat in almost every direction, with a huge mountain laying beyond the thickest of the visible forests. The skies were covered with a layer of thick, dark clouds, but there wasn't any rain and, most curiously, the clouds were not moving – as if they had been locked in place. "Yeah, that's my thinking too," he stated.

"How so?" Mai Lu questioned. He turned and looked at her, an instinctive flare of frustration crossing his face immediately as he sensed her questioning his intelligence. "It matches what we've heard of Strigon's domain. The darkness, the landscape and so forth," he answered. "Given it seems like it's just us two, I don't need you to question my intelligence," he growled. She looked around before shrugging. "I'm just checking your cognitive abilities, old man," she said with a probing grin. He flinched. "Old man? I'm about a third of your age, 'young lady'," he returned.

She grinned, placing her hands on her hips and looking ever-so-slightly down at him. "And don't you forget it. So follow my lead. I sense magic all around us so we should try and head towards the source – someone may be able to help us, or, at the very least, there should be a group we can enslave – I mean, coerce." Ordo shook his head. "That mountain. We should climb it, it'll give us the tactical view we need to plan our next move. We should also be laying low, not trying to dominate. This is Betrayal, Vampire Lord, Jure Strigon's domain, and from what I've heard he is not alone here. Now is not the time to be picking fights." "But it's a mountain, do we really have to?" whined Mai Lu.

"We need to find the others. I can sense Taranis somewhere far away from here, he will try to come and find us, but I'm guessing you got no response on our communicators?" Ordo stated. Mai Lu shook her head. "Then we have to assume

they're either dead or not here. In either case, we lay low and gather information. Understood?" Mai Lu didn't respond. "Am I understood, Mai Lu? Baal?" "Clear," came a growl from Mai Lu's neck. Ordo looked towards Mai Lu's face. She let out a sigh and nodded. "Fine, Old Dog, we'll do it your way." He nodded and turned towards the mountain, beginning their march. Mai Lu trundled along after him.

"Great plan!" Mai Lu yelled, the pair of them back-to-back as they stood surrounded by trees in darkness with numerous glowing red eyes locked onto them from all directions. Ordo stared at the vampire spawn circling them. The vaguely human-like monsters were all pale, skinny, deformed – as if they had been starved and left to fester. One lunged at him and he slammed it down into the mud with his spiky greatclub. It squirmed and he brought his boot up before crushing its skull. The creature broke apart into ash. "We'll come across far worse than Vampire Spawn, my dear. They look like they've been abandoned, they're starved." Mai Lu shrugged, biting her finger before pointing at a Spawn lunging towards her. A bullet of blood shot out from her hand and impaled the creature. It then staggered backwards before rupturing from the inside out.

The rest fell shortly after, with Mai Lu using the blood-splatters of the corpses as weapons of her own and Ordo crushing the rest with his huge and heavy club. "Easy enough," Ordo stated, leaning on his weapon and looking at her. Mai Lu rolled her eyes before beginning to walk forwards. He cleared his throat and she turned to face him with a flash of irritation. "What?" she questioned. He gestured to the blood on his greatclub. "Do you mind?"

Ordo rubbed his bruised nose as they began the steep ascent up the mountain. "Where is your Dragon now?" Mai Lu eventually questioned, moaning and complaining with every step and leap. "Still far away, somewhere in that direction," he gestured, pointing vaguely towards the other side of the mountain. "A real pity..." she said quietly. It took them far longer than Ordo would have expected to reach the summit, but the view was everything he could have asked for.

At the edge of the clouds, an orange glow broke through the faintest gap on the horizon. It felt warm, reassuring, kind to them both as it landed on their faces - but almost immediately the light was smothered. The pair of them stared down at a large city, the buildings medieval and bleak – illuminated almost entirely by fires in hearths and oil streetlamps. A fog seemed to float across the cobblestone streets, the roads almost entirely empty other than a hurrying, hooded figure or

two. Faint farms sat in the background but the fields of crops seemed desolate, abandoned and withered.

Beyond the farms, the ground had cracked and broken. Huge masses of earth had listed, breaking out of the ground and tilting upwards as if pushed from below by something. Forests, fields, a mountain, even a lake floated a few dozen metres above the ground – encapsulated within an unnatural power from a past long gone. But one of the loose pieces of earth had been captured, moved or dragged to sit above the city – held to the ground by colossal chains. A black castle stood watch over the dominion beneath it, its spires tall and pointed, gates and walls high and ominous. Its windows glowed a blood red colour, and both Ordo and Mai Lu felt as if the castle itself was watching them. “Well...” Mai Lu stated, losing grasp of the words she had wanted to say. Ordo nodded in agreement. The land itself felt in despair. “This is certainly Strigon’s domain.”

Slowly, and carefully, they descended the mountain towards the city and its floating castle. A caravan was coming in from the west, following a trail through the surrounding forests. Ordo and Mai Lu quietly slipped in amongst the other walkers, the guards unobservant and focused more on guarding the wagons carrying food than the passengers either in the carriages or walking behind. “Easy enough,” Mai Lu whispered, pulling her hood up over her pinkish hair. “Too easy,” Ordo returned, stepping forwards to get a glance inside the nearest carriage. He couldn’t see much, but the glowing red eyes and pointed ears of the passengers within told him all he needed to know. He dropped back to her side, looking towards the other hooded walkers – each of them bore grim and doomed expressions, some wearing shackles or otherwise marked with brands. “Slaves, and food for the populus – vamps and otherwise,” he ascertained.

Mai Lu nudged him, gesturing ahead to the gates to the city. A rotting corpse of a woman hung over the entranceway, the entire road leading up to it marked with sharpened logs each bearing an impaled corpse of their own. They were mostly men, all a variety of ages, with the youngest being a late teenager. Ordo lowered his head, clenching his fists in a deep rage as he walked through the clear warning that had been presented to all newcomers.

Mai Lu kept her head up, her curiosity scanning the Null Legionnaires on the walls for any traces of vampirism. The sight didn’t bother her – the dead were dead, the method of their execution was irrelevant – but she couldn’t help but let her thoughts wander. The city was large, well-defended and being supplied with external resources given that the fields looked dead. But it wasn’t anything

special, a mere monument that any self-respecting tyrant would scoff at. The castle stood out, a distinct stench of magic floating upwards from within towards the skies – the source of the daytime cloud-cover, Baal informed her – but it was just a castle, not a palace.

“This isn’t Strigon’s city, only one of his Generals,” Mai Lu informed Ordo, snapping him out of his silent fury before subtly nudging him away from the other broken walkers, the pair of them watching from an alleyway as the caravan continued forwards further into the city. “Are you sure?” Ordo questioned, taking a deep breath before slowly exhaling. “Certain,” she returned. “This isn’t grand enough for a Vampire Lord. It’s the domain of one of his Generals.” “Should be easier for us to move around then. They won’t know who we are, not to the extend he does. Let’s find somewhere to sleep, and then we’ll buy some clothes to better blend in in the morning.” She nodded in agreement, glancing back towards the city gates as they slammed closed.

It never felt like morning actually came – the only sign of the day was the clock on the wall of their room and the bustle of people hurrying about the streets outside of their inn. They quietly left their inn, heading through the streets to the nearest clothes shop. Ordo immediately searched for anything plain, ordinary, and functional, but Mai Lu decided against that idea. “You’re not Zeta,” Ordo grumbled, as she emerged in a gold and black embroidered tailcoat. “When surrounded by Vampires, dress like them – no?” Mai Lu returned, testing the movement of the black leather shoes and patting her fluffed black trousers. “Return it and grab something more sensible,” he ordered. She rolled her eyes, moving her hair to ensure it covered her ears. Her red and pink eyes flashed at Ordo. “Vampire enough?” she asked. He sighed, shaking his head. It wasn’t worth the argument. “Fine, just... don’t do anything stupid.”

“Where to?” Mai Lu questioned, looking up at the Vampire castle above them. “Let’s head closer to the marketplace. We’ll buy some supplies and then head further west.” Mai Lu nodded, stepping closer to him before biting her finger. She hooked her arm around his, a steady stream of blood rolling up her finger before binding to his clothes – the black-red crystals shining in the low light and glamourifying his clothing. “I need my servant to look the part,” she said with a smile, leaning into him and beginning to walk. “Why couldn’t I have been paired with anyone else?” he muttered. She glared at him out of the corner of her eye, a genuine question of whether or not to kill him crossing her mind – on Baal’s suggestion. “Just, uh, joking,” he quickly added, sensing bloodlust.

They walked around the marketplace, the majority of the shoppers avoiding them like they had the plague, and all of the sellers offering them only the best of deals. A scream struck the air, Ordo immediately turning to look as Mai Lu desperately tried to keep him locked within her grip. "Don't!" she warned, firmly and coldly. A Vampire had snatched a young boy from his mother, the boy squirming in the pale and blonde woman's grip. She stared at the mother, her fangs bared over the boy's neck – the child no older than seven or eight. "Please! I beg of you, let him go!" she wailed on her hands and knees, pleading before the Vampire.

Ordo took a step forwards but Mai Lu darted forwards and stood in front of him with her arms spread. "Think, Ordo, think!" she said in a firm hush. He glared at her. "We can't do nothing!" he returned, keeping his voice low and in a deep growl. "You can't stop it, it's too late – you'll just create a hostage," she warned. "Everything we do here may have unforeseen consequences and there is a very real chance that the Vampires may punish the population for anything we do." "So we should do nothing?"

"That's not what I'm saying. This isn't going to affect any real Vampire. This is just the territory of one of Strigon's Generals. We hold off until we reach his city, we cause real pain there," she suggested. He looked past her. The mother lay on the floor in a ball, sobbing – the child and Vampire were nowhere to be seen. "We're here for the moment, we might as well leave an impact here. We can put the fear back into these fiends – make them learn to hesitate before they take any actions."

"And just how do you suggest that?" she questioned, folding her arms and glancing around. "We show them that there is always a bigger monster," he stated, looking intently at her. "We can't do anything for these people, I agree with you – we need the others. But we will come back, and every one of those monsters we kill now is one less for us later. Let's show them what they have to look forward to. Even if it's not permanent we can give these people a breather, it's only fair."

Night fell once more, the foggy streets darkening beyond the shadows of the daytime into the eclipse of the night. The moon shone through the gaps in the freed clouds, painting the streets like searchlights as the Vampires prowled. A scream filled the air: a drunken man caught out on his way home. Another pierced the silence: a young woman carrying food to her parents, an old man trying to force a door shut, a priest muttering a prayer in a dying church... a child

in their bed, screaming at the forced-open windows, a crouched red-eyed ghoul staring at them with a wicked grin and salivating tongue. All food for the night.

A hand grabbed the creature from behind, the flapping curtains falling still and the window slamming shut. The prayers continued unhindered. The door closed and locked, bringing a sigh of relief. A daughter made it home. A father was embraced by his wife and children. Blood splattered the streets, teeth and skulls were shattered, monsters were slain by the bigger predators on the prowl - all the way until the sunrise that lay invisible behind a wall of shadow.

The pink and red-eyed Demon fed on the massacre and the Old Dog guarded the people as he always had. Slowly the fear of the Vampires stilled, replaced by the fear of whatever lay in the night – waiting for the creatures to lay a finger on the people they had once called their prey. Rumours swirled whilst Ordo and Mai Lu hid in pubs and alleyways – both in plain sight and without – rumours of the predator that hunts Vampires.

“They say it’s someone called Astris Kai,” murmured an ancient man to Ordo, the pair of them enjoying a pint of very dark ale. “Who?” Ordo questioned, his eye glancing towards his watch as he waited for Mai Lu to return from her hunt. “Some Vampire woman that turned against them – they speak of her in terror, in the same sort of way they speak about their Lord, Jure Strigon,” stated Almec, one of the eldest within the city. “I see,” Ordo returned casually, the door to the pub slamming open.

