

Chapter 218: A Captain and His First Mate

Jayce grinned as his hands flashed in technicolour, cycling at his command across the various colours of Focus. He had done it, he had mastered it for all its worth and even as he stood in the void of the Scourge, he still held command of his senses. He turned, looking at the army of skeletons assembled between him and Rosalynn's home. He flicked out Sola and Luna, turning to face the bones before charging forwards. Jayce danced through the field of bones, lighter, faster and stronger than he had ever been before. They were never-ending, but he didn't care – he laughed with glee as he cut, smashed, and decimated everything in his path.

He struggled to stop smiling, even as he lay in his bath – washing off the dust, sweat and grime from his training. A meow drew his attention to the side of his room. Little Witch sat watching him, the cat's tail flicking from side-to-side impatiently. She wasn't alone in the impatience – RK kept wandering off further and further into the desert, the rokken nervous if not afraid of the fate of Tempest. Jayce's smile dwindled and he lay back looking up at the ceiling. He only knew the fate of Astris and Caelie, both currently sailing with Astris' brother on their way to reinforce Cyrenna and Alara, everyone else was still a mystery. He sighed, descending below the surface of the water and shutting his eyes in the hot darkness. "It's time to go," he stated in his mind. A few moments of silence passed. "You don't say," came a sarcastic response from Paimon.

Rosalynn sat waiting for him in her usual position for the time of day. "I made your favourite," she said, looking at him with what he presumed to be a smile. It was always hard to tell given she had no skin – a skull after all was a poor conveyer of feelings. The blue glow to her eyes were particularly intense this evening and she was wearing simple white robes, the closest clothing she possessed that amounted to casual. "Thank you," he returned, sitting down next to her as Little Witch leapt onto the table and dug into her own meal.

They sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes as she watched him eat. "So," she eventually stated as he sat back sated. "You've succeeded in your training?" He nodded. "Good, I must confess that I am deeply impressed. To have such control in such a harsh environment should make it a 'cakewalk', as you have put it, when you return to your home," Rosalynn said softly. Jayce smiled, nodding appreciatively. "I hope so. And on that topic..."

"Ah," she realised, looking down. "I suppose the time has finally come." He nodded. "Yeah, I'm sorry, but my people need me. I need to return to them." Silence followed as Rosalynn thought, a slow mental sigh following as she raised her head and looked at him. "Then I suppose we best make the most of this night. Let me find you the good

wine," she stated, getting to her feet and walking off. "The rest wasn't the 'good' wine?" he questioned after her.

They sat and talked long into the night, talking both of their time together and their own separate pasts. Rosalynn obviously had far more of a past to talk about but Jayce couldn't help but notice how much of the conversation had been about him, as if she was savouring every last word he was leaving her. "So what will you do next?" she eventually asked, the wine all gone. He looked at her, fighting the sheer volume he had consumed with every bit of his constitution. "I... need to get my friend back. To free him from the Sovereign."

"Vexx?" she questioned, laying on her front and kicking her legs slowly behind her as she looked at him. "Yeah. Him," he said, leaning back and looking up at the ceiling. "I failed him last time. And... I'm still failing him now. I need to find him, find Captain Valentine, stop the Sovereign," he stated. She nodded. "And you will, I have no doubt about it." Jayce looked at the skeletal companion he had spent so many months with. "I wish you had been born in this era, I feel we could have been great friends," he stated a little stupidly. She looked down. "I wish you were born in my era. Perhaps the world wouldn't have ended. And..." she trailed off and sat up, shaking her head. "I think it's time for bed. You have a long journey ahead of you." He let out a sigh and nodded. "You're right, I guess I will retire. Goodnight, Rosalynn," he stated, unsteadily getting to his feet. She watched him go. "Goodnight," she said after him.

Jayce lay in his bed, looking up at the ceiling of his room as he thought on their conversation, on their conversations – there had been so many across so many hours. As he finally began to shut his eyes he heard the door open, a soft pair of feet quietly making their way across the room towards him. He felt the covers move, a body climbing in and nestling up to him. He felt soft hair across his chest, an ear placed to his heart. His eyes peeked open, not wishing to disturb his visitor.

Long blonde hair lay across his body, a soft and cold pale body resting upon him. She looked up at him, her large eyes a beautiful and soft green colour. He felt her hands caress his skin, before reaching up towards him, cold fingers rubbing his beard before searching through his hair. She rose upwards, the brilliant eyes looking into his, her bare body sitting across his waist as she leant down and kissed him. He kissed back.

The morning came and he woke up alone, other than the cat and the Demon in his head. "Ro-" he questioned, stopping himself as he noticed a letter and a scroll on his bedside table. He dressed, grabbing his bottomless bag and summoning Sola and Luna to his wrists. Jayce then glanced around the room, taking in the view and thinking back to how bare it had once been. Rosalynn had done everything she could

to make him comfortable throughout the time together, crafting and making everything he needed. "Come on," he told Little Witch, picking her up and placing her in a special frontal backpack Rosalyn had made for her.

Nervously, Jayce then approached the letter, opening it before putting it in his pocket. He then unfurled the scroll, looking at the map guiding him to the Anvil of Agron – the likely location of the items he needed to get back to the New World and his friends. He put it away, taking a short breath before stepping out of his room for the last time. Jayce walked the corridors, looking for any trace of Rosalynn, any sign of her at all. Not a single skeleton stood in sight, nothing watched him, nothing waited for him. He was alone as she hid from their goodbye.

"Come on RK, time to go," he told the rokken, the now even larger mountain of a creature grumbling as he got up and began to move towards the exit of the castle. Jayce walked slowly behind, trying to process, trying not to let his emotions rule him. "If it helps," Paimon said in his mind as they crossed the threshold to the Scourge, "the illusion she put up for you, did not work for me. That was not a sight I want to see again." Jayce snorted, shaking his head. "You bastard, couldn't you have just let me had that?" he questioned. He could feel Paimon's smile in his head. "Head high, Exarga – we have a lot to do."

Jayce stopped as the castle sat a few hundred metres away, he turned and looked back – a faint figure watching him from a window. "Thank you!" he yelled out, waving wildly. "Goodbye!" He turned, looking ahead at the empty horizon he had to walk. Only then, as she could not see him, he let the tears begin to fall, knowing that somewhere his partner from another world was likely feeling the same.

Bjorn let out a sigh as he sat back in the communications chair. It was too small for him, uncomfortable and a blatant example of just how out of place he felt. The message had been sent: he had summoned his crew back to the North, and only time would tell just who would answer. With luck it would be everyone, but he doubted that – his luck had run out, that was for sure. He could only hope that Marisha, the boys, and Jayce were okay.

"Sir?" came a voice, a Marine dressed in an all-black uniform standing to attention next to him. "Me?" Bjorn questioned, meeting the not-short Marine eye-to-eye, even as Bjorn remained seated. "Yes, sir. You have been requested by the Fleet Admirals for a meeting. I'm to take you there immediately," he stated firmly, but with an almost-awestruck expression. Bjorn nodded, getting to his feet. "Best not to keep them waiting then. Lead on."

If it hadn't of been for the years of being with Jayce, Wicke and Vexx, Bjorn most certainly would never have dreamed of even meeting an Admiral face-to-face. Yet it

had become such a frequent experience throughout his travels, that it had almost become an annoyance more than anything else. He no longer revered them, they were just people to him – and as he entered the room with various Admirals scattered across the numerous chairs around a colossal table he couldn't help but smell the fear permeating throughout the air. Once upon a time these had been the most powerful people in the world, both physically and through status. Not anymore.

Eyes glanced towards him as he stopped in place near the entrance, awaiting an instruction or an invitation. "Bjorn," came Cassandra's familiar and friendly voice from across the room, "Yuthura, Arthuria, Jeanne," she followed, expressing the faint greetings to his companions stood behind him. "Thank you for joining us," she said, concluding what Bjorn imagined would be the only pleasantries to the meeting. A series of subtle nods and gestures landed Bjorn's way, the Paladins receiving nothing and Yuthura's reputation resulting in several cautious stares. "You called?" Bjorn returned, standing in a still habitual position of attention.

"Indeed," Truth stated, his voice firm and clear, and his position tense. "You once served under Commodore Osiris, correct?" he questioned, his deep brown eyes boring into Bjorn. "As no more than a Conscript, but yes. A long time ago," Bjorn returned, not liking the attention upon him nor the unearthing of his past. "Do you still remember your training?" Truth continued. Bjorn nodded. "We'll have to take your word as is. As of this moment you are reinstated, we do not have time to wait for your Captain or your crew for aid. Congratulations, Acting-Captain Bjorn, take a seat."

Bjorn felt his body flush with heat. He had long shrugged off any allegiance or ambitions within the Navy and its Marines, yet in a hesitant instant it all came back. He had never dared ask for more before, a Conscript had never had the luxury to dream – but now... A cane prodded his back as Yuthura nudged him towards an empty chair. "Let it be understood plainly and clearly – this is temporary, and only as an act representing the urgency of the situation. Abuse it and there will be consequences, succeed and there very well may be a more permanent position for you." Bjorn nodded, taking a seat amongst the Admirals. "I'm honoured," he stated sincerely.

"You shouldn't be," Cassandra said somewhat coldly, as if disapproving of the idea – or at the least disapproving of the way it had been enacted. "What we're asking of you is to help us delay a threat that once almost toppled the Empire. Crach is dead, and Xerxes was always held back by him. We are facing a creature of mayhem and destruction, a beast that never cared for collateral. We are asking you to help lead the first strike whilst we establish more firm evacuation routes and defensive lines. By all accounts – this is almost suicide."

"Ah," Bjorn uttered, deflating slightly as it dawned on him why he was there and what was expected: a miracle or a sacrifice. "And what will you wonderful folk be doing in the mean time?" Yuthura questioned from the side of the room as she drew on the floor with chalk, periodically poking a Marine attempting to politely stop her with her cane. "Jayce's... absence left a hole," Philip Exarga explained. "The other Pirate Lords have been attempting to claim territory – currently Kitty Deliver and Tim Kane are fighting wars of their own."

"A fantastical coincidence," Yuthura stated, the chalk circle glowing as she tapped her cane onto it. In a flash of red light, a comfy rocking chair appeared, along with the disappearance of numerous large floorboards, that she promptly sat down in. Bjorn smiled, shaking his head. "It's unknown whether or not Xerxes has allied with the Engines and Ningyo, but both machines and ocean crawlers are knocking on the doors of the Republic and we intend to answer," Truth stated. "You will have a fleet, along with some of the best officers we can muster. We ask that you stall, long enough for our other fleets to surround the enemy." "And just how long will that be?" Bjorn questioned. A grim silence followed. "Fine."

"This is stupid," Arthuria stated boldly, as the Admirals began to leave the room once the meeting had ended. "They're in a difficult position. The Republic is still reforming after the collapse of the Empire and three Pirate Lords looking for conquest is not a small amount," Bjorn rationalised, his words sounding hollow even to him. "This isn't our fight, Bjorn. It's not worth the risk, not when they have a room full of Admirals that are being held back for one reason or another."

Someone cleared their throat and the four of them turned to find Philip Exarga stood nearby. "Follow me," he stated quietly, turning and stepping away. Bjorn looked towards Yuthura. "What are you looking at me for, Captain?" she stated, taking a step forwards and following after Admiral Exarga. "You heard her, Captain," Arthuria stated, following after her with Jeanne close behind. Bjorn let out a sigh and followed the group.

Philip led them to his office, the door opening on its own and remaining open as Bjorn and the others followed him inside. The door then closed quietly before locking loudly. "This doesn't leave the room," Philip stated firmly as he sat behind his desk. Bjorn nodded, folding his arms as Yuthura took a seat and Jeanne and Arthuria leant against the door. "There are other reasons why you are being limited in your resources," Philip stated. "We are currently at war within the Old World."

"What?" Bjorn questioned, the others all mirroring his shock. Philip nodded, leaning back in his chair and scratching his chin. "Alara and both Kai's are currently staging an assault on the Old World with the hopes of disabling a trio of weapons, and then

using them to liberate Alara's parents." Bjorn shook his head. "That sounds even more suicidal than what has been asked of me. Again, why not send the Admirals?"

"We're vulnerable Bjorn, more than you know. This Republic is run by the military and the entire world knows that we are at the whims of the Sea Sovereign. Even just maintaining control of the New World seems to be a losing task. The innumerable casualties that occurred during the war with the Church... it's not something that can be swept away. It is a lot to ask of you, it would be a lot to ask even of Jayce, but I have faith you'll find a way to hold Xerxes off. Just hold his War Hounds back until we can drive them back. We do not need to destroy them, only delay them. Only then can we launch our true assault on the Old World and, for the first time since Scáthach announced herself to the New World, take the initiative back."

"I'll do what I can, but..."

Philip shook his head. "You will do fine. Arthur limited your rank to ensure that you don't hold too much sway, but your reputation is well-known. Even without being placed into an official position, there would be few amongst the Republic that would not follow your orders. The therians that have been swept into Xerxes' grudge will not be unaware of you, I have done my best to ensure that." Bjorn frowned. "Information spreads easily with a handful of pearl in the right pocket. You're a legend in this world, there's little reason for that to not be the case in the Old World too. Someone needs to stand against Xerxes' influence and you're the man for the job. Kill him and Crach's position is yours, and with it a guaranteed position amongst the Admiralty, should you use that position correctly. There is a lot that the Righthand of Jayce Exarga can achieve, but focus on what you can do now. Weaken Xerxes, stand up to him, push his forces back – whatever means necessary." Bjorn met his somewhat casual gaze before slowly nodding and stepping back. "That's all I can ask for. Jayce would count on you, and so will I. Buy as much time as you can, but if the chance is there... take it. Good luck, Captain."

Bjorn couldn't help but feel uneasy as he stepped onto the Slayer, a heavy warship with more cannons than he could count. It was most certainly the largest ship he had sailed on, but not the largest he had ever boarded. "I hope you're proud of me... Osiris," he muttered, a uniform stamp drawing his attention to the waiting Marines and Navy all looking towards him. "We greet Captain Bjorn!" called the foremost and most decorated Marine, a somewhat shaggy ox therian with a pair of large and wide horns. "Commander Foreborn, I take it?" Bjorn questioned, trying not to show his nerves as he glanced at the more-than three-hundred bodies now under his command. "Aye, Captain," returned Foreborn, glancing briefly from Bjorn to Yuthura, Jeanne and Arthuria, before finally upwards at the Dragon circling above the ship. "At ease, fill me in on everything you know," Bjorn told him plainly.

The large Marine nodded, turning and looking at the crew of the Slayer. "We are at your command, so is the Hellbringer, the Icon, the Bad Day, and the Dawnstar. Roughly fifteen-hundred souls in total. We are ready to set off on your command, we know the cost, we know what is at stake, but with you here it doesn't seem quite so bad - if I may say so, Captain," Foreborn stated. Bjorn nodded, letting out a short exhale before straightening up. "The crew are hoping you have some... words of encouragement, if you don't mind?" Foreborn turned and looked at Bjorn, the stoic and firm expression on his face giving away his real feelings for a brief moment. The Commander was afraid; likely they all were. "Please," Foreborn said a bit more quietly. Bjorn nodded, approached the Helm and gripping the wheel of the ship with his own hands.

"I don't ask for much, just for you to have my back! Can I count on it?" Bjorn called out. "Aye, Captain!" clamoured the crew. Bjorn nodded, a small smile spreading across his face as he looked down at all of them. "We will hold the line, for hours if we must! For days, if we have to! Until the last man or woman takes their final breath, so that these scum do not lay a hand on the civilians of our Republic! We fight not just to survive, we fight to win! And win we shall!" "Oohrah!" Zhurong flew across the tops of the masts, unleashing a heavy and bright plume of flame into the air that Bjorn felt across his nose.

"To your stations! The Helm is mine – let's see what this beauty can do!"

Seize the Seas Tales: Ruination

"I want all batteries primed and ready, all squads prepared and ready for deployment - and a coffee," Alara stated to Weapon, as she stepped out of her quarters, rolling her metal arm and testing the grip of her fingers. He nodded, setting off to carry out her simple command. It was early in the morning, the sun fresh on the horizon, along with a thick haze of smoke and the consistent thunder of cannon fire.

Alara's eyes lay on their destination, the wooden railing groaning under her grip as she unconsciously crushed the wood. Her wounds were still fresh, the scars across her neck, chin, chest and stump aching in a near consistent stream of agony. But she did her best to ignore it, to temper the fury that threatened to consume her. Two sentries were gone, along with Witchford. They weren't going to come back and that meant the final one ahead of her was her last chance to cripple General Barca Khallid's fortress ship. It was her last real chance to rescue her parents, and her last chance to avenge her fallen friends.

The wood cracked within her grip, snapping her out of her wayward thoughts. A Marine handed her the coffee, a nervous look in the Ensign's eyes. "Thank you," Alara told him, dismissing the survivor. He nodded, glancing outwards towards their new

battlefield. Alara hugged the warm cup as she stepped into her quarters and grabbed her weapon. She downed the drink and set it aside, reaching up for her communicator. "Cyrenna?" Alara questioned firmly.

"Vanathur, is that you?" came Cyrenna's voice through the communicator. "It is; we're not much but we're coming in hard," Alara returned. A chuckle slipped through from the other side. "Link up with the Rear-Admirals and come and find me, I'll be waiting. See you soon!" Alara frowned, turning and looking towards Riley and Wulf who both shrugged. Alara then looked ahead, watching as another cyan barrage descended down from the heavens, illuminating a dozen or so ships all wearing Republic colours. A smile spread across Alara's face. "Reinforcements! Reinforcements have arrived!"

Chapter 219: The First Waves

Bjorn finally released the wheel of the Slayer, relinquishing it to the ship's Helmsman only as the advancing fleet appeared on the horizon. "We know the plan," Arthuria stated quietly as she approached his side, the pair of them walking across the main deck towards the ship's bow. Bjorn nodded, his heart racing. It wasn't much of a plan, especially since he had been the one to create it, but it was a plan after all and, at the very least – if it all went wrong – it would all be over quickly.

"I still think you should stay here though," Arthuria reiterated. Bjorn shook his head, cautiously placing a foot on the edge of the ship and glancing back towards his new crew as the Slayer and the rest of his fleet came to a halt in a staggered line. "I have to go, and there's no way I'm leaving you to fight this alone," he stated, finding Jeanne, Yuthura and Commander Foreborn by the wheel. He nodded to them before looking ahead and concentrating. "I'm never alone," Arthuria stated, leaping up and being snatched out of the air by Zhurong, the pair flying upwards hard and fast. "Nice for some," Bjorn muttered, dropping down onto the ocean. His feet hit solid ice, a platform forming underneath him before spreading forwards as he focused on freezing a path for himself. With his head held high he strode forwards towards the incoming fleet.