“Everyone out!” growled a harsh voice. “Everyone is to report to the market square, now!” Ordo turned to look, a trio of Vampires had entered the dark and warmly-lit pub. The lead Vampire wore a smart suit of black and red, his hair slicked back and eyes a fearsome vampiric red. Flanking him were two Null Legion – their eyes glowing beneath their gasmask helmets, they held thin rapiers already stained with blood. Ordo moved to stand up, his right arm hanging down as he pressed on his left knee – readying himself to strike if necessary.

But Almec reached for his sleeve, taking it subtly and with a strong grip built from a lifetime of labour. “There is a door out of the back, my friend. It connects to the cellar, which has a hatch behind the bar,” Almec said softly, getting to his feet with a groan and stepping in front of Ordo. The pair looked at each other. Ordo was not young, but Almec was at least a few decades older than him. “Don’t talk, my friend. Go.”

Ordo didn't hesitate, as the rest of the busy pub staggered and shuffled towards the Vampires by the doorway, he stuck low – downing the remains of his pint and moving quickly to the bar before slipping behind it. He pulled open the hatch, dropping down into the cellar before moving through the numerous barrels to another small hatch. He entered into Focus, scanning his exit before stepping outside.

Mai Lu was waiting for him from a vantage point near the main market square. The majority of the rooftops were laden with Null Legion, all with their rifles aimed towards the growing crowd hurried and shoved into the square. "I don't like this..." Ordo murmured, leaning against wall of the church's bell tower – looking down from the belfry windows. "No, but this was expected," Baal stated through Mai Lu, standing unafraid, directly in front of the opening.

"There," Ordo stated, pointing upwards as a shadow descended from the castle high above the city. It fell fast and hard, landing in a splash of red mist in front of the terrified crowd. It was a Vampire woman, dressed in a crimson corset dress. She had long, light-brown hair, her skin ghostly-white. Her features were tight, with high cheekbones, narrow, blood-red eyes and a prominent nose. "That's one of Strigon's Generals."

"Then now we move," Mai Lu stated, looking back towards Ordo. He nodded in agreement, stretching before moving next to her. Screams came from the marketplace, an interrogation beginning as the Vampire General attempted to turn the hunt around, but Ordo and Mai Lu ignored them. They dashed in the opposite direction, heading straight towards one of the large chains binding the floating castle to the ground. They ran unopposed, leaping onto the giant metal binding and surging upwards towards the castle.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, the castle was basically empty. No one stood guard – there was no need to, after all. They walked straight through the courtyard, pushing the huge main doors open and entering into the entrance hall. The dark castle was lit by simple torches on the walls. Crimson tapestries and rugs lined the large walls and floors, the high ceiling had carved vampiric imagery. "Can you feel the source?" Ordo questioned. Mai Lu nodded, stepping towards a nearby staircase and leading the way as they hunted the strong source of magic within the castle.

She led them to another pair of ornate doors, pushing them open and leading the way inside into a throne room. It was similar to the main entrance hall, only with huge paintings on the wall, a gigantic stained glass window on the far wall sitting

over a large and dark throne. The glass was almost entirely red, and depicted a naked young woman in the arms of a dark-skinned Vampire biting into her neck. Corpses lay at their feet, blood running down her pale skin. But neither Ordo nor Mai Lu paid it any attention – instead their eyes lay locked on the grotesque monument before them. “Fascinating,” Mai Lu muttered almost subconsciously.

“Fascinating?” Ordo questioned in horror. It was a twisted form of numerous corpses, stuck together with metal spikes and pins, the skin flayed from the two dozen or so bodies. It was hard to tell where one body started and another ended. Some were skeletal, almost entirely rotted away, whereas others were clearly fresher. A soft moan escaped the monument, a movement coming from what used to be a man.

Mai Lu approached the source of the magic, pausing to touch the dried pool of blood beneath the monument before flicking her finger upwards. A thin and sharp spear of black-red crystal ended the suffering, the spear branching outwards to ensure that every body was for certain dead. “Not going to argue that we could have saved him?” Mai Lu questioned, as if to herself. Ordo stepped closer, the stench horrific. “No. There’s no... no. So this is... the source of the magic?”

“Most certainly, but it’s not something Baal or I recognise. It’s a curious monstrosity. Eldritch, and cunning,” she stated. “It should fade on its own, or perhaps it’s a conduit to something else. I don’t really know. Morgana would know.” Ordo scoffed, it wasn’t worth playing who was and wasn’t helpful at one particular moment or the next – they were on their own, they would have to handle whatever they encountered. “Then let’s destroy it and get out of here,” he stated, looking to her.

But Mai Lu’s expression went blank, her face morphing as Baal emerged. A pair of red curved horns curled upwards from her forehead, another pair emerging out her temples. Her skin turned dark crimson, other than her face which turned a pale, bone white. Mai Lu’s teeth sharpened into a maw of points and a forked tongue rolled across her lips as her red and fiery pink eyes stared at the evil before them. “Give me a moment,” Baal stated, staring intently and curiously at the despair before them. “Mai Lu,” Ordo said with a growl. Baal looked briefly at him. “Do you not trust me?”

Ordo didn’t answer. It wasn’t worth answering. “Truly fascinating,” Baal muttered, reaching up to the monument to rest his clawed hand on the bloody chest of the nearest corpse. The blood vibrated, as if channelling a heartbeat,

before each and every corpse twitched – the countless heads all turning unnaturally to stare at him. “What the fuck?” Ordo questioned, taking a step back and drawing his greatclub. Each black eye stared at Baal and he stared back with an inhumanly wide grin. “You belong to me,” he growled, the numerous mouths opening wide in a silent scream before the entire monument erupted in an explosion of blood and gore.

Mai Lu faltered as she found herself in a ringed circle of white light, as if a beam had descended down upon her – everything around her was grasped in shadow. She was alone, but she could feel the hot and wet breathing of Baal across her neck. “Be on your guard,” he warned. “I feel... something new.” Another breathing joined the air: wet and raspy – guttural. A pair of eyes illuminated within the shadow, green – yet bloodshot – both of them bulbous and looking in opposite directions. They moved independently before snapping onto Mai Lu. Slowly the eyes moved closer, a heavy shuffling reaching her ears as something dragged itself across the floor. Then the body rose upwards, the eyes moving from her eyeline to towering above her – at least several metres in height. “Fiend...” came a raspy and deep voice.

“Mai Lu!” Ordo stated, placing a hand on her shoulder – Baal’s form fading back into her as she stared vacantly at the stained glass – a brilliant sunlight breaking through and painting the blood and gore-soaked floor in red light. She looked at him, blinking quickly as she questioned just what she had seen. “Yeah?” “You good?” he asked, taking his hand off her and flicking blood to the floor. She grinned, unaware of the blood soaking her from head to toe. “Better than good.” “Good, cause something is coming!”

The doors slammed open behind them, a badly burnt woman striding in with fury on her face as her flesh began to heal. The Vampire General stared at them with utter rage. “You dare!” she yelled, taking an offensive stance and drawing a large and long knife out of thin air. “What? No introductions? No speech?” Ordo questioned, as she screamed and charged at them. Her knife brushed the air in front of his throat, but black-red crystals latched to her ankles as she tried to take another step.

Ordo stepped forwards, twisting and swinging with his greatclub to send her flailing across the room towards her throne, directly into the sunlight painting the floor. She screeched in pain, writhing in agony before darting towards the shadow by her throne. “I will flay you alive for this!” she screamed, looking

between the pair of them with crazed rage. "Strigon will have your heads!" she yelled.

Mai Lu took a step forwards but Ordo held out his arm, stopping her as he looked towards the growing shadow in the window. The glass exploded inwards as a large black and blue Dragon crashed through the window, snatching the Vampire General in his mouth. She wailed in pain, her arms locked to her side in his maw before a loud revving sound filled the room. The two halves of her fell with a thud, before disintegrating into ash. "Took you long enough, you big reptile!" Ordo stated.

"Die," Taranis returned with a deep growl, shaking his head and looking down at his vanished meal with disappointment. Ordo chuckled. "Let's get out of here, no point waiting for Strigon," he stated, turning to Mai Lu. "We should find you a bath, or a lake." She shrugged, placing her hand to her chest before pulling her hand away – the blood lifted, coalescing into a large crystal that she dropped onto the floor, shattering it to remove any traces of her presence. "Fair enough, can you do that for my boots?"

"No."

"Fair enough. What did you see? You blanked out for a moment once Baal... ate that monument," he questioned, clambering aboard the back of Taranis. Mai Lu took his hand and sat behind him, Taranis flying once around the large room before diving out of the shattered window into the bright sunny sky. "That thing... the monument. It belonged to the Grandfather. The Cannibals and the Vampires are working together here," she answered. Ordo nodded, it was hardly surprising. "Then let's head south. We'll make our way to the capital of these lands. Let's find what makes these monsters tick, and then put a spanner in their works."

Seize the Seas Tales: A Greater Understanding

Rosalynn the Lich would have smiled if she could. It had been a while since the stranger, Jayce Exarga, had crossed her threshold, and during that time he had filled her mind with ludicrous tales of his travels, read a respectable portion of her library, and sweated away with his weapons out in her courtyard. She found herself most days watching him from the window as he danced along the stone with a variety of weapons. Sometimes he would brave the sands beyond, often collapsing and needing her minions to drag him back to safety after over-exerting

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himself in an attempt to harness 'Focus', as he put it, outside of her protective field. It was cute. Like watching a puppy fail to catch a butterfly.

But sometimes... rarely, but growing more commonly, she would see a technicolour array of power crossing his body – inside and out of her castle. He was growing stronger, and quickly, and soon he would leave her – as she always knew he would. Her would-be smile faded. She didn't want him to go.

Chapter 214: Tears and Tears

Zeta let out a yelp as she landed awkwardly on a slope, her left ankle folding and her body immediately tumbling backwards into a large fern. “Ugh,” she groaned, laying on her back and looking up the forest of evergreen trees all around her. “Guys, where are we?” she questioned, touching her necklace and thinking of her crewmates. Silence followed. “Guys?” she questioned once more, standing up with a wince and leaning onto her right side. Silence continued. “Great...” she muttered, patting down her long, frilly, glamorous, and, hand-made, blue dress. It was untorn, and luckily she had avoided a nearby patch of mud – landing instead on a heap of moss.

Zeta looked around: there was only forest, but she could see a walking path not too far away – a simple dirt track cutting through the woods. “Better than nothing, I suppose,” she said to herself, trying to still the rising panic inside her. “The others have to be nearby, surely. Just... somewhere. Come on Zeta – you’ve got this. What would Marisha do?” She looked down at her injured ankle, patting her side for her bottomless bag. She continued to pat, frowning before switching sides then looking down and spinning around. “No... no, no, no... no-no-no-no-no!”

She buried her face in her hands. “Why?” she whimpered. She let out a long and heavy huff into her hands before standing up straight and fixing her hair. “It’s okay! Breathe,” she told herself. She was missing her instruments, her healing potions... her money pouch – she literally had nothing but the clothes on her body. She took a step forwards before hobbling on the other foot. She took another step, and another, and another – shutting away the pain until it became a numb sensation in the back of her mind. With a squelch, her foot splashed into a cold and muddy puddle – ruining her shoe. She stared outwards with a cold and dead expression before shaking the forest with an ear-bursting swear.

The path had tracks pressed into the mud – signs of civilisation: wagons, carts, or carriages. It was life, human life and that meant people who could help her. With a silent mental coin toss, Zeta followed the tracks downhill, cautiously half-walking-half-sliding down the muddy path until the forest began to open up. She found herself stood at the top of a small cliff, the path winding downwards beneath her. A small town sat ahead of her, the buildings wooden and medieval, with smoke rising out of the chimneys and the windows lit by lanterns and candles. The clouds were thick above, the air cold, painting the land in a soft shadow that matched her temperament. People wandered the streets in simple,

colourless clothes. "Great..." she muttered. "It's going to be one of those kinds of peasant villages." Beyond the village were open fields and more forests beyond them.

Cautiously, Zeta began to her descent, eventually making it down to the final path leading up to the village. There were no defensive walls, no obvious guards, and the village likely only held a few hundred – if even that – people. She trod through the mud into the village, hugging her chest and shivering slightly as she glanced at the villagers all looking towards her. None stepped forwards, no one spoke to her – they just stared and whispered. She almost preferred it, but equally she couldn't help but feel as if something was off.

She walked the main road, looking at each building: mostly rural shops, or a church, or a town hall, eventually settling her gaze on the only building making any noise: a tavern called 'the Old Lily'. She pushed the heavy wooden door open, a bell tinkling above the entrance as she stepped into the fire-warmed, smoky room. Eyes continued to fall her way as she limped into the men-filled room. Zeta held her head high, forcing down her caution as she looked for someone that stood out amongst the room full of coarse wool clothes in greens, browns and creams. Her eyes locked onto one of the only other women in the low-ceilinged room: the barkeep.

"Excuse me," Zeta began as she leant onto the bar, ignoring the eyes on her backside and chest. The barkeep, a somewhat buxom, dark-haired woman wearing work clothes and a sneer, gave her a quick glance before pulling a face. "You lost, princess?" she questioned, continuing to serve drinks and turning away from her. "Uh, yeah," Zeta returned. "Where am I? I mean, which region?" "Huh? You're in a small village called Old Keeling. You buying a drink? If not then get out. This is an establishment, we don't host loiterers and the upper class."

"I, um, lost my money pouch," Zeta said. The barkeep looked back at her, her eyes glancing towards Zeta's bare ears and then the necklace on her chest. "You can pay with the necklace." Zeta clutched her necklace: her translator and her communicator. "Sorry, I'll be back with some money," Zeta stated, stepping away from the bar and walking quickly towards the door. She ignored the jeering and the whistling.

Zeta found an alleyway, leaning her head into the wall and trying to think as she fought back tears. She had no idea where Old Keeling was, but it most certainly wasn't New World – not unless she was in the Gardens somewhere. "Think..."

she muttered. She glanced up to the sky: it was dark but it wasn't night – late afternoon, she supposed. She patted her empty hidden pockets, there was nothing in there. Her stomach rumbled, drawing out a sigh. "Whatever it takes," she stated, stepping out of the alleyway and approaching a statue along the main road.

Zeta made herself comfortable before clearing her throat. Eyes continued to fall her way but more out of curiosity than animosity. A small child pointed at her before tugging on her mother's arm. Zeta began to sing, trying to remember the words to the song she had written about Caelie and Xander, a song about loss and grief, a song that best represented how she felt now, all alone in alien lands. She felt her voice wobble at points, the lyrics all the more impactful as she sung without her music – reliant only on her voice to carry the impact of her tale. The passersby stopped, some stayed, some went. She carried her song onwards, switching naturally into the song she wrote about the end of the Empire. She sung about the battle, the fear, the horror of both the actions of the enemy and her own. She felt like a fraud without her instruments, as if her words were only half true, or second-hand. The songs didn't feel like hers.

She moved onto her song about Jayce, a song she had called 'Hero', singing about his leadership, his courage, his love, and his willingness to do what needed to be done. She moved onto Thalia, singing a song of admiration, love and worry – a song she hadn't released for fear of Thalia's reaction and the potential damage it could do to their bond – both spoken and unspoken. She faltered at the end, her mind filling with worries over her friends, her crew, and their fates. A hand tugged her sleeve, drawing Zeta's brown eyes back to reality. The small girl who had watched her start to end held up a pearl to her. "Thank you," Zeta said earnestly, the rest of the watchers moving onwards. "Your hair is very pretty," said the child. "Can I touch it?"

Zeta nodded, bending over slightly and presenting her waist length blue hair to the girl. The girl hesitated for a moment, almost nervous to touch the rare colour. She giggled as she touched the hair. "It feels real," said the girl with a smile. "It is real, no dyes – I was born with it this colour," Zeta assured. The girl faltered, shaking her head. "Liar, it's fake! Mummy says you're all fake!" she stated, the words cutting deep and painfully, even if it wasn't true. "No, I-" Her mother called her and the child ran back, the pair of them walking onwards. Periodically the child would glance back, uncertain as to what to think about the strange blue woman. Zeta watched them leave before looking down at the money she had earned – enough for at least a few simple meals.

Zeta found a bakery, purchasing a loaf from the judging owner before hurrying towards the grocers as darkness began to fall. She bought cured meats, cheese, a glass bottle filled with apple juice and a little butter before making her way to the village well. The entire journey she felt eyes upon her, but it didn't matter, she sat and made herself a sandwich, eating it quickly before filling the juice bottle with water. She wrapped the rest of the bread, cheese and meat before tucking it inside a mostly broken satchel she had found in an alleyway. Zeta counted her change, it wasn't much but perhaps it was enough to stay at the village inn. She doubted it.

The night had fallen and the streets were quieter but there were still a few people walking around. She cleared her throat and began to sing once more - she didn't need much, not even a whole pearl, only a bit of spare coral, enough for a bed and a maybe a bath. Eyes lay upon her, a small quartet of men from the other side of the square. The rest of the travellers ignored her. Song after song passed, the men continuing to watch her. She could describe them with her eyes shut, their presence consistent. It filled her with unease, and as Zeta quickly became aware of just how quiet the night had become, that unease turned to fear. She shut it down, ignoring it and quickly picking up her stuff before hurrying away from the square. They didn't seem to follow.

Zeta headed through the back alleys towards the inn. She could haggle, she was sure of it, and if not then she had her magic to be extra convincing. She rounded the side of the church, preparing to make the small ascent towards the inn in the upper part of the village when she felt a hand move past her ear. "Cover her mouth!" came a deep voice, as she was pushed hard into the stone wall. Zeta grimaced in pain as two pairs of hands pressed her arms against the wall and a third forced a wad of cloth into mouth before a strip was wrapped around her head, gagging her. Zeta tried to scream, a hand on her throat, her arms and legs pinned.

She stared in terror straight at the largest and oldest of the four locals that had followed her. He held up a poster next to her face, his two accomplices glancing from her to the poster. The fourth and youngest man stood nervously a few metres away. "It's her alright, Zeta – the Rising Ace Bard. You were on it today, Davy, she'll earn us a fortune," said the leader with a wide grin, several of his teeth missing and the rest a urine yellow.

Zeta squirmed, panic erupting out of her. "Be still!" threatened the leader, putting the poster away before withdrawing a jagged switchblade from his

pocket. Zeta concentrated, thinking back to her lessons with Ordo before entering into Focus. The second she did, a fist swung into her stomach. "No, you don't." Zeta couldn't understand it, they were peasants in the middle of nowhere, they shouldn't have been able to recognise Focus, they shouldn't have known to gag her and immobilise her. She scanned their grizzled, wrinkled and worn faces, looking at scar and marks. Her eyes glanced towards a wrist tattoo. The leader seemed to notice. "You're nothing special, darling. You'll find plenty of ex-militia all around the Old World."

Zeta swore internally, she had lowered her guard too much and now it would spell the end of her. "Now, listen closely. Don't kick up a fuss and maybe we'll turn you over alive. Your bounty says either so don't test us!" Zeta stopped squirming, the three in front of her all outweighed her by a significant portion, but their friend seemed uneasy, nervous and almost repugnant. She looked to him for help, desperately pleading without her voice and body. His expression steeled and he turned away, killing her soul.

"You're going to do as we say," said the brute on her right. Zeta pushed the wad of cloth in her mouth with her tongue, pressing it as hard as she could and trying her best to chew it. "Hang on, I thought you said-?" questioned the one on her left. "Yeah, yeah," said the leader. "We will. Just be careful with the dress, I want to gift it to my wife. Get her hands!" Zeta's eyes widened as they began to pull at her clothes. She chanted in her head, repeating her spell over and over as she wordlessly said it. It had no effect, she had no channel for it – she needed her mouth.

Zeta chewed the ball, thrashing against the hands even as the blade was pressed closer to her neck. "Watch it, princess, I don't want to waste you!" She concentrated her Focus on her tongue, pushing the gag down just a little before spitting with as much force as she could muster. The wad of cloth came out and she released a silent scream. Windows shattered all across the nearby church, dogs howled in the distance, and the three men released her – clutching their ears as their faces turned veiny and red. They yelled in agony, one dropping to their knees, another stumbling backwards, and the leader gritting his teeth as his nose and eyes began to gush blood. He staggered towards her, bringing the knife upwards but she unleashed her scream with even more force, his eyes popping inside his skull before his entire head popped, the other two following one after another.

The fourth member stumbled backwards, falling to the floor before beginning to scramble away. Zeta turned, still wailing like a banshee – unleashing her terror, her hatred, and her fury upon him. He fell to his knees, screaming and clutching his head before it too detonated outwards in a colourful rain of pink, white and red. Zeta fell to her knees, clutching her throat and coughing as tears and blood that wasn't hers rolled down her face.

Zeta wailed in agony and fear, only stopping as she saw a figure stare at her from down the street. The woman screamed in horror before turning and running away. "Murder! Murder!" she yelled at the top of her voice. Zeta sat frozen, unable to move as her heart hammered inside her chest, her breathing heavy. "Run!" cried a voice inside her mind. "Run!" it repeated, Jayce's voice snapping her out of her daze. Zeta looked at the bodies, and her bloody poster laying in the mud. She had moments, she knew that. A place like this wouldn't believe in law, she'd be lynched, or she'd be forced to massacre the village. She shook her head, the others probably could fight back in her position, but she couldn't fight like they could. A pitchfork would spell her end, that or a noose.

Zeta lunged for the bodies and her satchel, taking anything and everything she found in their pockets before shoving it inside the bag along with her poster. She then turned and ran, ignoring her ankle and fleeing for the woods beyond the inn. She ran up the hill, sliding on the mud and the stone and scrambling with her hands and her feet. She could see torches behind her, hear commotion in all directions, but she didn't care.

Zeta crossed the edge of the village, darting into the forest in her mud and blood-covered dress. She ran until she couldn't breathe, breaking through branches and leaping across puddles. She couldn't see in the darkness, she couldn't feel her skin in the cold, but still she carried onwards, glancing towards the obscured moon and the patches of moonlight breaking through the trees ahead of her. She stumbled and fell, picking herself upwards and continuing in a stumbling limp until she came to a small stream, a fallen log laying across it. Zeta looked behind her, she could see her footprints, and others likely would too.

She stood listening to the night, the faintest of sounds far behind her, she then stepped into the water and followed it downstream. The stream widened and deepened at points, the water cold and cruel. The mud and stones ripped at her shoes, stealing them away from her and forcing her to continue onwards barefoot. Her dress grew heavy with water, but still she continued forwards, only stopping as the water drained into a small pond.

The tears and blood had dried on her skin by the time she dragged herself to the shore of the stream. She felt safe, although she knew that she most certainly was not. The cold had settled in, her body in a continuous shiver and the wounds on her legs and arms numb and irrelevant. She sat on the moss by the bank of the pond, holding her legs to her chest as she listened to her ragged breathing. Zeta wanted to sob and to wail, but no voice came to her and no tears remained within her. She wanted to curl up into a ball, she wanted to hide away, but she knew she couldn't. "You're a Rising Ace. You're alone. No one is coming to rescue you. You're Zeta. Survive," she told her herself.

She continued to shiver as she collected sticks, collecting them together into the beginnings of a fire. She then withdrew the knife she had claimed, cutting away at herself as she tore off pieces of the dress she had put days of work into making. She cut it short, the skirt stopping just above her knees, she cut the sleeves off, turning them into bandages that she rolled and put away in her satchel. She then raised her knife up to her throat, taking it behind her head and sawing away at her hair. She ignored the whimpers she made as she cut it all away, putting it into her burgeoning fire before taking off her dress and underwear.