Somewhat civilly, the enemy fleet came to a halt and in a mirrored manner to himself a figure descended from the ship, landing with a crash into the water. Bjorn stood and waited, extending out his frozen platform, the path behind him breaking away into the water, and moments later with a heavy crash a figure launched themselves out of the ocean. Bjorn looked down at the figure that was almost twice as wide as him. The therian was bright pink, along with a greyish brown colouration to his rubber-like skin. Large teeth filled his huge maw and his eyes were small and purple. The hippo therian looked at Bjorn, a heavy set of gauntlets across his hands and a mean expression on his face. "Bjorn," came a growl from the War Hound, Kandon.

"I know of you Kandon, as you know of me. I would rather we settle this conflict peacefully and I hope you feel the same?" Bjorn prompted, remaining firm in his stance and ready for anything the War Hound was prepared to throw at him. "You stand against your brothers, your people, why?" questioned the War Hound, refusing to give his name. "Because my kind do not decide to invade a nation over a grudge from nearly thirty years ago. Do not throw the lives of your people away. Crach-"

Kandon spat at Bjorn, a heavy lump of saliva splattering across Bjorn's face. Slowly Bjorn reached up and wiped it away. "A lot of pointless lives will be lost if we come to blows. Let it go, this is not a fight worth having – there are larger problems out there that we can overcome if we simply work together. Please, end this now."

"I hoped for more than begging from someone with a reputation like you. A shame, but then again – Xerxes wants you dead and I have no intention on disappointing him." Bjorn sighed as the hippo raised his right arm and gesturing forwards, his ships sailing onwards. "So be it," Bjorn growled, flinging his arm forwards. The ice beneath the hippos feet sharpened and propelled itself upwards into the therian's stomach. He lurched backwards, a pained expression of surprise on his face, but then he punched the ice and it shattered. Kandon roared as he charged forwards, smashing the ice that Bjorn threw in his path whilst unhinging his jaw into a monstrous bite.

Bjorn drew his axe and swung but the therian bit onto the weapon, slamming into him with his body and sending them both into the ocean with a heavy splash. Bjorn pulled for the surface, taking a desperate breath of air as hands grabbed him and pulled him under before a heavy impact hit his ribs, sending a wave of pain across his body and knocking out a sizeable amount of his air. Desperately Bjorn pulled upwards, but Kandon remained with a firm grip on him, deliberately pulling him downwards. The water was the hippo's world, not Bjorn's.

More pain flooded Bjorn's body and darkening mind. He tasted blood, felt the cold water flooding his body as the light of the surface grew darker and darker. But then the darkness vanished, the surface igniting in a bright flash of orange flame. Bjorn turned, looking down with ferocious fury at the War Hound attempting to drown him. He reached outwards, grabbing the flabby skin of Kandon with his claws and concentrating on the energy within the water around him. He drew it away, the water and skin of the hippo turning colder before freezing.

Bjorn's hands froze over, sealing themselves to the thrashing hippo, now desperately trying to pull back from Bjorn. But he pushed forwards, further into the darkness as he thought about his crew and everything that had been taken from him. They were coming, he knew it. He wasn't going to let this be his end. A flash of green came from Kandon as he transformed out of his hippo form, breaking free from Bjorn's frozen grip. The chubby man's eyes went wide – Bjorn's frozen maw the last thing he ever saw.

Arthuria desperately glanced down towards the rough area where Bjorn had gone under. It had been minutes now and neither him nor the War Hound had come to surface. "Come on Bjorn!" she desperately pleaded, the first wave defenceless as Zhurong ignited their sails on fast diving runs, the Republic ships rushing forwards to seize the initiative and bombard the enemy. A large bubble of red broke the surface, a yellowish fur emerging along with it. Arthuria breathed a sigh of relief.

Zhurong swooped down amidst the cannon fire, plucking the hapless polar bear out of the water. "You had me worried!" Arthuria called down, angling Zhurong back

towards the Slayer. "I had me worried!" Bjorn returned, transforming out of his therian form before back into his polar bear form – the various wounds for the most part disappearing. "Is he dead?" she questioned. He nodded grimly, a familiar look of disappointment on his face as she dropped him down towards the Slayer.

"Their leader is dead," Bjorn stated to Commander Foreborn, as he shook the water off his body. "Excellent to hear, Captain, but I fear more are on the way," he stated, pointing ahead towards the burning ships. More ships loomed on the horizon, steadily getting closer. "I doubt very much they're going to be willing to negotiate, reform the defensive line!" Bjorn commanded, the other ships swinging around to rejoin the Slayer, the defeated ships fleeing in all directions or sinking into the seas amongst heavy flames.

Zhurong dropped down on to the Slayer's main deck, the Dragon panting heavily from the brief battle. "How long will the Dragon need to recover?" Foreborn questioned to Bjorn as the pair of them approached. "Doc should get him up and running before long but he's going to sit this one out for the moment. Arthuria, are you ready?" Bjorn questioned to the Paladin. She nodded, placing her helmet onto her. "Most of the therians against us will have been forcibly conscripted, try to be merciful," Bjorn told her. She looked directly at him, her golden eyes shining through her visor. "We can't spare everyone, we targeted the sails as you commanded, but..."

"I know, just do what you can," he stated, placing a hand on her back and gently nudging her forwards towards the bow. Arthuria strode forwards, breaking into a run before leaping over the side and dropping down onto the ocean. She darted across the surface, striding quickly with her hands over Caliburn's hilt. If it had been her decision she would have saved her most powerful weapon for Xerxes himself, but she had a very strong feeling that this wasn't going to be a short conflict.

Explosions decorated the surface of the ocean ahead of her as the enemy unleashed a bombardment upon her. Then, to her distinct amusement, a cloud of winged therians darted into the skies and descended upon her. Arthuria unleashed Caliburn, a golden halo floating above her head and a wide pair of glowing feathered wings spreading across her back as she took to the air. "Mercy," she muttered, "may your souls find peace," she stated.

"Gods," muttered Foreborn, watching as entire ships were cleaved in two by the angelic Paladin. The grey horizon was shredded by golden beams and arcs as Arthuria massacred the enemy with everything she had. A minute later, the gold faded, followed by several large and fiery explosions from within the wreckage of the enemy fleet. Bjorn shook his head, he had hoped it would have been a last resort but

deep down he knew it never was going to be. If peace wasn't an option then he had to make certain that the enemy would hesitate – it was what Jayce would have done.

Arthuria staggered back to the ship clutching her limp left arm. "Are you okay?" Bjorn questioned as she dropped to her knees with a groan. "Yeah, I think. They got a lucky hit, I was cocky," she admitted. Bjorn held his tongue. It was concerning to see Arthuria injured so early – he knew injuries would happen, it was the sole reason he hadn't left Yuthura behind at the Capital, but he had been hoping they would happen later – after days at the least. "A War Hound?" he questioned. She shook her head. "No. Sorry."

"This was only the first wave. It was a probing strike," Foreborn stated. Jeanne nodded in agreement. "The next will be larger, more deliberate. If I was Xerxes, I wouldn't hold anything back. He now knows our strength – I have no doubt we are being watched. The next strike will be everything he has." Bjorn glanced out towards the stormy horizon. "We've bought some time. Everyone should get some rest."

Thunder crackled above the Slayer as Bjorn sat in his assigned quarters. It had been hours since the first wave and there was still no sign of Xerxes' fleet, but Bjorn knew better than to assume that meant a battle couldn't start at a moment's notice. He shook his head as he thought over the lives that had been lost from the first encounter. "A waste..." he muttered, resting his chin in his hands and looking at the floor.

A flash of lightning illuminated the room and the door opened, Arthuria standing in the doorway. "Any news?" Bjorn questioned, sitting upright and looking at her as she stepped inside and let down her long golden hair before setting her helmet aside on his bedside table. "Still quiet. We're in the position you ordered, but there's still nothing from either the Republic or Xerxes," she stated, dragging over a chair with her leg to sit next to him. "Can't sleep?" Bjorn asked. She shook her head, looking out towards the rain rattling against the window. "Jeanne is out like a light, so is Doc. The crew are nervous and... well... if I were to strike, now would be the time. In the night... in the storm..."

"He won't," Bjorn stated confidently. Arthuria glanced his way, frowning as she read his wayward expression. "Why not? It makes tactical sense. Slaughter us whilst we sleep – especially if he has therians capable of swimming efficiently." Bjorn shook his head, glancing towards her. Sometimes he forgot that, although he himself was only in his thirties, that Arthuria and some of the others were practically still children. She and Jeanne were only just over twenty, Morgana was even younger, so was Caelie. "To Xerxes this about more than just invading and seizing territory. This is about revenge. This is about concluding the Blood Wars."

"How so?"

"The Blood Wars happened long before you were born, but the consequences of it are still felt even now. It was a... waste, a time of pointless conflict, but no one then could really see that. I mean, it was all orchestrated by the Church after all. A means to put the therians down in status and elevate the Church into the military. Crach and his rebels slaughtered the hierarchy of the Empire, they all but eradicated all senior leadership. Only the Old Dogs were really left of the generation before Crach and the Exargas, but due to Gamble's tensions with them it pushed a lot of new blood into power, forced the Exargas, Truth and the other Admirals to create new ideas, new methods, that actually worked against Crach. They created the Marines, incorporated therians into positions of power, rather than just as conscripts, and forced the Church to only operate within the Navy. And with therians on both sides of the conflict, Crach's influence crumbled – forcing him into peace talks."

"But Crach had created monsters within his armies. The War Hounds were allowed to be feral, unhinged destroyers with little oversight. But peace doesn't really work with those types of people. So..." Bjorn sighed, shaking his head. "They were given up," Arthuria concluded. He nodded, watching the flashes of light in the surrounding darkness. "They were meant to be killed, and had they been then we would have never been in this mess. But for some reason or another, the Church wanted them – as potent ingredients or for some other purpose. They were locked away for years, decades, until I let them out."