Naked, Zeta stepped into the pond, disappearing beneath the waters and letting the cold embrace her as it peeled away the blood and grime from her body. She didn't know how long she was beneath the surface, she stayed below, even as the air left her lungs. In the back of her mind, she didn't want to come up. She wanted it over. She wanted to disappear into the darkness. "Shine," came a voice in the darkness. "Be the star you were always meant to be," came the voice of her Captain, a flood of warmth fighting back the cold and the darkness as a ray of moonlight illuminated the pond and the sea of bones beneath her feet. Zeta pulled herself upwards, breathing in deeply as she broke the surface and carried herself out and back towards the fire.

Zeta shook the water off her body, using the few incantations she remembered from Wicke to dry the rest and to warm her body as she dressed in her altered clothes and lay next to her fire. She stared into the flames, the last traces of her long hair sizzling away. "Survive," she told herself. "You can do it. Find the others... or die trying."

Seize the Seas Tales: Bindings From Across The World

“How’s progress coming along?” Marisha questioned, her arms folded as she stared out at the rain falling over and beneath the Guild Headquarters. It was early morning, the faint traces of the sun periodically breaking through the clouds from beneath the floating islands, painting upwards towards Marisha’s face. “Not bad,” came Morgana’s response in her head. Marisha smiled, shaking her head and turning away from her window. “And just what does that mean?”

Morgana sipped her coffee as she sat in the Stacked Hand’s living quarters, watching the snow falling around the ship. “Travel is slow. Someone is definitely spreading word of our reformation – it seems every other day now that Wam has to torch a ship or two. Is that your guidance, by any chance?” “Of course not. If I could do anything to speed your journey up I would. I can only imagine what it’s been like for Zeta this past half-year, all alone from the sounds of it.”

“Are you sure? Not to be... too harsh, but of everyone to survive alone-“ “I know, she preens and performs but she survived on her own before joining us. And, of everyone who is still missing: Jayce, Astris, Caelie, Yuthura, Ordo, Mai Lu, Jeanne, Arthuria, Fenn, Falconer, RK – do you think any of them would have wandered in the realm of Strigon and Armin in silence? The Blue Bard legend has escaped the very realm of Cannibals and Vampires. She’s alive, and if there are others there then they will rally to her – I know it. Just... find her, please – for my sake. I miss her, as much as she does annoy me.”

Morgana nodded, not that Marisha could see it – they were hundred of miles away from each other after all. “We’ll bring her home - in what piece, however... only time will tell. Stay in touch, keep me informed, Marisha. Morgana out.” “Find her. See you soon.”

Chapter 215: Hunted/Hunting

"This is your fault!" Mai Lu yelled, as she slid down a muddy slope before leaping up into a sprint as she reached the bottom. Ordo grinned, a spray of bullets peppering the ground behind him as he pursued her. He twisted mid-run, concentrating his Focus into his greatclub and batting the bullets back the way they came. "How so?" Ordo questioned, looking up at the lightning storm raging above them. "Your pet lizard drew too much attention! And you just had to stop at every stronghold and village we've come across – is it surprising that Strigon is pissed? We've butchered probably half his army across the last few months."

Ordo chuckled as they leapt over a fallen tree before crouching behind it. An almighty thunderclap rumbled the skies and the storm disappeared. "Go, get out of here and lay low – we'll call if we need you," Ordo stated into his communicator, his Dragon dashing through the skies away from the dazed cloud of colossal, winged, bat-like monstrosities that had been unleashed upon him. "I shall return, do not perish," came a growl in return from Taranis, through Ordo's communicator. "Don't deny you've enjoyed the hunt," Ordo stated to Mai Lu, peering at the squad of Vampire Null Legion hunting them down.

"I'll admit it was more fun when we were the hunters, not the hunted," she returned, cutting her wrist and creating a long black-red crystal spear that she immediately handed to him. Ordo stood up from their cover, throwing the spear with full strength at their enemies. The weapon shattered into dozens of piercing shards, themselves rupturing the bodies they entered. "We're still hunting, Mai Lu, don't forget our mission!"

"Our mission? Our mission!" she yelled, standing up from cover only to take a bullet straight to temple. In a graphic display her head detonated outwards, pieces of her brain and skull pulling away before snapping back as the trailing blood stretched and retracted like rubber. "Hey!" she yelled, turning to their few remaining aggressors. "Just fuck off!" she yelled, flicking her wrist and erupting the bloodied ground in huge shards of blood crystal. She then turned back to Ordo. "The mission is over, it's pointless! We're too big of a target now, and Strigon is probably hunting us himself by now!"

"So?" Ordo questioned, standing up and leaning against the log. Mai Lu clenched her teeth, shutting her eyes and shaking her head before taking a few paces away from him and throwing up her arms. "You stupid, ignorant, moronic... idiot!" "Huh?" Ordo questioned with feigned dumbness. Her face flashed red and she pointed a bloody finger his way. "I'm warning you..." she growled. Ordo

chuckled, stepping towards her before placing a hand on her shoulder. "We need to find out about the Grandfather, and the location of the True Vampire – Jayce would count on us to do so. It's too soon to give up." She sighed and he patted her head, her face flashing red and her want to slaughter him reaching critical capacity. "There's a town through the next forest. Dinner's on me," he told her. "I'm not-" Her stomach growled and she let out another defeated sigh. "Fine."

Slipping into the local communities had become a very simple task for Mai Lu and Ordo over the last few months. It helped that they often left no survivors to inform the Vampires hunting them of what they looked like and where they were heading. Instead the giant blue and black, electric Dragon had been the greatest give away – least of all due to Ordo's incessant zigzagging on their journey to exterminate the Vampires of Arcastalum – the old Kingdom of Spades.

They found a tavern, slipping in amongst the locals and grabbing a table. The food, locally grown vegetables and freshly hunted meat, was divine – if still only secondary to the now mythical meals Marisha used to cook for them. "Better?" Ordo questioned. Mai Lu nodded, leaning back on her chair and shutting her eyes as she enjoyed the warmth of the nearby fire and the casual buzz of the people around them. "How's the head?" he followed up with. She shook her head, rubbing her temple with her palm. "I'll be fine. It's more psychological than anything."

"Then next time keep your head down," he scolded. She snarled at him before taking a deep breath and choosing to ignore his goading. "I am being serious. I don't know how much you Demonlords can heal but that would have killed almost everybody." Mai Lu shrugged. It really was not something she was willing to test, and most of the time she did her best to avoid any serious injuries. "I know I'm not immortal, well – maybe in age I am."

"I don't think I'd have survived it a few months ago, at least not since Baal started eating those monuments," she said somewhat softly, almost nervously. Ordo shrugged. "Don't overthink it, take it as a blessing and don't rely on it. Just because you can survive a wound doesn't mean you should take it in the first place. Doc ain't here. Neither is Astris." Mai Lu tilted her head, glancing around at the other patrons as she gently rocked her chair back and forth on its rear legs. "Do you hear that?" she questioned.

Ordo turned, concentrating on the noise around them. "...blue Bard," came the words of a stranger near the bar. Ordo raised an eyebrow. "There's only one blue Bard I know of," he stated, a flutter of hope filled his cold heart. He got to his

feet, striding across the tavern towards the bar. "What's this about a blue Bard?" Ordo questioned, placing a few pearl on the bar before gesturing at the others crowded around it. "Round's on me," he stated.

Mai Lu raised an eyebrow at the very drunk man sat next to Ordo. "Sho," he slurred, "boom! Heads bang, popped – like a bawwoon." Mai Lu folded her arms – it sounded like something Zeta could do. "Where?" she questioned. "When?" "Oh, wong ago. Far from here." Mai Lu looked towards Ordo and he subtly held up a finger. "Where was she last heard of again?" Ordo asked, the man next to him slumping over and falling to the floor. A loud snoring immediately followed. "She's south of us, somewhere past our destination. Alone by the sounds of it."

"Then she's probably dead. If we're dealing with Vampires, she dealing with Cannibals. Alone. Zeta's no fighter," Mai Lu said softly, noticing the immediate twist of pain in Ordo's face. "I'm sorry, but it's the truth. It's Zeta..." "She's alive. I know that girl better than you. She wouldn't die here, not in obscurity. We continue onwards, get that information in the Capital, and find her."

Mai Lu shook her head. "She's dead already, she must be, and we'll only join her if we carry on this crusade of liberation. This isn't winnable for us, Ordo." "I'm not leaving her. If I have to go on alone I will. She's out there, somewhere. We just need to follow the music to her. I'm going to get us a room. I'm carrying onwards tomorrow, with or without you," he concluded, getting to his feet and walking away. Mai Lu looked down at the drunkard on the floor, shaking her head. "Idiots... everywhere."

The snow had almost killed them both as they continued onwards south by foot. They were both experienced with cold, but the weather in Arcastalum was something else – the wind by far the worst aspect. The trees of the snow-covered forests only seemed to funnel the winds rather than protect them. At more than one point Mai Lu had lost feeling in her fingers, forcing her to wield a frozen claw of a hand until they had found a way to warm her back up. Mai Lu missed the Stacked Hand and its bathhouse. She missed not having blisters on her feet, or aches in her joints. She wanted nothing more than to just collapse in the snow, concede to the environment and leave it all behind. But Ordo was unyielding, the stubborn old fool carrying her when she grew too cold or too tired, keeping her warm by the fire as she shivered in the night, and refusing to leave her behind – no matter how many times she snapped at him or he snapped at her.

Finally, they came to an opening in the seemingly never-ending forest they had marched through. A city stretched before them, shrouded in darkness and buried in snow. A frozen river cut the city in two, the outskirts surrounded by a huge wall of dark metal and stone. They stood on a cliff top a little more than a kilometre away, searchlights panning the snow around the city and the walls patrolled by numerous Null Legion.

It was daytime, yet the skies were unnaturally dark – just like most of the towns and cities they had passed through. Snow fell gently, and, for the first time in a while, the winds fell soft and slow. The city was medieval, with the buildings made of old stone and wood. Inside the colossal outer ring of walls were three more loops of metal and stone, enclosing the inner city into three different sections.

The outermost part seemed by far the most destitute, the buildings were built tall and compact, building up and outwards to overlook the streets passing between them. Hanging lanterns and candles inside the houses painted the Lowercity in flickering orange. It seemed the most populated and also, curiously, had searchlights passing periodically across the inside of the outer walls – as if searching for people trying to escape.

Built within the Lowercity, surrounded by walls of its own was the Uppercity. The buildings looked more colourful, several of them had been painted into bright whites and yellows, as opposed to the greys and browns of the cramped buildings beyond the walls. The houses were larger, some hosting gardens, the streets were better lit with lanterns that burned bright blue. There was squares with fountains rather than wells, and the streets were wider.

Another ring of walls connected the northernmost part of the Uppercity, where the river passed through. This oval ring of metal and stone held within it a colossal stone palace, topped with pointed orange spires and numerous walls of its own. The windows glowed a bright crimson. The Royalcity flaunted banners of red and grey, showing off the symbols of the Null Legion but also something more. A banner of sickly green, with three skulls looking in three different directions flapped in the wind, next to a banner of deep black displaying a pure white bat with its wings spread.

Circling above the city were dark swarms of colossal bats. “How will we get inside?” Mai Lu questioned, looking at the army of guards and the dark swarms of colossal bats circling above the city. Ordo pointed towards the river snaking through the centre of the city. “We’ve still got those breathers that Tempest made

us. Let's go for a swim," he stated. Mai Lu sighed, reaching for her bottomless bag and withdrawing a wetsuit. "Fine."

Even with the wetsuit, the frozen waters were apocalyptically cold. Mai Lu fought against it by filling her mind with dark thoughts of ways she could get revenge on Ordo. Periodically Baal would chime in, and on occasion she thought about relinquishing control to him, so that she could descend into her subconscious and leave him to the frozen waters. Ordo glanced back towards her, the pair of them under a thick layer of ice. "You okay?" he questioned telepathically through their communicators. "Just about. I'm really beginning to regret ever siding with your people against the Church. The luxuries I would have continued to enjoy... oh, how I miss them."