"Maybe I shouldn't have, maybe I should have let them be buried underneath the Necropolis. Crach would probably still be alive and I wouldn't be forced to kill my own kind. We'd have another ally within the Pirate Lords, what remains of them," Bjorn lamented. Arthuria watched the storm with him, uncertain of what to say back to him. He wasn't wrong... "I think, Bjorn, you oversell yourself. No one is that important, and Crach was old. Someone would have taken his position eventually. And then we'd probably still be in a similar position. Maybe it's just bad luck, or maybe it's being taller and stronger animal-folk that has led to your people being consistently conscripted into mercenaries. I don't think you can change that. I think Admiral Exarga has placed the idea of your importance into your head to give you a reason to make this fight yours. I think it's what Jayce would have done to convince you to fight, as he often does – he makes it personal. His father is probably the same."

"But it is my fight. Regardless of Exarga influence. It's my tribe's fight, it's... the boys' fight too. Wam, Ohno, Fenn – they will all have to deal with this eventually. Should I not try to bring an end to... to it all, before it gets to them?" he asked, before sitting back as he read the uncertainty in the youngster next to him. She wasn't capable of answering. She was too young and she seemed to know that herself. "I-I'm sorry, I... I don't know. But you're the closest thing I have to the Captain I chose to follow, so..."

whatever you decide – I will be there. I promise.” He nodded appreciatively. “Thanks. Get some sleep. It’ll be a long day tomorrow.”

The storm had cleared in the night and it felt like the clouds had also lifted from Bjorn’s mind. The start of spring sun shone down upon him as he stood by the Slayer’s Helm, his eyes ahead to the fleet amassing on the horizon. “And here I thought we would be lucky,” stated Yuthura, leaning unsteadily on her cane. “Since when has that ever been an option?” Bjorn questioned to her, with a small smile. “Hmph,” she returned, shaking her head. “Plan?” she asked. She wasn’t the only person looking to him for one, but compared to the twenty-plus ships ahead of them, the small fleet under his command well and truly stood next to no chance. “We stall,” Bjorn told her and the others. “We hold the line for as long as we can, and we pray that help comes.”

Seize the Seas Tales: Orders

“Admirals,” Alara greeted, standing to attention on her own ship as a pair of tired Rear-Admirals stepped on board. Alara recognised them both: Marka Atin and Reva Robat, both had been Commodores before the war and both had swiftly been promoted after the Sovereign’s arrival to fill the holes the conflict had left. They were by no means new or inexperienced, and both had reputations as bold and fair Marines, but Alara couldn’t help but harbour a twinge of disappointment. Marka stood taller than her, a broad, dark-skinned man with an eyepatch over his right eye and large split in his upper lip. Reva was otherwise similar to Alara in height, if only a little shorter, with similar olive skin to her and green eyes. Her curly brown hair was held back with a series of golden bands.

“Commodore, it is good to see you... mostly intact, the reports were... unpleasant to hear,” Rear-Admiral Robat stated, nodding to Alara before turning and watching the battlefield. “Are you fit to fight?” Atin asked, with an almost unnervingly genuine care. Alara nodded. “Yes, Admiral,” she returned. Robat nodded, continuing to look outwards. “Good, cause you’ve got one hell of a mission ahead of you,” she stated.

“Kai is out there almost entirely on her own. Her fleet was forced to ground and what remains of it has slowly been picked away. The landmass is large and it seems the enemy have responded to the destruction of the other two Sentries. More and more reinforcements keep arriving whilst ours are limited to the dozen ships we brought with us and the few that you have with you. For the moment Khalid has remained away, for reasons unknown.”

Alara folded her arms: there were all manner of reasons why he hadn’t engaged, but none were good. “My objective?” she questioned, hoping to hear words she knew she wouldn’t. “You’re to reinforce Commodore Kai,” Atin stated. “We’re going to hold back and maintain Naval superiority. The majority of Kai’s problems have come from

being surrounded after being driven to ground. This is only the start, we cannot allow that to happen again. We will secure and establish a supply line. Admiral Robat will support you from afar with tactical information and orders, I will ensure that supplies, reinforcements, and anything else you require makes it to you."

"Respectfully, how will you do that sir?" Alara questioned. A small snarl of a smile crossed Atin's face. "We've received some upgrades since you departed. Communication is still slow but our mages are fast. They will teleport what you need to my ship. Can you get in there? Are your people able to still fight?" Atin asked her. Alara nodded, standing up straight. "Yes sir!" she stated. "We'll get to Cyrenna for you."

The Admirals nodded, glancing towards each other. "Then get moving Marine!" Robat stated. "Dig Commodore Kai out of her hole and show them what the Republic can do!"

Chapter 220: Broken Against the Wall

Flames rolled across the waters around the Capital. It was never going to be easy, nor likely possible, to hold back Xerxes' forces, but Bjorn, Arthuria, Zhurong, Jeanne and Yuthura had done what they could. Ships had sunk on both sides, souls descending into the abyss in their tens to hundreds, but still Bjorn held firm. "Arthuria, lure them towards the long range guns," he commanded, spinning the wheel of the Slayer and scraping the bow of his ship against the side of one of the triremes that Xerxes had dispatched. "Starboard guns!" Bjorn yelled, his words relayed across his ship as the wall of cannons ignited and devastated the ship that had attempted to ram them. Survivors leapt and clawed their way onto the deck of his ship, his Marines lunging into action to repel the boarders.

But Bjorn ignored it, he had to trust in his people to do their part. Wearily he glanced upwards, as if hoping to see the once familiar shape of Wren high in the skies, but Falconer was not here to guide him from above – he had to do it himself. "Admiral, we could use those forces you promised right about now," Bjorn stated into his communicator. "Not yet," came the voice of Admiral Philip Exarga. Bjorn scowled. Both Fleet Admirals had set off to deal with the other incursions, and for whatever reason Philip Exarga was holding back the forces ready to reinforce Bjorn.

The Slayer lurched as something heavy landed on its deck. "Xarga?" Bjorn immediately questioned, looking at the ancient giant of man. "I never had the patience for strategy," he stated, looking with his one good eye towards Bjorn, wheezing even as he stood there. The giant of the man looked like a shell of himself, his face was scarred and malformed, his left eye a milky white, and he had a stump just below his left shoulder. He looked ragged... broken, but the firm glare, grim expression and mane of hair reminded Bjorn of a lion on its last legs – the perfect reminder of who Xerxes had killed. A woman in a black veil and lightweight, skin-tight clothes of the same colour floated beside him on the tips of her toes: a Killer. She nodded to Bjorn.

"Evandril, this is too much for you – the Fleet Admiral directly forbade-" she protested. The leader of the Old Dogs bellowed, his raucous laughter quickly descending into rattling coughs. "I will fight to protect the Capital. A wounded dog can still bite. Captain Bjorn, where can we best serve?" Xarga questioned, looking up to him for orders. Bjorn couldn't believe he was being asked to command the man the Exarga's were named after, but given all that was going on – a heavy barrage of explosions illuminating the glowing barrier Jeanne had erected around the Slayer, giving a stark reminder of the losing state of the battle – he couldn't have asked for a better ally.

"Xerxes has not appeared, nor have his War Hounds. Give them a reason to show their faces, if you please sir!" Bjorn commanded. Xarga nodded, clenching his fist and leaping towards a nearby enemy ship – with a felt scowl, his guard followed after him. Xerxes' fleet had engaged with full force, or to what Bjorn most certainly felt like full force. More than likely a hefty reserve had been left behind in the Old World, but despite the decent volume of enemy ships – this fleet felt... small. As if it was still only a probe.

Bjorn angled the Slayer, bringing it back towards the Capital to allow the defensive guns to fully test their capabilities. For the moment, it certainly felt like they were winning, even if the Slayer was only one of two remaining ships within his fleet. But as he let that momentary thought come to his mind, a wall of purple dropped down from the skies – countless lightning bolts hitting the various weapon emplacements, resulting in a swift wall of flame and death. He span the wheel once more, turning to spot a glowing purple circle appearing within the centre of the circling enemy fleet, before with a flash a colossal ship landed in the waters. Even across the large distance, Bjorn could see the glare of the black lion therian stood on the Flagship's bow. Xerxes had arrived.

"Reinforcements are on their way!" came Admiral Exarga's voice through Bjorn's communicator. "Hold out!"

The deck of the Slayer shattered as a meteoric impact struck the ship. Bjorn felt like he was moving in slow motion as the black lion darted across the deck towards him, his golden eyes leaving lines in the air as he swung his claws through the Marines moving to intercept. Blood painted the air as Xerxes lunged forwards, his claws tearing open Commander Foreborn without question or thought. He lunged up the stairs towards Bjorn, his maw open in a roar, his arms pulled back as he pounced. The Pirate Lord was out for blood. The Therian King had come for what was owed to him.

A flash of gold slammed into Bjorn's chest, a small black knight planting a banner between the therians, whilst swinging with her sword to catch the first upwards blow aimed at Bjorn's throat. Jeanne blocked the first strike, another swinging straight into the side of her chestplate and battering her aside without concern. But the moment pause had been enough. Within the aura of Jeanne's banner Bjorn felt faster, stronger, whilst he knew the opposite was true for Xerxes. Bjorn swung his huge fist straight into the Therian King's stomach.

Xerxes doubled over, coughing out the contents of his stomach before Bjorn rocked his skull with a heavy uppercut that send the lion toppling down the main deck. Bjorn glanced towards the Jeanne-shaped hole in the Slayer's railing. He had to count on her being fine. Xerxes landed on his feet, glaring up at Bjorn with a snarl. "You have more

of a bite than I would expect for a cub of the Empire,” Xerxes growled, wiping his mouth – a swift ring of Marines surrounding him and waiting for Bjorn’s command. “Republic,” Bjorn corrected.

“Same thing. Do you think it makes a difference to our kind, our people?” Xerxes questioned. “Truth is a therian, he’s the Fleet Admiral – times have changed,” Bjorn returned. “Sure they have. This is the era of peace the older folk always dreamed about, isn’t it?” Xerxes asked rhetorically. “In all honesty, Bjorn, I care not. I want the years owed to me, and there is only one way that is going to happen: if I take a piece of this Empire, one island at a time, and finish what my father started.”

“The father you killed? He wouldn’t want this and you know it. It’s why he gave you up in the first place.” Xerxes let out a roar and Bjorn roared back, the wall of Marines flinching as the two therians stared each other down. Xerxes held his glare until Bjorn glanced to the Marines he had claimed as his own. In a blink they were all dead, replaced by Xerxes’ remaining five War Hounds. “Kill him!” Xerxes commanded. “Slowly,” he added.

The golden eagle therian was the first to move, but compared to Xerxes he was nothing. The second he entered the radius of Jeanne’s banner, Bjorn easily avoided a thrusting spear and grabbed one of his wings, tearing off the limb before throwing the disabled bird over the side of the ship. Next surged the crocodile, a heavy warhammer in his hands. Bjorn scraped his axe forwards, catching the weighty blow before sending ice flowing down the handle of the warhammer. The crocodile hissed in pain as his hands froze, but his body was wrenched backwards by the shaggy white boar just as Bjorn swung his other axe down towards the crocodile’s skull.

Xerxes had turned away, leaving the presumed end of Bjorn to his War hounds, but he faltered as he neared the bow – his black fur shining purple. Mare and Pheldor, the owl and the elephant therians had also both faltered, their eyes upwards towards the circling cloud somewhere behind Bjorn. “King?” Mare stated with a nervousness to her voice. Xerxes turned around, darting forwards back towards Bjorn.

A colossal crash of thunder roared across the seas around Bjorn, the entirety of the Slayer lurching a second later as something very heavy landed on the stern of the ship. The pair of therians in front of Bjorn staggered backwards, their eyes wide as their attention looked elsewhere, upwards and away from him. Fear painted their faces as a loud revving filled the air. A pair of figures then dropped down beside Bjorn, one wielding a heavy greatclub and the other a colossal anchor. “Took you long enough,” Bjorn stated, Xerxes and the four War Hounds staring down the snarling expression of the black Dragon Taranis. “What can I say,” Ordo stated, “traffic was bad.”

Xerxes' attention was no longer on Bjorn, his eyes were instead locked firmly on Thalia – her face twisted into an inhuman expression of fury. "Mare!" Xerxes commanded, the owl beginning to chant and the other War Hounds falling back alongside their master. Thalia took a step forwards but Ordo held out a hand and stopped her. To Bjorn's deep curiosity – she didn't press forwards. "I will see you soon, Bjorn of the Frostbear Tribe!" Xerxes threatened as the War Hounds vanished in a boom of purple lightning. Bjorn turned to Ordo. "I need to speak to Jayce," he stated immediately. Ordo chuckled, shaking his head. "Don't we all. Cap's not here. Let's mop up, we have a lot to talk about."

It all felt unreal as Bjorn sat once more in his seat within the living quarters of the Stacked Hand. The battle had ended swiftly with Xerxes' retreat, his forces had no stomach to fight without their King and they had promptly began to retreat back towards the Frontier. He looked towards Wam, the Demonic therian form a curiosity and a great fear for him. The boy should never fallen in the first place, Bjorn couldn't help but feel that he had failed him. He then glanced towards Zeta, the trauma of her past months immediately obvious. Each and every crew member had suffered in one way or another, some physically, others emotionally. They all looked to him, but every so often they would glance to the other two people in the room.

Bjorn turned. "I owe you a great debt," he stated to Xarga. The old man shook his head. "This is my home. I would die for it and I could not stand by any longer," he stated. "You owe me nothing, Captain." That final word brought levels of discomfort to the others, and Bjorn could feel it. It had always been his position amongst the crew to take over in Jayce's absence, but this was different. It had been nine, nearly ten, months since they had been split up. Jayce was still missing, so was Caelie, Astris, Fenn, Falconer, Wren, RK and Little Witch. And although he knew where she was, Marisha was also absent.

"Thank you. Then... respectfully – what do you want from us?" Bjorn questioned. "To go with you," Xarga stated – ignoring the silent pleas from his bodyguard. "Fleet Admiral Exarga has refuse to take me on this next leg and I would like to tag along. So may I request transport?" Xarga questioned. Bjorn nodded, looking back to his crew. "So we are heading back then?" Zeta asked trepidatiously. "Yes, but not immediately," Bjorn answered. "I need to speak to the Admirals, but I believe they intend to take Final Bastion for themselves. The others must still be the Old World and we need to find them. No man left behind." The others nodded in agreement. "Rest up, stock up. Who knows what awaits us."

"You have no idea how good it is to hear your voice again," came Marisha's voice in his mind, as Bjorn held his upgraded communicator in his palm inside his quarters. "And you, I've been so worried. I'm glad you're safe," he stated, thinking over

everything Ohno and Morgana had told him about their travels. "Safe is a curious term, but yeah... I will make my way to the Stacked Hand when you guys cross back over to the Old World. In the meantime, there's a lot to talk about. A lot of... strange things."

A knock came from the door and Bjorn sat up. "Sorry, someone's at the door," he told her, feeling the silent sigh from halfway across the world. He opened the door to find Morgana in front of him. "Admiral Exarga has called for you. He says it's urgent," she stated firmly. Bjorn scowled and hung his head before reaching for his communicator. "I'll call you later. Exarga wants me," he told Marisha before following after Morgana as she led the way.

Philip was waiting for Bjorn within the living quarters. "Bjorn," he stated, not getting up from his seat and gesturing for Bjorn to sit. Other Rising Aces decorated the room, watching and listening. Bjorn sat. "Well done," Philip said first. "Thank you, but I owe my survival to this crew and Xarga, not to you," Bjorn returned fiercely. Philip nodded subtly. "Perhaps, but regardless the outcome was our victory. And now our next task is to plant our flag firmly and permanently into the Old World."

"Our next task?"

"The Republic's. I have permission to place the Stacked Hand within the Republic's Fleets as a special operative. You could be military, officially, with your own unique designation," Philip offered. A few chuckles came from around the room. "You seem to have forgotten that we're Pirates. We're allies, but that's still optional," Bjorn reminded. "Jayce wouldn't accept, so neither will I." Admiral Exarga nodded, sitting up in his chair. "Fair enough. Then in that case I offer for you to join the Old World fleet. Fleet Admiral Exarga has personally asked for your aid in breaking through the Frontier and then helping to seize Final Bastion for the Republic."

"And why should we? As you can see, we're not full strength and we've already done a lot for you." Admiral Exarga reached into his personal bottomless bag and pulled out a file before placing it on the table and sliding it towards Bjorn. "Two of your crewmates are heading to Final Bastion on orders given to Commodore Beowulf Kai. They are going to be there, in the midst of the battle. This is not a threat, there is no intention to coerce you – I am simply telling you that Caelie and Astris will need your help."

Bjorn grit his teeth, 'not intended to coerce' – as if. "Fine then. We will join you," he stated. "But I expect to have all the details. I want full transparency." "Shouldn't be an issue. This fleet will be under mine and Cassandra's care. Truth has no oversight on this and we have no intention on hamstringing you. But let me make this clear from the get-go: you are not Jayce, I do not have any loyalty to you or the rest of your crew.

Break our trust, put this operation at risk, do anything that makes us question you and there will be consequences – am I clear?” Philip stated coldly, firmly and plainly, with a simple malice that made Bjorn swiftly realise that the Admiral would easily eliminate them and wouldn’t think twice about the decision to do so. “Most certainly, Admiral,” Bjorn answered.

“Perfect. Let us hope that we can see ourselves at the end of this in a more peaceful world. You’ll be kept informed, but be ready to depart within the next few days. We will take a slower pace as Cassandra makes her final preparations, so account for that with your resources. Equally, I’ve been told my adopted Granddaughter is fond of the ice cream here, so please stock an abundance for her.”

It was only as Philip departed the room that Bjorn realised that outside of Jayce there were actually two members of the Rising Aces that the Exargas were fond of: Caelie and Astris, both of whom Jayce’s parents had gone out of their way to provide for. He looked outwards towards the Rising Aces around the room. “Let’s get Caelie and Astris back. Inform the others, I want the Stacked Hand ready to go at a moment’s notice,” he commanded.

An uncomfortable feeling filled Bjorn’s mind as the Capital sunk into the distance several days later: a feeling of loss and grief – as if he was witnessing the city for the last time. It felt unpleasant, but by all accounts – given the enemy he was about to piss off – it very well could have marked the end for them all. First came Final Bastion, and from there – if they couldn’t find the others – their next enemy was most likely the Sea Sovereign and the Betrayers.

A hand tapped his elbow and he turned and looked down at Arthuria, Morgana stood by her. “Captain,” she said with a smile. “You ready?” He smiled back, looking out across the deck of the Stacked Hand – his crew, the Rising Aces, looking up at him. Beyond them was a fleet of more than a hundred ships, with the Ursus Ultra at the lead. Fleet Admiral Exarga was visible from his position, the Stacked Hand sailing just to the side of her. Admirals Yashiro and Exarga were with them, along with a few other Rear-Admirals and numerous other Commodores, Captains and Commanders. For the first time in a while, Bjorn felt complete. He nodded, looking out to the sun high in the sky. “Always. Let’s take this world back from the Sea Sovereign.”