"You were a slave there, these people are slaves here. I'm sure Strigon would be willing to take you in. He could put in a bottling division, handling the blood he's taxing from these people," he returned. She shook her head, a faint smile crossing her blue lips. "Perhaps I'll hand you over myself. I'd certainly learn about the True Vampire and that Grandfather, one way or another." He chuckled, coming to a stop as they came to a large metal grate dropping from the wall above.

"Sealed, as expected," Mai Lu commented. Ordo looked closely at the bars before back at Mai Lu. "You or me?" he questioned. She pointed at him and he nodded, reaching down and grabbing hold of the metal. His hands flashed with cyan Focus before spreading across his arms and back as he pulled. The metal strained and then bent, opening outwards enough for them to pass through. Mai Lu slipped through without issue, he then squeezed through afterwards. They continued to swim forwards passing by a few small groups of salmon. The fish watched them but otherwise didn't do anything.

They continued onwards, swimming towards the Uppercity, another set of grates built beneath the wall. But as they came to a stop, Mai Lu faltered. She turned, looking back at the fish. Several of them were looking at them, watching them, more so than she would expect. One opened its mouth, the teeth inside looked pointed, thin and long. Her eyes widened and she immediately reached out towards it, cutting her finger with her nail and extending a long and thin spear of blood crystal that impaled the fish between its eyes. It thrashed before falling still, breaking apart into ash. "Ordo, they know we're here."

They broke through the ice without difficulty, clambering out on top and leaping upwards away from the river before rushing forwards into the busy streets of the

Lowercity. "Where do we go?" Mai Lu questioned, bells ringing out across the city and people immediately rushing towards their homes. Ordo didn't know - he had expected their presence to be noticed eventually, not immediately. The city walls were one way, the castle another. Null Legion and swarms of Vampires, and likely Cannibals, would be descending upon them from all directions.

He looked towards the houses as they ran amongst the people, looking for any that looked empty or abandoned. The people began to disappear, the streets emptying quickly. Time was running out, dangerously quickly. "This way!" came a voice, a worn middle-aged man standing in a lit doorway waving towards them. Ordo and Mai Lu glanced at each other. "Are you deaf? Hurry!" he called out. Ordo surged forwards with Mai Lu hot on his heels. The man stepped aside and they entered the house. He took one quick look around the streets before blowing out the lantern next to the door and shutting it. Ordo and Mai Lu panted as they stood in the entranceway in their wetsuits, a heavy clunk drawing their attention to the door as the man twisted and engaged several sets of large locks on the thick wooden door.

"Thank you," Ordo said immediately, standing up straight and looking at the stranger. A faint noise drew Mai Lu's attention away, her eyes glancing immediately towards an intensely beautiful woman stood in the kitchen holding a meat cleaver and a frying pan. A pair of young girls stood behind her, looking nervously at the strangers in their entranceway. "You're welcome, do you have clothes to change into?" asked the father. Ordo nodded. "Bathroom is just over there. Change quickly, they may do door searches."

"Mai Lu," Ordo said softly, drawing her attention away from the kitchen. She followed him to the small bathroom, the pair of them wordlessly changing into their travel clothes before faltering as they looked to the door. Just who had invited them in, and why? The questions filled their mind. It was suicide to help them. Stupid even. So why? Why had he called to them, knowing that they were clearly intruders? "Be on your guard," Ordo warned. Mai Lu scoffed - as if she ever wasn't.

The family was waiting for them in the kitchen. Shutters were closed on the windows, blinds pulled across over them, a few simple candles provided light in the darkness. "Tea?" offered the mother. She was taller than her husband, slim with broad shoulders. Her eyes were almond-shaped, the irises a pretty hazel colour. Her features were tight, and she looked just slightly underweight. She

had slightly tanned skin, but it was pale – as if she hadn't seen enough light, which she quite likely hadn't. Her hair was long and dark, glossy and lay gently across her shoulders. She smiled softly, if a little nervously, as she looked at them. She also looked young, in her early thirties at most, compared to her husband who looked tired and worn and in his forties to fifties.

The girls that still clung to her were both between ten and twelve. They too had her dark hair, as opposed to their father's slightly lighter brown and grey. The older had her mother's hazel eyes, the younger held her father's green. The older girl was paler than the younger and they both wore almost identical plain dresses. Mai Lu found her eyes kept flicking to them, as she found their gazes locked eternally upon her.

The older man was grizzled and worn, with firm wrinkles around his small and tired eyes. He had a rough, patchy grey and black beard on his jaw. His skin was pale, his body slightly hunched, and his features firm and solid. His hands were worn and stiff, with rough callouses on his palms. A small pair of cracked glasses hung from his loose shirt. His hair parted in the middle and was swept back across his head. A band of brown beads hung from his wrist.

"Please," Ordo returned, taking a seat and sitting at the table. Mai Lu nodded appreciatively, continuing to stand as the mother set about making tea, giving her daughters simple instructions to retrieve some leaves, water and honey for her. The girls rushed to the larder and sink to complete their missions. The father sat down opposite Ordo and Mai Lu, looking at them both with caution. He gently gestured towards Mai Lu. "Your eyes... they're unique, but not uncommon here. Are you...?"

Mai Lu shook her head. "No, I'm not a Vampire," she assured. He nodded, glancing gently towards his wife; she took her hand away from the meat cleaver she had been trying to subtly grip. "I am sorry for the question, sometimes they try to pretend otherwise, but the ears are normally a giveaway," he stated. "My name is Matteo, this is my wife Alina, and our girls: Orianna and Lucinia." "You may call me Ordo, this is Mai Lu Mina," Ordo returned. Mai Lu held up her fingers from her crossed arms. "Mai Lu is fine."

Matteo nodded, smiling to his children as they brought tea to the table. "Girls, there are some papers up in the study. They have a red mark on them. Could you find them for me?" Matteo questioned. The older girl, Orianna, looked towards her father and folded her arms. "I want to stay here and listen," she stated boldly. "Papers, please," he requested again. She pouted and looked towards her

mother. "You heard your father. Do him the favour," confirmed Alina, shooing the girls away. They both hurried off into the house, their footsteps audible above the kitchen. "That should buy a little time to talk uninterrupted," Matteo stated, his wife sitting down next to him.

"You're not from here, are you?" Matteo questioned. Ordo nodded. "You knew about the blight here?" Ordo nodded once more. "And you came anyway?" "We're looking for information on the Vampires under Strigon and the Cannibals under Armin," Ordo explained. The couple glanced towards each other nervously. "What kind of information?" Alina asked. Ordo sipped his tea, sensing the girls sitting quietly at the top of the stairs and listening in. "We've fought Strigon before," he explained. "My crew and I drove him out of the New World. We're looking for a way to destroy him, for good."

Tension swiftly spread across the room, the awkward silence growing as Alina and Matteo both stared at their own drinks. "So... the reason he came here, was you?" Matteo asked quietly. Ordo nodded, awaiting an eruption, accusations, threats, but they didn't come. Alina set a gentle hand on her husband's arm. "We all thought the end of the war would bring about a great time of light, instead an even darker time has followed. That... man is a monster, one we know all too well," Alina stated, rolling up her sleeve to show a brand on her forearm. "This marks me as his. His bride-to-be..."

Ordo clenched his fist. "What do you mean?" he asked, a bubbling anger building within. "When he first arrived, Strigon fed and hunted without thought – as if in a rage, or stupor. But sometimes he would hesitate, leaving those he found of interest alone. He... claimed me, threatened my family, my children. So I begged for time, asked for mercy in exchange to go with him when my clock ran out. I don't know when, but someday he will come for me. To turn me into his Vampiric bride, or maybe something worse."

"I'm sorry," Ordo stated. She shook her head, her body shaking as she gripped her dress. A thundering of feet came down the stairs before the sobbing girls charged into their mother's arms. "Don't go! I don't want you to go!" cried the younger Lucinia. "We'll do everything we can to not let that happen, I promise!" Ordo stated firmly. He twitched as Mai Lu dug her nail into his back. "I'm sorry, but he's wrong. There's nothing we can do for you right now, not yet. Not without the rest of our crew – the people who sent Strigon bleeding and on death's door to these lands," Mai Lu confronted.

Matteo looked down, his shoulders dropping. Alina smiled gently. "Thank you, I appreciate the honesty. You said you were after information?" she questioned. "Yes," Mai Lu interrupted, taking over from Ordo before he could answer. "We are looking for someone as well. A young woman with blue hair, she's a Bard, her name is Zeta. Has anyone like that been seen around here?" she asked. The couple looked at each other. "The Blue Bard?" questioned Matteo. "There are posters all across the city asking about her, but no. Not here. I heard she was seen south of here, heading west."

A sigh of relief escaped Ordo. Zeta was still alive, that was all but confirmed. She would have been proudly paraded around by Strigon otherwise. "Thank you, that's good to hear," he stated. Matteo nodded. Ordo looked towards Mai Lu. "We should get out of here. There's nothing we're going to be able to obtain whilst the city is after us. And we shouldn't put these people at anymore risk." "Agreed," Mai Lu returned. "Thank you for your hospitality, and I am truly sorry there is not more we can do. We will return, that I do promise."

Alina and Matteo both nodded, getting to their feet. "There is a door out of the back. You'll go unnoticed that way," Alina stated, holding her still-crying children. "Please, this way," Matteo stated, stepping towards the way the girls had gone and leading them to a curtained backdoor. He unlocked the door and then peered outside before looking back at the pair. "Before you go," he said quietly. Ordo and Mai Lu looked at him. "What do you need to destroy them? Both Strigon and Alberta Armin?" Matteo asked.

"Both of them are governed by inhuman creatures: the True Vampire, a colossal bat-like creature that is progenitor of Strigon and all his Vampires, and the Grandfather – a similar monster that has warped people into those Cannibals. We kill them, then both monsters fall. They are here somewhere, most likely. If we know where they are then we can end the darkness once and for all," Ordo stated. Matteo nodded, looking back in the vague direction of his wife and children. "Okay," he said quietly, opening the door for them. "Find your friend." "We will, and then we will return. We promise," Ordo stated. Matteo nodded, shutting and locking the door behind them.

They left the walls of the city behind, fleeing quickly towards the West. Towards Zeta.

Seize the Seas Tales: Whatever the Cost

“Do you think they’ll come back?” Alina questioned, as she lay listening to her husband’s heartbeat, their children curled up in their bed beside them. The screams of the night lay in the background, a warning of the risk Matteo had put on them, but also a warning of the reality they were forever doomed to unless something changed. “I have to believe they will,” he said quietly. “I do not want this life to be all the girls ever experience. And I do not want them to lose you.”

She smiled softly in the darkness. “Some things we cannot change. That is one. It will happen eventually, it could happen tomorrow. I don’t want you to lose them over me.” She shut her eyes, her soft breathing telling Matteo that she was asleep. Silent tears dripped down the side of his face, his fists clenched as a deep fury broiled inside him. They needed information in order to bring down those monsters. When they returned, he would have it for them. “For you, my dear, I would sacrifice everything.”

Chapter 216: Songs of War

Zeta had lost track of how long she had been wandering the forests. It had been at least a few days since she had popped the brains of her would-be rapists and murderers, and each passing day seemed to be getting colder and colder. She had fed on mushrooms, fish and any berries she had come across, ignoring the chances of poison thanks to the remarkable resistance Marisha had forced upon all of them in her early days as the Stacked Hand's Cook. Sometimes she had come across people, opting to hide and wait for them to pass.

But this time there was no hiding. She stared at the hunchback creature with grotesque curiosity. And it stared back at her, its bulbous, swollen and bloodshot eyes analysing her from head to toe. Its large tongue lapped across its jagged and broken teeth. "I can't believe you were once a human," Zeta stated with disgust, twirling the recorder she had made for herself out of a reed. "Am... human..." it grunted, the three other Cannibals it had been with laying in twisted and broken forms on the floor, having each been set upon by Zeta's magic. "Sure you are," she stated, folding her arms and thinking what to do with the creature. She could see it fighting her magic, her enchantment wouldn't last for much longer. "Kill yourself," she commanded, the creature reaching inside its mouth and then pulling on its tongue with as much force as it could muster. She turned and walked away, leaving it to gargle on its own blood.