Astris struggled to fight back against the tears drowning her vision as she felt Beowulf’s ship turn away from their heading. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she whimpered, feeling an agony of grief as she was forced to abandon Alara, Witchford, Riley, Brett and the others. There had been no word from them, but she knew something bad had happened – she could feel it in her blood. A hand slipped into hers and she looked

towards Caelie, a look of sympathy on her face. "I'll be okay," she stated, wiping her eyes and sniffing. "It's stupid to be upset over."

Caelie shook her head. The news was good, Bjorn had contacted them, but Caelie knew what Alara and the Wolfpack meant to Astris. She would feel the same if she had been forced to leave the Rising Aces to an unknown fate. "Not stupid," Caelie said firmly. "Reasonable," she added, hugging Astris gently. "Home soon," she added. Astris nodded. It would be good to see the crew again. It had been so long without them.

She pulled away and looked outwards towards the horizon. Alara was out there. Cyrenna was out there. Both of them in the midst of heavy combat and fighting for their lives. "Survive, please," Astris begged quietly, leaving them to whatever fate awaited them.

Seize the Seas Tales: To Where It All Began

Wicke let out a half-scream, half-exasperated sigh as she realised that had she arrived a day earlier she would have encountered her crew: the Rising Aces, right in the Capital. "Look, relax – it wouldn't have made a difference," Damian reassured, drawing out an even greater well of frustration from within her that she was all but ready to channel into him until Enki stepped between them. "What he means is that they have their own task and we have ours. They're close by, now is the time to get any information we can from them. You have questions, right Wicke?" Enki pressed. Wicke nodded, the ocean crawler was right – as he often was. "Yeah, no – you're right. Rest up, we'll reconvene in a few days – okay?" The others nodded and Wicke immediately turned on her feet and hurried off.

It was a little longer than a few days, but eventually Wicke reunited with her party. They had spent their time using their funds on nice food, baths and massages, new clothes and equipment, whilst she had been slaving away sending letter after letter to Mai Lu and Morgana for information on the Demons and how to capture them, whilst sending her own information on what she had found within the Dungeons so far. When the messages had finally dried up the emotions of their absence and the cruel reality that Jayce, and several others, were missing finally wore her down. The worry and guilt of being unable to protect her friends devastated her, but she knew that she could only allow her misery to affect her so much. She had a job to do, a mission to complete, a Dungeon to conquer.

“So the North then?” Morgause questioned, new thicker clothes covering her body. Wicke nodded. “It’s most likely going to be the least guarded of all of the Dungeons. It’s our best chance for multiple attempts,” she stated. Sabine turned and looked at the pier they were stood at. “And this rotten hunk of junk is our way there?” she questioned, a small worn boat sat waiting for them. Wicke looked towards Damian, the purveyor of the vessel. “It’s literally called the Reliable. What more could we want?” he questioned, to the groans of the others.

But Wicke smiled. It felt nostalgic. Just like when she had first set off from the Capital. She stepped forwards and leapt aboard. “Shall we get going? Or are we going to stand around until it gets dark?” she questioned with a grin. The others clambered on after her. “To the Ice Floes!” she declared.

Chapter 221: Boots on the Ground

"Keep your heads down!" Alara yelled, the deck of her adopted ship detonating as it was sprayed with bullets and cannon fire. It didn't matter, the ship was sacrificial, all that mattered was it got her and her Marines onto the massive island that Cyrenna was trapped upon. With a lurch, the ship hit sand. "Go! Go! Go!" she yelled, charging forwards through the danger and leaping over the bow of her ship. She hit the ground and rolled, darting forwards up the beachhead.

Wulf's pack of therians dashed forwards, the heavy weapons that the Null Legionnaires and the local Brunxchume armed forces had set up to box Cyrenna's forces in desperately beginning to turn to target them. Weapon surged forwards alongside them, aiming his mechanical parts at the heaviest of emplacements and launching explosive ordnance from the miniature cannons built into him. Riley and her snipers brought up the rear, using the cover of their allies to take precision shots at key enemies. Brett and his scouts darted to the side, heading into the trees and bushes to flank the enemy.

But Alara remained focused on her task. She could only hope that the Admirals and the other forces would do their part and defend her rear from the enemy ships. She aimed her glaive, letting loose a bolt of energy that tore straight through one of the largest Null Legionnaires. She weaved to the side, ducking low as bullets tore past her head. A glowing cyan bolt flew past her ear, so close that she could physically feel the wind from it. A bunker exploded ahead of her, the gunfire aimed specifically at her coming to an end. Alara dove inside a trench, swinging with her glaive and cutting down the few surviving enemy.

They had only travelled a hundred to two hundred metres but already Alara felt exhausted. She felt the weight of her task and the weight of the lives under her command. They needed to take control of the Sentry, a few kilometres ahead of them inland, and somewhere between it and her was Cyrenna with only a handful of hardened survivors. Alara glanced behind her: the ships swarming the island were wrapped in one another, desperately fighting to control the main entrance to the island. "Send in the second wave," Alara commanded to her allied fleet, nodding to her Marines to raise the flag of the Republic.

"Are we not going to move forwards?" Wulf questioned quietly, a few hours later. Alara shook her head, looking cautiously at the thousand-or-so souls that were placed around the first line. Everyone was tense, everyone was waiting for word to reach the Sentry and bombardment to begin. "This isn't going to be a short campaign," Alara told him gently, as much as the words hurt her to hear aloud. "This will be weeks if we're lucky."

He met her gaze, shaking his head softly. "Can Cyrenna hold out for that long?" he asked her, the pair of them for the most part alone. "I don't know but this island is, in rough estimates, almost thirty kilometres long and the Sentry is on the far side with a huge fleet defending it. You know as well as I that between us and it are fortresses and military installations. If we don't crush them then we will be surrounded and cut down before we can take the Sentry." He let out a sigh, the dark sky illuminating with flashes of cyan light. Somewhere ahead, Cyrenna was under assault.

A heavy panting drew Alara's attention to the doorway of her command centre. After a long charge and a longer siege they had seized a supply outpost for themselves, the large camp built around an ancient stone fort. Brett gasped for air as he stumbled in, several Marines rushing to his side as he all-but-collapsed. Grime covered his sweat-covered face, a long streak of blood flowing from his scalp down and across his left eye and then finishing at his lips. "Commodore," he gasped as she approached him. He held up a scroll of paper, handing it to her. "Get him food, water, and a medic," she commanded, nodding to him as he looked up at her with a grimaced grin.

Alara turned, approaching the maps strewn across a large central stone table in the middle of the room. She dropped the scroll on top of it and unfurled it, looking at the crude drawings of the region they were in. A small red x marked a village roughly two kilometres away. Alara grinned, she turned and looked towards Brett as he was supported out of the room. "Well done, Brett, I owe you!" she called after him. A weary thumbs up came back. "We have Commodore Kai's location, we move out at first light!" Alara declared to the cheers of those around her. "I'm coming, Cyrenna," Alara then muttered.

It was the first good night's sleep that Alara had had in quite some time. The start of her campaign had been fluid, but then they started to fall into traps. Suddenly they were being ambushed at their most vulnerable moments, information was inaccurate, and casualties were rising. The enemy were using their communication systems against them, and that meant that communication between Cyrenna and Alara had been forced to come to an end. Alara hated leaving her friend alone. If she could she would have set off on her own to find her, but that was the actions of a more inexperienced Alara. As Commodore, despite the increase in rank, she felt far more restricted. There were more things that she could organise, but less things she herself could do. It felt choking, far more than she would have liked.

Alara woke up early as always, her dreams grey and empty and swiftly forgotten. She hadn't bothered to change out of her clothes; she hadn't slept in a bed either, instead curling up in the deepest part of the fort – one of the few places she and her people felt safe to sleep in. The Sentry hadn't targeted the ancient fort, it must have held some sort of historical relevance to the Brunxchume forces because everything else around

it had been reduced to numerous craters. Alara damped a rag and wiped her face; she had long accepted that she smelt and was dirty, but there weren't any amongst them that were clean so she didn't really care.

Alara returned to her command centre, the other members of her main command waiting for her – Brett stood amongst them, to Alara's frustration, despite almost certainly still needing to recover. "We have Commodore Kai's location," Alara stated, nodding to him but ensuring to add a firm glare along with it. "The wounded will stay here under Commander Aed. You're to hold this position and maintain the supply line. Everyone else is to push forwards to this town, we're going to seize the garrison there and make it ours."

Several looks of confusion crossed the room as Alara pointed to a target away from the x on the map. "Myself and a small detachment will pursue and rescue Commodore Kai," Alara then stated firmly. An uncomfortable silence filled the air. "We will then link up with the forces here to join the assault here." No one questioned her orders out loud, they all knew better than that. "I am going personally because in the worst salvageable situation I know that I can get in and out, and should be able to get the Commodore out with me. This is not an assault, it is a grab and go, so as one of the fastest here it is the best option," Alara clarified.

She could sense the unease but they were going to have to live with it. "Weapon, you will take my place in command. Take the town and get us one step closer to that Sentry," she ordered, looking directly at him. He was one of the only people in the room who didn't seem to have an issue with the plan. "Aye Commodore," he returned with a firm nod. Alara then looked towards Wulf. "You're with me, I'll need your squad." He nodded back and Alara looked across the rest of the room. "This is a risk worth taking. I will be back, but if I'm not, I know you will all do your part. My team sets off immediately, the rest of you are to depart within the day. Wulf, get your boys."