Zeta took a deep breath of fresh air as she stepped out of the forest: a small town sat before her, its walls high but gate open. She smiled and shook herself off. First task was some clothes better suited to her environment, oh, and shoes, definitely shoes. She strode up to the gate. There were no obvious guards and the mud in her hair helped to disguise the colour. "Are you... okay, miss?" questioned an elderly man holding a long pointy stick as he sat on a rocking chair just on the inside of the wall. "Yes, thank you," she returned. "Bloody carriage toppled over when we were attacked by Cannibals. I'm lucky to have made it here. Where are the shops? And is there an inn?" she lied, as easily as breathing. He stood up and approached her, leaving his pointy stick behind. "That way, my dear. Do we need to send anyone out on search and rescue?" Zeta shook her head and he nodded, his eyes glazed over. "Understood. Carry on."

Zeta immediately headed to the inn, purchasing a room and a bath and burying herself in the hot, near-orgasmic, waters. "Oh," she moaned, "thank the Gods!" She lay there until the water had gone cold, putting her dirty dress back on before moving towards the window to look outside. "A blue-haired girl," came the faint

traces of a voice from the streets below. "Wanted on murder and witchcraft." "Fuck," Zeta muttered, backing away from the window. She looked around the room for anything she could use to disguise herself, her eyes eventually locked onto a small pot of ink left out for writing letters. She sighed, taking it and smearing it into her short blue hair. It wasn't perfect, but once it dried her hair was a deep black, except for a few tiny patches of blue buried throughout.

Zeta made her way back out onto the streets, heading immediately to the nearest clothes shop. She grabbed several outfits that would help her to better blend in with the locals. She then went and bought herself a backpack, a travel tent, and long-term food supplies before stepping back out onto the streets. As she walked, more whispers of her own name and identity reached her ears, her eyes eventually spotting a pair of armed men approaching her accommodation. She let out a sigh – at least she'd managed to have a bath. "So be it," Zeta muttered, turning and heading towards the gates.

The wilderness quickly grew on her as she moved north. It gave her time to think and to plan. She built instruments for herself out of what she could find, hunted animals for food and pelts that she traded to the villages she passed through, often stopping to busk for a few hours before moving onwards as the rumours of herself caught up. Yet, with each stop and each rendition of the rumours she heard, Zeta endeavoured to at the very least leave something behind her. She sung of monsters and the darkness of the world, pairing it with tales of the heroics of her crew and their actions to bring light back through the darkness.

Zeta left behind tales of herself, speaking of the blue bard she claimed to have seen. The slayer of monsters. The liberator of people. She sung of hope, of returning joy, of adventure, and the world she wanted to see once again. As time went on, it turned from desperate tunes to keep herself going, into songs fighting back against the soul-crushed lands she wandered. She never stayed long; bounty hunters would appear only days after she arrived at a destination.

The winter fell, the snow heavy on the grounds she walked as she continued her slow journey north, but long gone were the coinless days. Her pockets jingled with coin, accumulated from audiences arriving to hear her songs of hope. Her large fur coat felt unbearably heavy as she crossed the final hill towards her destination: one of the few cities within the south of Arcastalum. She let out a long exhale, her breath white in the cold air, a small grin crossing her face.

The city of Tulo was massive, and all built around a large central castle. High walls surrounded the outer city and an inner-ring surrounded the castle, but the

gates were visibly open, and the walls were manned by locals. Even in the depths of Alberta Armin's territory people still held hope and the lack of green banners meant that she would be among friends, not in a meat camp like some of the locales she had passed through, and wiped out. Zeta began to trudge forwards, looking in faint awe at the mountain tilted on its side and floating in the air not too far away: a waterfall had frozen, connecting the landmass to the broken earth beneath it. She still wasn't used to the sights of broken and ancient magic and the devastation it had caused on the landscape.

She held her head high as she marched towards the central gate. "Halt!" cried a voice, an armoured giant of man stepping to stop of her path. "What is your business in Tulo?" questioned the guard, Zeta immediately noticing several others looking down at her from various positions. "I'm a simple traveller, on my journey north, just passing through," she answered, truthfully. He looked at her through his metal helmet, his eyes analysing her carefully. He looked to her dyed black hair and then the few instruments she carried with her. "A Bard?" he questioned. "A performer, yes," she answered. "Nothing special," she lied.

"Wait here," he instructed, gesturing to a small side chamber with a table and some chairs. Zeta bit her lip and walked inside, sitting down and folding her arms. It wasn't her first interrogation and a young woman wandering lands known for Cannibals wasn't exactly without suspicion. She sighed, chanting silently inside her head in preparation to cast an enchantment – if it was needed. Long ago it had been something she had been poor at, now it was practically second nature to her.

He returned almost twenty minutes later. "The Lord would like to see you," he stated. "The Lord?" Zeta questioned, looking towards a painting of a middle-aged, dark-skinned man on the wall. "Yes, at his castle. You will be escorted there for your own safety. Numerous people are after your bounty, after all." Zeta swore under her breath. "Right..." she muttered, standing up and walking towards the doorway. A squad of armoured men stood waiting, she opened her mouth to speak only to feel cold metal clasp around her neck – her magic fading away almost instantly. "Oh dear..." she muttered, realising quickly just how much trouble she had brought upon herself.

The walk was prompt, and somewhat scenic. The city was nice, calm, clean, and the people seemed nice enough – albeit distinctly curious of her as she walked amongst an armoured escort with an anti-magic collar around her neck. She was led straight to the castle, handed over multiple times to different sets of guards

and soldiers before guided inside. Her things remained on her the entire time, a curious choice that made her question just what the Lord wanted from her.

She was led through beautifully decorated corridors, past artwork, tapestries and luxury. She was guided to a room before being put inside. Three maids stood waiting, a warm bath ready for her. "Lady Zeta, the Lord has requested that you bath in preparation for dinner with him," stated the oldest of the three. Zeta looked at her suspiciously, before looking back at the knights stood outside the room. "Dinner... with him? Not as a course?" she questioned.

The bath was nice, albeit it was strange – as an adult – to be physically bathed by three other women. Whilst she washed, a new set of clean travel clothes was brought for her and laid out. Her fur coat was cleaned and her hair was washed free of the ink she used to dye it black. "Such a beautiful colour," muttered the maid in charge of drying her hair. Zeta didn't quite know how to respond, everything felt off, but also... not.

With her new clothes put on, her hair and body dry and her things still available to use, Zeta was marched by the knights through the castle once again. This time she was led to a large dining room. A roaring fire sat to the side under a colossal mantelpiece. A huge and long table sat in the middle of the room, the floor covered in a red carpet. The table itself was laden with food, countless meals of meat and vegetables, still steaming as the sole occupant of the room sat waiting for her at the end of the long table. "Truly, I couldn't believe my luck!" came a loud voice as she entered.

The Lord of Tulo stood up, immediately gesturing towards a seat next to him. Zeta stared at the food as she walked alongside the table, drooling with little thought – the smell was unbelievably pleasant after so long on the road. He wore a fine outfit of brilliant purple, his hair short and curly, a thick square moustache above his lip. For an older man, he wasn't bad looking. His hands were bare, other than a simple gold signet ring.

Zeta felt little other choice than to sit, so she did. "Wine?" he questioned. Zeta nodded. "Red?" he asked. She nodded and he clicked his fingers. A maid walked into the room carrying an open bottle. She poured a small amount into Zeta's glass, allowing her to taste it first. "Very nice," Zeta confirmed, nodding for more before looking towards the Lord. His own glass was filled from the same bottle. He took a heavy gulp before smiling at Zeta and raising a glass. "To your exploits, my dear – extraordinary as they are."

“Why am I here?” Zeta questioned bluntly, looking towards the food as the Lord began to fill his plate. She then reached out and filled her own with the various vegetables and meats within her reach. “Quite simply, because I wanted to meet you. I am Lord Dolion Cozbi. Ruler of this city. And you, are Zeta – of the Rising Aces,” Dolion stated. Zeta nodded, looking down at her plate and digging into the vegetables. He smiled as he watched her, taking several bites of the meat on his plate.

“And why did you want to meet me?” she asked, sipping her wine. He smiled and leant back in his throne-like chair. “Because the rumours surrounding you are quite extraordinary. They say you’re a liberator, striking back against the darkness polluting these lands and bringing hope and light to the people. How could I not wish to meet someone like that? It sounds exactly like the sort of person I could use by my side. I could use you. My people could use you. Hope is in short supply and when the people are without hope they turn sour and bitter.”

Zeta faltered. “People need hope, they need to feel safe, and, in these trying days, safety is not easy to come by. I will pay if that is what you wish, otherwise I can offer you magic items, status, whatever it is that you desire. I just want you to keep singing the right kind of songs,” Dolion stated. Zeta looked down at her plate and then further along at the fresh dishes lining the table. “What do you mean by sour and bitter?” she asked.

“Well, when hope disappears community falls apart – desperation builds and the experiences that help to foster growth fade away. It sours people, turns them against one another. I hope you got to see the joyous community I have helped to build. I can imagine you have equally seen the opposite on your journey here.” Zeta nodded, some communities had been hostile to newcomers, brutal to people with differences, and otherwise cruel to their fellow man. “So, what do you say? Will you join me? I hope to expand beyond this city and continue to bring hope back to the darkness.”

“How have you... gone unaffected by Alberta Armin and her Cannibals?” she questioned. He cut a large piece of meat off his steak, lifting it up to his mouth and chewing it. “What do you mean?” he asked with his mouth full. “Why have they left you alone?” she questioned, all of a sudden grateful that she had only eaten the vegetables. “Who says they have?” he asked, his green eyes staring deeply into her, a thin dribble of red juice dripping down his chin. “Why am I alive?” Zeta asked the Cannibal.

“It is as I said. You bring hope and that helps to bring out the best in people. I need you, I want you. Help me help these people. It won’t change their fates, but a happy cow makes a better steak. Why let them live their lives in misery when it could be filled with joy? You could be that joy! A hero! An artist! A hope in the darkness and a guiding light! What more could a Bard ever want? You would have everything you could ever ask for, and you would never need to eat anything you don’t wish to. I do not force the Grandfather’s delicacies upon those that do not wish for it. You should want to join me, not be forced, in the same way that when people know that there is no choice they will happily sacrifice for the greater good. Every meal I have ever tasted has been a volunteer, each and every one – having given up their lives so their loved ones do not have to. It’s the way the world should be. Don’t you think? Choice, not by force.”

“You want me to convince people to... give themselves over, to sacrifice themselves to be your food?” she questioned in disbelief. He nodded with genuine belief, as if it wasn’t an insane concept. “Yes, exactly. Sing songs of praise, of how great it is to sacrifice for others. To be a light to them so that they can continue onwards. It’s perfect. Beautiful even,” Dolion stated with a wide grin. “You’re insane!” she stated.

His smile faltered before it fell into sadness. “Oh...” he said softly, as if she had broken his heart. “I would have thought a Bard, a manipulator of emotion, would have understood. A pity. I take it the answer is no?” he questioned, his face cold. “Go to the abyss!” she stated, standing up and picking up a steak knife. The knife clattered the floor before she could even blink. She was sat back in her chair, forcibly pressed down with a simple outreached hand. He was monstrously strong and she felt her ribs threatening to break under the simple press.

“I tried. The Grandfather’s chosen is on her way. She will be here soon to see you personally, and from what I’ve heard Alberta is not of a particularly positive mindset at the moment. I can imagine it’s to do with the emotions you have fuelled to the south. You have until the morning to consider my offer, it is truly the only thing that can save you. Guards!” he yelled, his knights striding in and immediately grabbing Zeta by the arms before dragging her kicking and screaming out of the room.

The cell she was thrown in was cold and her bed was little more than a blanket on the stone floor. The guards locked the heavy door before walking away, leaving her alone in the moonlit cell. “Finally,” she muttered, reaching up to the antimagic collar and ripping it free with her Focus. She smiled as she set it gently

down, ever grateful that Ordo and Jayce had bullied her into learning Focus. "They never question it," she muttered, looking at the door and at the bars on her cell window. "Guard!" she yelled out, chanting inside her head.