"Any particular reason you chose us, Commodore?" questioned Boot, as Alara and the squad of therians moved quickly through one of the forests scattered across the large island. "I need your noses, obviously," she stated with a smile. The wolves around her laughed, apart from Wulf. "No," she corrected more honestly. "If Cyrenna is dead I need a squad with me who is willing to obey more... reckless orders, and is willing to both commit and survive them." "Let's say the Commodore is...?" Channing asked somewhat gently. Alara remained silent for a few moments. "We head for the Sentry directly and buy time for the others by causing as much mayhem as we can," Alara stated. It was a foolish plan, a stupid one. But without someone as strong as Cyrenna, Alara really couldn't see a way to take the Sentry alone – especially if Barca Khalid could be manning it personally, like

she theorised. "Then let's hope the Commodore is still alive," Boot said with a smile. "I've not brought enough bombs."

They moved quickly, staying low or ducking into abandoned buildings whenever they heard the familiar roar of flyers above them. The island was devastated, the majority of the previous woodland and grassy lands turned into fractured and trodden mud. Rotting and abandoned bodies were everywhere, their uniforms identifying them as Null Legion, Brunxchume military and even Republic Marines and Navy. But there was no time to stop, no time to give them proper burials so Alara and her wolves carried onwards, eventually coming to a ruined village surrounded by a field of corpses.

A lone flag fluttered in the wind, torn and full of holes with the ends singed. It was the flag of the Republic: an anchor held in the air by a seagull with its wings spread. "Cyrenna," Alara called into her communicator, as she rushed forwards and took cover behind a broken stone wall. "Still kicking," came a groan through Alara's communicator. "We see your flag, give us a signal." Alara twitched as she felt a wave of Focus hit her. "She's here," Alara told her group. Wulf gestured ahead, drawing his heavy sword. "She's not the only one. Brunxchume military are approaching." Alara peered her head around the corner of the wall. It was a sizeable force, nearly fifty in number.

"Republic insurgents!" came a voice that Alara recognised, drawing a quick look of surprise and confusion from her. She couldn't quite remember where she recognised it from. She felt another pulse, somewhere from below the village: a cave or a cellar. "Below the village," Alara told her wolves. "Find her, I'll buy you time," she commanded. They nodded, hurrying quickly away from the approaching gold and blue soldiers. "Show yourself and surrender!" came the voice once more. "I won't surrender, but I will talk!" Alara called out, immediately moving towards a nearby building before diving through its' broken window.

She could sense the enemy Captain reaching out for her with Focus, and she did the same, the pair detecting each other. Rather curiously, he then quietly ordered his men elsewhere before approaching with a small group. Alara remained where she was, practically holding her breath as she heard his footsteps in the gravel amongst the explosions far in the distance. "Vanathur?" came a hushed whisper through the broken door of the house. "Irall?" Alara returned, approaching the door before opening it a crack.

He stepped inside: he no longer had quite the golden outfit he had previously, and his face was certainly more worn than when Alara had met him more than a year prior in the Brunxchume capital. "What are you doing here?" they both asked, almost

simultaneously. Alara gestured for him to answer first. Fleet Admiral Malik dispatched me to try to escort a Commodore out of here. I had no idea that Commodore was you."

"It isn't," she stated firmly. "My people are evacuating her and her survivors as we speak." He nodded before folding his arms, but she spoke first. "Why is a member of the Royal Defence Force here?" she questioned. He shook his head. "He is not. A member of the Navy is. I received a demotion and a reassignment. My people do not take too kindly to Republic soldiers slipping in and out of the city of Chull without capture. So I am here to make it up."

"Yet you're taking orders from someone who is no longer a serving member of your military?" she questioned. He glanced to his two escorts before gesturing for them to leave the room. They did so without question. "If this were a nicer place I would opt for a longer discussion. Your people are making more permanent moves on this world, correct?" he questioned. She nodded. "Then in the best interests of Brunxchume I offer some aid, on the Fleet Admiral's behalf. He wishes for a conversation with your command, such that any invasion will not spill unnecessary blood."

"Not currently possible, and I struggle to see why your people would want to be incorporated within the Republic of the New World?" she stated hesitantly. "We have already been conquered, this way offers a chance to reclaim our sovereignty. You seek the destruction of the Sentry, it is your way to launch a full invasion?" he asked in turn. Alara nodded and then shook her head, glancing outwards towards the broken windows and Irall's patrolling men. "We want to cripple Khalid's fortress, and for that we need the Sentry. He has my parents prisoner on board and it's the only way to successfully ground it."

Irall stared at her like she was insane. "All of this for two Admirals?" he questioned in disbelief. "We don't leave our people behind," she stated firmly. "So I see. I shall pass this forwards, and will do what I can to ensure my people are not between you and the Sentry. Should you succeed, on your way to Chull please rendezvous with the Fleet Admiral. You will need his assistance if you are to enter the city. I must depart, but I wish you luck – for all our sakes." "Thank you, may we not meet in battle. For your sake," she stated. He glanced back towards her and stepped outside before barking orders to his people to fall back.

Alara slipped out of the back of the building, spotting Wulf and the others retreating discretely in the distance. She broke into a sprint and chased after them, finding them waiting for her within a thick treeline. "Thank the Gods!" Alara stated, grabbing Cyrenna in a tight embrace as she turned to look at her. Cyrenna looked tiny, almost skeletal and on death's door. The twelve others with her didn't look any better. "You

found me," she said weakly with a weary smile, her grip on Alara still firm. "Alara, we shouldn't stay here long," Wulf warned. She nodded to him. "Feed them, water them," she commanded to her squad, the group breaking out the rations and waterskins that Cyrenna's crew practically dove for. "Is this...?" Alara questioned uneasily to Cyrenna. She nodded back. "Yeah..." she croaked. "We're all that's left."

Alara tried not to let her disappointment show. In many ways she had been hoping that Cyrenna and her elite would bail her out. But Cyrenna clearly didn't notice the disappointment, inside her face was stretched into a look of horror as she cautiously placed one gauntlet on Alara's torn up neck and the other on her metal arm. "Damn..." she said softly. "Looks like you've had it rough too." Alara nodded, her eyes blurring as Cyrenna held her.

"The plan then?" Cyrenna eventually asked, as she struggled to keep down the rations and water given to her, her body no longer used to eating or drinking anything proper. The wolves looked to Alara as well. "Our forces are pushing further along the eastern side. Before we can take the Sentry we'll need to expand to the west, or else we'll have spread too narrow. The Rear-Admirals are still supporting our flank but they're in a losing battle. The enemy keep getting reinforcements, we don't."

"Okay, not much has changed then – that's fine. And what of Beo, are his forces on their way?" Cyrenna questioned. Alara shook her head – she didn't know. "Unknown." Cyrenna let out a sigh before forcing her food down and getting to her feet. "Then we presume not. We'll have to make do with what we've got. We meet with the others and continue our assault. We should move out sooner rather than later, but – if you don't mind – at a slower pace for the sake of my people," she stated. Alara nodded.

"Oh, I spoke to a Captain of the Brunxchume military," Alara suddenly remembered. The entire group all looked at her. "Huh?" Cyrenna questioned. "It was someone I had met before. He was speaking on behalf of one of their old Fleet Admirals. Should we succeed, he has asked that we speak to Fleet Admiral Malik. They are willing to help us against Khalid but there is only so much they can do for us here. He had been dispatched to get you out of here." Cyrenna scoffed and shook her head. "Sounds like a trick. Not worth thinking about." Alara looked towards Wulf. "It was Captain Irall." He nodded and pondered for a moment. "Worth thinking on later. Not much we can do about it now."

It took some time to reconnect with the others, but that was mostly by choice. Alara could see just how damaged Cyrenna was, and as much as throwing her straight into another military push could be to their benefit – her status and reputation would be a potent morale boost – Alara knew her friend needed rest. They rejoined the supply

line from towards the rear, the journey mostly safe, before following the traces of her forces forwards.

"You will wait here until you feel comfortable sending your people back out there again," Alara ordered Cyrenna, the pair of them at odds with one another as she caught Cyrenna packing her kit. "I am needed out there," Cyrenna told her. "Lies. You aren't any use to them right now. I'm heading forwards because I have to. A week at the least, then you can join me. Get back up to weight, actually recover, and then come find me – am I clear?" Alara questioned. Cyrenna glared at her. "Cyr... if it was the other way around, would you send me in your state?"

That ended the argument. "See you soon," Cyrenna told her firmly, standing at the very edge of the camp as Alara and her wolves broke into a run. Alara ignored her. The first part of her mission was over. Now it was time to seize the Sentry – whatever the cost.

Seize the Seas Tales: Chained Mutts

Scáthach rubbed her temples as the whining continued all around her. Her Betrayers, a few excluded, were all barking at each other as they sat along a large table in her mansion. "The Republic is pushing closer and closer towards the Sentry! And they have also breached the Frontier! Now is the time for action! To put them down and deal with them once and for all!" Barca Khalid demanded. Scáthach let out a groan, leaning back in her chair and kicking her feet back and forth on top of the table. "Just shut it already. I heard you the first time."

"Sovereign-" began Strigon, silencing immediately as Scáthach glared at him with prepared malice. "Bitching, bitching, bitching. Ooh a Bard sang mean songs about me. Ooh a Marine is trying to rescue her parents. Shut up and see what happens. Quite frankly..." she stated, sitting up and looking at them. "You're sucking the fun out of this. The rest of you are to do nothing to help them. All of you. This is not your fight, not your effort. This is your problem and it's on you to deal with it, personally!" she declared pointing at the Vampire, the Cannibal and the coward. "Fine," Khalid stated, getting to his feet. "I will execute the prisoners and put an end to this."