"What do you mean: she escaped?" growled Dolion, as he got out of his bed and looked at the pair of guards before him. They stood shaking in their armour, unable to look at his face and instead looking at the bony and twisted muscle across his body. "She..." gulped one of the guards, "she broke open her collar. Used her magic on us and then escaped into the city. The gates have been sealed and the guards are all on high alert. She will not escape, not without help."

Dolion swore, rubbing his bulging forehead, his milky white eyes looking out and down at the city. "Fine. I want her found before the morning, and most certainly before the Betrayer gets here! Which of you opened her cell?" he questioned. The guard on the left stood back. "Leave," Dolion commanded, the guard hurrying quickly towards the door and shutting it behind him. "My Lord, please! It wasn't--"

The scream rang throughout the castle, a steady stream of blood flowing out from beneath the doorway long into the night.

Seize the Seas Tales: A Return to the Start

"The Capital," Bjorn stated, leaning into the wheel of the Last Card, "it's been some time. It's good to be back." Yuthura slowly turned and looked at him. "Just what are you whittering on about?" she questioned, rolling her eyes and looking back ahead. "It's just good to be back, that's all. The others are probably waiting for us," he returned, spinning the wheel to bring the small boat into the correct lane. "Anyone here?" Yuthura questioned into her communicator. Silence followed. "Fuck!" Bjorn stated.

They docked the ship, Zhurong circling high in the skies above the city before diving down somewhere on the Isle of Duty for a nap, most likely scaring the soul out of a few Marines in the process. "Plan?" Arthuria questioned, looking towards Bjorn as Jeanne glanced out towards the city, her gaze settling on the Isle of Sanctity – all traces of the Church now long gone. "We're going to go and find Admiral Exarga. He may have information on the others, or at the least he can probably help us." Arthuria nodded in agreement, stretching her arms before taking her first step back onto the solid ground of the Capital. "Then let's go!"

They found the High Office of the Republic in an unusual sense of panic. People were rushing about, guards looked tense, and remarkably no one seemed to pay

them any attention, at least until Bjorn pushed open the doors to the Admiral's offices. "Identifi- holy, a-are you Bjorn of the Rising Aces?" questioned a Marine in a black uniform. "Yep," Bjorn returned. "Where's Admiral Exarga, son?" Bjorn questioned. The Admirals are in an emergency meeting within the Fleet Admiral's office, they are not to be disturbed," stated the young Marine. "Understood, we'll wait here for them. Go about your duty," Bjorn stated. The Marine stood at attention. "Yes sir!"

The second the Marine turned around, Bjorn strode forwards and pushed open the doors to Fleet Admiral Truth's office. "For Gods' sake!" Truth yelled. "I said no interru- Bjorn?" Bjorn glanced at the small group of senior Admirals: Truth, both Exargas, Koga and Blackwell. "Apologies for the interruption, Admirals," Bjorn stated. "What is going on?" he questioned. "This is an official meeting, I do not have time to play games with any more Rising Aces!" Truth growled.

"An attack is incoming. Xerxes has launched an invasion and is currently on his way to the Capital with an armada," Fleet Admiral Cassandra Exarga explained. "Is the rest of your crew here?" she questioned. Bjorn shook his head. "Damn." "Fleet Admiral, might I refer back to our previous discussion about involvement with Pirates?" Truth growled. She waved it off and turned to face Bjorn. "This is a major crisis and any and all help would be appreciated. He will arrive in a little over a day and reinforcements will take far longer than that to arrive," Cassandra stated. "How can we help?" Arthuria asked, drawing out a gentle smile from Jayce's mother.

Cassandra turned to Truth and he simply sighed, gesturing for her to go ahead. "We need to evacuate the Capital, but equally we also need to prepare our defences. We need time, and that is something we are lacking. We will launch an offensive to stall the enemy. Can I count on you to help be a part of it?" Cassandra questioned. "Yes, but first I need access to your communicators," Bjorn returned. "Why?"

"I need to send a message. I'm going to call the others here!"

Chapter 217: All Together

Zeta was grateful to see the breaking of dawn. It had been a long night avoiding the patrols and the random searches of the Lord's knights. But dawn didn't mean safety, she knew that more than anything; what it did mean was opportunity. Dolion wanted her to lead the masses to his whims, she wasn't going to do that. She refused to do that. She stepped out of the shadows, walking straight to the town's central church.

"May I help you?" questioned the priest, looking at her with confusion more than anything. "Do your bells work?" she asked. "I was hoping to ring them." He frowned, looking at her. "They do, but might I ask why?" he questioned, following her as she continued to stride forwards. "The Lord is a Cannibal, it's time to unmask him," she stated. She felt his demeanour change without even looking at him. He lunged at her but she stepped aside, concentrating her Focus into a powerful kick straight into his lower back. There was a crack and he toppled to the floor, his legs limp behind him. "You're going to tell me everything I need to know."

The bells rang out across the city of Tulo, stirring anyone who could have potentially still be slumbering. Zeta rang them long and hard, long enough to draw attention, but short enough to give her the chance she needed to escape. After slipping away from the guards that immediately rushed to investigate, she fled to the main square where countless people had gathered, all curious to find out about the emergency and what was going on.

She walked through the crowd, her bright blue hair visible and clear. "The Blue Bard!" came whispers. "It's her! It's Zeta!" She ignored it, walking straight to the statue in the middle of the square and climbing up it. She stood next to the stone figure of Dolion, pulling out the violin she had stolen from the church and beginning to play a soft tune. Eyes flooded towards her, fingers pointing as she began to play.

Zeta began to sing, her eyes glancing towards the guards rushing towards her. She sang a tale, a story of a monster that ruled the lands. A monster that fed on loved ones, the innocent and the guilty. A beast that forced people to choose between sacrificing themselves or those that they cared about. She sung about the absence of those that vanished, tears filling the eyes of her audience, and the guilt of sacrificing those that you cared about to save yourself. She could see the void in the bodies of the guilty grow, the anguish of their choices and the anger of being made to choose in the first place. She sung of Dolion the Cannibal, the

predator, the dark lord, and the people he feared. Several knights stopped in their tracks, others desperately trying to push into the crowd. "Fight! Fight for those you've lost! Fight for those that will be taken from you if you do not! Drag the monsters out into the light!" Zeta yelled, her personal mob raising their fists to the skies. "Tear down the kingdom of Cannibals!"

The knights after her drew their swords, an army of angry civilians all around them. "Enough is enough!" yelled a knight. "Down with the traitors of humanity!" he yelled, turning his blade on a fellow knight. Chaos erupted instantly, the knights on Zeta's side trampling the knights on Dolion's with the aid of the people they were meant to protect. Ordinary folk ran to grab anything and everything they could, return with flaming torches, kitchenware and pitchforks. "Drag the monster out into the light!" Zeta repeated, pointing towards the castle. Her followers charged forwards, yelling and repeating her words as they charged as an army, the knights at the lead.

Zeta hopped down from the statue, looking at the broken bodies of the fallen before running off in pursuit of her mob. She found the gates broken down, her people fighting against the enemy – their true forms revealed. The hunchback monstrosities tried to fight back, but there were too many on Zeta's side. Her people carried her forwards, bursting through the doors of the castle and into the main corridors.

Zeta let them run onwards, waiting and listening. Screams met her ears and she ran off in their direction, bursting back into the dining hall she had been in only hours before. Dolion stood waiting, a squirming knight in his elongated grasp. There was a crack and the body went limp. "You dare!" Dolion screeched, throwing the corpse at Zeta. She dove out of the way. "Kill yourself!" she commanded. He paused and then broke into laughter. "The Grandfather protects me from your trickery. I will savour every morsel as I peel the flesh off your bones!" he growled.

His entire misshapen body was grotesque. He held a hunch, the upper part of his body bent and cracked forwards with his spine bulging out of his back. He was pale with milky white eyes and greasy skin and hair. His fingers were long and bony, his nails cracked and broken. Zeta backed up, chanting whilst looking around for anything she could use to hurt him. He lunged across the room, his long arms flailing wildly as he ran. He swung at her, knocking chairs aside, but she kept her distance backing away. She whistled, a high-pitched and precise sound that caused him to clutch his head in pain. He grabbed a chair and threw

it at him. She dove aside, rolling to her feet and grabbing her violin before beginning to play. "No you don't!" he yelled darting towards her.

But she was waiting for it. Zeta swung, smashing the violin into him with a Focus-enhanced force that sent him flying backwards into and through the dining room table. He groaned as she began to hum, her throat glowing as she concentrated her magic not on hindering him but on buffing herself. He got to his feet and she leapt at him, swinging downwards with a scavenged sword. He held up a hand to block the blow and she cut straight through, twisting the blade to stab downwards into his chest. He lifted his legs upwards, kicking her backwards, but the blade remained in his chest impaling him to the floor. "I'll kill you! Tear you limb from limb! Boil your brains! Scoop out your eyeballs!"

Zeta glanced upwards as he tried to pull the blade out of his chest. A chandelier dangled from the ceiling. She whistled, sending out a high-pitched sonic blast that shattered the chain holding it up and sending it crashing down onto him. A rain of glass and metal scattered across the room, a cool silence following. Zeta let out a sigh of relief, slowly walking around the room to see the still corpse of the crushed cannibal, his bulging eyes wide in disbelief. "Thank the Gods," she muttered, dropping to a knee and catching her breath.

She could still hear violence all around her, her tuned ears picking up the combat in all directions, but as she looked at Dolion's corpse her mind immediately flashed back to his warning of Alberta Armin's imminent arrival. "Time to go," she stated, getting to her feet and beginning to run. "I hope they can hold out," she added, thinking about the people she was leaving behind as she ran through the castle back towards the gates.

She stopped only as the city sat as a small speck on the horizon; flames were spread across the castle – funeral pyres most likely. She had made an impact, whether for the better or for the worse she did not know. For now it was over. She had survived. She had done enough. Zeta looked towards the sun, and turned away from it. "Let's go home," she stated aloud, setting forwards on her journey west. "It's time to find a ship, it's time to find the others!"

Zeta did not bother to dye her hair, she did not need to, nor want to. The story of the Blue Bard that had slain a Cannibal Lord seemed to precede her, it got her what she wanted or needed without issue. And where issue did arise, she often found others willing to help her, biding time for her to escape or providing her routes to do so. Friends lay waiting more than enemies, all the way to the West coast.

She breathed a sigh of relief as she finally saw the ocean, the gentle, cold, blue and the spring sun filling her with joy. The large coastal town of Lanis was simple – Zeta liked simple. It was one of the main access points to the continent and a steady stream of ships seemed to be coming and going, mostly merchant vessels, some military. “You’re here,” came a voice as she crossed the town boundary, a young woman waiting for her. Zeta flinched, faltering as she slowly turned and looked at the woman. “M-Morgana?” Zeta questioned in distinct disbelief.

Morgana smiled, a long-missed smile that immediately unleashed a flood of tears from Zeta’s eyes as she dove into Morgana’s arms and began to wail. “It’s good to see you, Z,” Morgana stated, holding her tightly and crying silent tears of her own. “You’re safe, well...ish,” Morgana stated. Zeta pulled back and looked at her with blurry confusion. “I’m not the only one who is aware of your trajectory. Those Cannibals you’ve pissed off are on their way. A load of them. The Stacked Hand will be here soon, so we should get out of here before they arrive.”

“What of the people, we shouldn’t leave them to the hands of various angry Cannibals?” Zeta returned. Morgana smiled softly, shaking her head. “Somehow I just knew you’d say that. I’ll follow your lead, Blue Bard, what do you want to do?” Morgana asked. Zeta looked around at the town, her eyes eventually setting on an outdoor performance stage. “One last performance, for the road,” Zeta stated with a small smile.

“Ready?” Morgana asked, looking at the sizeable crowd that assembled to hear Zeta play. “I think so, I think this is also the biggest crowd I’ve played to,” she admitted nervously. “First of many,” Morgana reassured. “Give them hell! I’ll be guarding you from the skies.” She took off, leaving Zeta alone to take a deep breath, before she twirled her enchanted baton and stepped out onto the stage, transforming her reunited weapon into a glowing violin.

“Hurry up, we’re close!” yelled Ordo, darting through the forest with Mai Lu hot on his heels. “You’ve been saying that for a day and a half!” Mai Lu panted after him, her face red as she pursued him. “Yeah, this time I’m right!” he stated, leaping across a river. “Look!” he yelled. “Ahead of us!” Mai Lu looked past him, they weren’t the only ones rushing through the forest. A large swarm of bulbous hunchback creatures were bounding ahead of them. “Wonderful,” she said, “can we ignore them.”

“No! Do not let them touch a single blue hair on her head,” he stated, transforming into his partial Dragon form, a pair of blue-black wings emerging from his back and sparks of lightning flashing off his body. “Fine,” Mai Lu said,

relinquishing control to Baal. Her skin turned red, other than her face that turned a ghostly white. Red horns emerged from her head and her nails became claws. "Hunting time!" Baal cheered with joy, dashing forwards after Ordo.

Zeta ignored the flying bolts of green, white and red as Morgana flew across the sky bombarding the Cannibals that emerged from the darkness. Her audience hardly noticed themselves, their attention focused entirely on her as she sung about the monsters of these lands and how they can be beaten. A crash of lightning drew her attention to the forest, a draconic figure launching out of the woods alongside an all-too-familiar Demon. A smile crossed Zeta's face as her friends came to her aid, striking the monsters with incredible ferocity and strength.

Her audience sang her words, turning on the approaching Cannibals with weapons of their own. And where they would have run in the past, the people of Arcastalum ran forwards, unafraid, towards the creatures that had for too long claimed to be their predators. Zeta continued to play, her magic weaving strength into the people around her, their actions the beginnings of a new legend: a legend of how they took the dark continent back. And almost as quickly as the song started, it came to an end, the battle won – and the monsters slain.

"You're alive?" Mai Lu said, somewhat in genuine disbelief as she looked at Zeta. Zeta smiled faintly at the Demon girl. "Yeah, somehow," she returned before looking at Ordo and stepping into his tight embrace. "You did it girlie, you survived alone. I'm proud of you." She nodded, crying into his shoulder as he held her tightly. She was safe, they were safe. "We can trade stories later," Morgana interrupted, landing next to them before pointing out towards the water. "Our ride is here." The Stacked Hand sat on the horizon, its familiar blue, white and black bringing smiles all around. "Home..." Zeta said softly.

It took some time to recount all of the tales of the various fragments of the Rising Aces; it took even longer for Zeta to finally set the communicator down after a long and lengthy chat with Marisha. But eventually the relief of seeing each other faded and a nervous feeling emerged. "So..." Ordo questioned, looking at the assembled group: Wam, Morgana, Tempest, Gaea, Zeta, Red, Mai Lu, Thalia and Ohno. "Where are the others?" he asked. "Where's the Captain? Where's Bjorn?"

"We don't know," Morgana answered on Marisha's behalf. "There has been no contact and rumours have dried up." Zeta tucked her legs into her chest, rocking slightly as she sat on the sofa in the living quarters. "So they could be dead?" she suggested. "Maybe," Morgana said quietly. "But I doubt it. It will take more than

an awry spell to kill our crewmates." The others looked to her. "Look, we've found each other. We'll find the others. Ordo, what is our next move?" she asked.

"The sensible move is to fall back to the New World. If anyone landed there then they will have made their way to the Capital. They'll find a way to contact us. Especially with Marisha monitoring things in the Guild. Great move by the way." "Be sure to tell her that yourself," Morgana returned, sitting on the table and crossing her legs over. "So we set sail for the Capital?" she stated, various nods of agreement came from the others. "Sounds good. Tempest, are we good to teleport? No point wasting time and waiting."

"A definite option," Tempest returned. Morgana looked towards Ordo, hoping he would take command as the most authoritative member amongst the group. "Then that's what we'll do. Better to rest in familiar waters than unfamiliar ones. Will our communicators still reach Marisha?" he questioned towards the djinn. "They should. I have little reason to believe otherwise," Tempest returned. "Perfect, then let's go right now. Prepare the ship, Tempest – when you're ready." Ordo then turned towards Zeta. "Zeta, join me in my quarters for a moment. Morgana, you too," he stated, standing up and exiting the room. Morgana and Zeta glanced towards each other, raising an eyebrow.

They found him adjusting toppled items and checking for dust. "That djinn bothered to dust but didn't bother to fix my knocked over things," he scowled, taking a seat on his bed and looking up at the pair of them. "I just want to say that I'm very proud of you both. And I know that Jayce, Arthuria, Bjorn – they would all feel the same way. Morgana – you've brought us back together. Zeta – you survived on your own for so long. I am sorry we let this happen in the first place, I hope you can forgive me for letting you down," he said, with unusual softness and sincerity.

Morgana and Zeta glanced at each other. "Ordo, this wasn't your fault," Zeta immediately returned. He held up a hand and shook his head. "No, it is. I failed to prepare you, and failed to prepare myself, to deal with an enemy such as Kaina. That Dragon destroyed us, and it is miracle that we survived. I have no doubt that the consequences of that loss will echo amongst our crew for far longer than it takes us to reunite. We need to do better, and I should have been a catalyst earlier on to bring that about."

"That's unrealistic," Morgana returned, folding her arms. "We can't always be the strongest – it's not possible. A Dragon is a reasonable foe to have struggled against - if not, then what is?" Ordo smiled and shook his head, standing up and

looking at them. "Our next foes are going to be the Betrayers, you both know that – right?" Zeta nodded, gritting her teeth and clenching her fists as she thought about what she had seen. Morgana, however, looked at the floor and shied away – her pupils dilating, and her breathing growing sharper and quicker. Ordo placed a hand on her shoulder. "Focus on finding the others, just as you have before," Ordo reassured. "We will be fine."

Zeta found a familiar figure stood leaning against the wall outside of Ordo's room. "I'm surprised you survived everything you went through," Thalia stated bluntly. "I am relieved though," she promptly added. Zeta looked up at her, reaching up and placing a gentle hand to Thalia's cheek. "I heard you didn't exactly have a walk in a park either. Arena Champion?" Zeta questioned. Thalia leant into her hand before shaking her head and pulling away. "No, I gave that chance up to be here."

Zeta raised an eyebrow. "That doesn't sound like you... Are you alright?" Thalia nodded, putting on a smile as she looked down at Zeta. "I guess I've softened." "Never." Thalia chuckled, leaning her head against the wall. They locked eyes. "I've missed you," Zeta said bluntly. Thalia nodded, a brief look of uncertainty crossing her face. "You too, at times." Zeta smiled, stepping forwards and placing her head into Thalia's chest. Awkwardly, Thalia placed a hand on Zeta's head. "Your hair looks better short," she stated clumsily. Zeta shook her head. "No, it doesn't."

"Come on fuckbuddies, get a room," Ordo stated, stepping out of his room and immediately causing them both to separate. They both flashed red. Ordo rolled his eyes and stepped past Zeta, placing a hand on Thalia's shoulder. "Come on, show me how you've improved these last few months. You'll see each other later," he stated, dragging her away. Zeta shook her head as Thalia sauntered off after Ordo before leaning into the wall. She made a fist and tapped the wood. "Still the same awkwardness," she muttered. "The Barbarian and the Bard... not meant to be." She turned away and retreated back to her room.

"All crew," came Marisha's voice, almost the second they landed in the waters outside of Last Drop. She sounded shaky, almost on the verge of tears. "Bjorn wants us back at the Capital, now! Get moving, I'll meet you there!"

Seize the Seas Tales: Back to Form

Thalia looked at Ordo, the pair of them circling each other within the Stacked Hand's training room. Ordo clenched his fist, the cyan around it turning black as he mirrored his opponent. "Still got it old man!" she goaded, lunging forwards and throwing a fist that for the majority of the people on the planet would have been lethal. Ordo tucked into it, guiding his fist on the inside of hers to force her punch on a wide trajectory, whilst his continued forwards, square towards her face. But instead she grabbed it, turning, twisting and flipping him over her body in a heavy slam into the floor. She grinned as she stood over him. "You've gotten slow."

"No, you've gotten technical," he stated with a surprised groan. "It suits you. You're using the brain that sits inside your massive head again." She concentrated on her fist, the black flames swirling around it as she pulled back her arm and then threw her punch towards his skull. He rolled away as she cracked the floor. "My head is not big..." He chuckled, limping slightly towards one of the benches – the room a mess from their several rounds of battling. "No, it's not," he stated, taking a sip of rum before offering it to her. Rather than sit down next to him she sat down on the floor and leant her head on his leg, taking the bottle from him and taking a heavy drink. He placed his hand in her sweaty hair before taking the bottle back from her. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"I... don't know. I... have changed, but I don't know if it's for the better." "Maybe it is, maybe it isn't – it's not something we can control: we're moulded by our experiences, our connections. We are who we are. What's the change you're worried about?" he asked. She thought for a moment. Her mind flashed with images of Zeta, Athena... Jayce. "I once threatened to take this crew from Jayce, to lead it rather than be led. But now..."

"You've grown, Thalia. You're beyond petty squabbles for power, you don't need it. There's no one to prove yourself to, and it's not something you should want or need to return," he told her, stroking her hair. She looked up at the old man, his own mind thinking as to how he had changed. "But I've lost my courage," she confessed. "You saw it. I'm... cautious, afraid." Ordo shook his head. "No, you're confused – you always have been when it comes to Zeta. You both are. You're not right for each other, no more than the Doc and I are. Some people just aren't meant for that sitting by the fire and growing old together happy ending."

Thalia looked down, her shoulders slumping. "Do you wish it to be?" he asked. She shook her head. "What is it you want then?" he asked. A thousand options filled her mind, eventually fading into one distinct image – her grandfather sat on a throne with his concubines. It flickered to an image of herself in his place, a dozen or so children running and fighting each other in a large house. "More," she stated. "She wants that too," he stated. "She wants to be a star, to travel the world and perform. But her more is different from yours, it doesn't mean you're incompatible – it just means that you won't always sail on the same ship, if you understand my meaning. You're thinking too much about it, rather than enjoying that the wind is in the right direction. Ignore the destination, enjoy the ride. That's the deal I have with Doc." Thalia shuddered slightly, a hard fist tapping the top of her head a moment later. "Ow!" she complained.

Wam swirled the beer in his bottle as he sat next to the Stacked Hand's wheel, watching as Tempest made his final preparations for teleportation. Ohno sat next to him, sipping his own beer. "Do you think Fenn is still alive?" Wam questioned. "Yeah, definitely," Ohno returned. "Why wouldn't he be?" Wam sat in a silence. "I... died, Ohno. Brother, I died-died, and if he was in a similar situation as to Zeta..." Ohno shrugged, looking out across the waters before reaching over and placing a hand on his brother's shoulder. "He's fine. No doubt. He always is." "I wish I had your confidence."

"Sounds... fascinating," Morgana said to Mai Lu, as she finished her recount of the magic the Cannibals and Vampires had used. "Anything you've encountered before?" Mai Lu questioned. Morgana shook her head, trying to think of anything that could have possibly come close. "We were more about using materials as ingredients, rather than people as conduits. But... it does make me think about just what the Grandfather could possibly be. If it's strong enough and old enough to have its own kind of magic, then perhaps it is a Demon, or something else that is primordial – maybe it's something similar to whatever the True Vampire is."

Mai Lu shrugged, leaning back into the sofa and shutting her eyes. "Do you think Arthuria survived?" Morgana questioned quietly. Mai Lu scoffed, shaking her head. "Do you doubt she has? If so then you clearly do not know your sister as well as I thought you do." Morgana looked down at her feet. She rubbed her thumbs against one another. "Maybe I don't..." she muttered.