He sat back down, his face pale and eyes wide as he stared at Scáthach crouched on the table in front of him with her nose an inch from his. "You will do no such thing!" she stated coldly and quietly. "You had the chance to and you displayed her parents like a prize to her. You dangled them in front of her and now she is hunting you for it. You failed to keep this within your control. You will keep this fight fair – even with it already chanced against her, because if you do fail, then she will be the perfect

replacement for you. And that is my business you will have personally fucked with if you screw it up!"

"Do not forget your usefulness to me is limited, Khalid. And that is true for all of you. Deal with your own problems, don't beg for help like this is an alliance. You serve me. Do not forget it." She stood up and looked towards Strigon. "Jayce, wherever he is, will come back. If you are so afraid of him and his crew then now is the time to bite back at them – regardless of their proximity to the Republic." He seemed to sink into his chair and she struggled not to laugh – of course he wouldn't lift a finger, Astris Kai was about to reunite with her crew, and if he was afraid of Scáthach then he was terrified of that girl. "Pathetic," she muttered, turning back on Khalid. "Make good on your title, General. Win this properly. I will make sure it is a fair fight."

Chapter 222: Through the Wall

"Bjorn!" called out Zeta from the deck below, pointing ahead to a Null Legion ship on a ramming course for the Stacked Hand. "Yeah, I see it!" he called out, maintaining his steady grip on the wheel. "Taranis!" he called, a shadow covering the hot sun of the Frontier Archipelago. A streak of blue-black lightning crashed into the enemy vessel, sundering it before it could impact with the Stacked Hand.

Between the Dragons, the Admirals, and a desperate group of Rising Aces eager to reunite with Astris and Caelie, there was little the defensive force of the Null Legion could do to stop the speedy and hefty advance of the Republic Old World Fleet. Red lightning rumbled across the battlefield as Cassandra Exarga was unleashed. A heavy laugh rattled next to Bjorn, his eyes glancing towards the old man that had tagged along with them. Why Evandril Xarga hadn't tagged along aboard the Ursus Ultra, Bjorn could only guess. Cassandra had swiftly gotten over her frustration towards the stowaway amongst her fleet, but for some reason the Old Dog wished to join the, mostly, youngsters.

Ordo laughed along with him, the pair hoisting a pair of laden tankards as the Republic demonstrated its renewed might, with a host of upgraded ships and weaponry alongside the newly trained Mages amongst the Marines and Navy. "Can you keep it down, we're trying to fight!" Bjorn complained in their general direction. "This is no fight, this is one-sided slugfest!" Ordo returned. Bjorn could only sigh as he angled the Stacked Hand to follow right behind the Ursus Ultra as it began its descent and then climb towards the entrance to the Frontier.

They broke through into the foliage, leaving the flaming wrecks behind. "All ships remain at alert," came Fleet Admiral Exarga's voice throughout the fleet's communicators. "They know we're coming, there will be traps waiting for us." Bjorn glanced towards his returning crewmates. "Anyone sense anything?" he called down to them. "It won't be this close," called back Mai Lu. Her intuition was normally correct, but she always had reasons behind her statements. "Any evidence to back that?" he questioned. She glanced towards Gaea. Gaea blushed and stood at attention. "Something's going on back home. Mother is warning us to stay away," she stated with a salute. Bjorn glanced towards Arthuria and Morgana, both of them speaking to their Dragons. "Something is coming, Bjorn, but its far off," Arthuria confirmed. He nodded, trying not to look too overjoyed to have his crew back. "Then rest up but keep alert."

It felt good to be able to rest amongst the trees. Bjorn hadn't initially liked the Frontier when he had first passed through it. It had been overwhelming to be smaller than even the leaf of the giant trees, but as the sun set and the Fleet carried onwards into

the night, Bjorn couldn't help but feel peaceful. The noise of the creatures all around them, the rustling of the leaves far, far above them, it reminded him of why he enjoyed their travels to begin with. But it also reminded him of how much they had lost. Had they kept small and out of the way, would they have avoided all the conflicts that their Captain had dove into for one reason or another. Bjorn didn't know.

"Thoughts?" Wam questioned, as he and Ohno approached the helm and sat down by him. Bjorn looked at the two boys: they had come a long way since he had first met them. Whether they knew it or not, they were no longer scared and lost teenagers. They were young men, valued amongst the crew as if they were anyone else. Bjorn gestured to the wheel and Wam took his place, looking up at him before nodding. "The New World side was always going to be easier than the other. I'm expecting a serious fight when we cross."

"There will be something big tomorrow, we can all feel it," Wam added. Bjorn nodded. "Dragons," Ohno stated, both Wam and Bjorn raising an eyebrow his way. "Makes sense, right?" he then added, identifying it as nothing more than a hunch. "Could be," Bjorn stated in partial agreement. Time would be the true identifier, but for the moment it remained a mystery. "Worth worrying about tomorrow, not today," he added. Bjorn placed a hand on Wam's shoulder before stepping away.

"D- Bjorn," Wam called after him. Bjorn turned and looked at the pair. "Anything on... on Fenn?" he questioned, Ohno looking with similar unease. Bjorn shook his head. "He's either with Jayce or with Falconer, maybe both. You'll see him again, I promise. We will find them. We'll find them all." They didn't look certain but they both nodded to him, and he nodded to himself – affirming his believe in the blatant lie. There was no telling where Fenn had ended up, and of the three... Bjorn ignored it, turning away. He had to hope that the young fox was still alive.

The morning came without fault, bringing with it a renewed sense of uncertainty as they all felt tension within the air. There had been no attack in the night, no sudden explosions or creatures in the shadows, but they could all feel something was coming. They could hear it too. "Bjorn," came a familiar voice across his communicator, his attention swiftly turning towards the Ursus Ultra and his eyes locking on its leader. "A sound you recognise?" questioned Fleet Admiral Exarga, her bold white and red uniform visible for all to see amongst a sea of dark uniforms.

"I think so," Bjorn returned, looking down towards his Dragonlords. Arthuria met his gaze, nodding in silent agreement. The Stacked Hand and the Ursus Ultra turned around a bend in the path, the consistent chattering from high above suddenly falling silent. Bjorn's eyes widened as he looked upwards: the canopy above the narrow and long stretch of river ahead of them held all manner of colour. A thousand Dragons lay

in wait. "By the ancestors..." he muttered, his eyes upwards, but every experienced fighter on his ship with their eyes locked down on the bubbling waters ahead of them.

Arthuria mounted Zhurong, the pair of them darting off the side of the ship and towards the colossal, white, serpent-like Dragon coiling beneath the waters. "Thákane!" Arthuria bellowed, as Nanabolele burst out of the waters and unleashed a huge torrent of concentrated water towards the Stacked Hand. The ship lurched as the water impacted against Soteria's and Tempest's shields, the impact strong enough to decimate the vessel without its protections. The Dragon then dove back under, likely moving to attack from below.

Bjorn scanned the air for the Pirate Lord Arthuria had called out. He couldn't see her, but no doubt she was present, watching somewhere. "Red!" Bjorn called out, the ocean crawler moving to the edge of the ship to dive overboard. "Hold your jiaoren back!" came an order across the communicators, Ordo immediately ensuring that Red received the message too by intercepting his body. "Now!" came Admiral Exarga's command, his voice firm and cold.

The water rippled as the numerous ships activated their sonic disruptors, a second later Nanabolele erupted out of the water, thrashing in pain. As if on cue, or realising that their leader was actually in danger against the fleet, the countless Dragons above began to dive, releasing a cacophony of cries, bellows and roars. "Open fire!" Flames, bullets, and explosions filled the air as the Navy unleashed their cannons and heavy guns on the skies. "Zhurong, Taranis, keep low!" Bjorn commanded, his crew sending their own attacks towards the Dragons.

Movement was limited, for both the ships and the Dragons, but through the hail of bullets some Dragons were managing to break through, using the corpses of their fallen brethren as walls to defend themselves. Bjorn did his best to ignore it, the best thing he could do was maintain course and keep the Stacked Hand moving forwards along with Ursus Ultra. The other ships would have to make do on their own. An explosion came from somewhere behind, panicked voices filling the communication channels. "Ordo, Thalia, assist the flank!" Bjorn commanded, the pair darting off with Taranis to do exactly that.

Zhurong and Arthuria continued to battle with the water Dragon, the pair managing against the ancient creature on their own for the moment now that the Dragon's main domain had been removed, but Bjorn knew that was only temporary. "Morgana!" he called out, the young woman rushing closer to him. "Where is the Dragonlord?" he asked. She turned, scanning the swarm of Dragons still above them before she sharply angled her head towards the Ursus Ultra.

A red-lightning bolt consumed the sky, the Stacked Hand lurching as a pair of bodies crashed onto the main deck, one with their hand around the neck of the other. Thákane thrashed beneath Cassandra Exarga's iron-grip, Fleet Admiral Exarga's other hand held onto one of her giant axes - ready to strike. Bjorn had not seen the Pirate Lord in quite some time. She looked as he remembered: light-brown skin with narrow matching eyes, long, braided, brown hair and coloured clothes made from animal hides and feathers, but she looked a bit more worse-for-wear.

There was a shimmer and parts of her skin peeled away to reveal white scales, her brown eyes flashed, changing into a bright, icy, reptilian blue, and a frilled cyan mohawk popped out of her back and neck. She pushed free from Cassandra's grip, darting backwards towards the centre of the Stacked Hand's deck. Another woman appeared next to her, Arthuria skidding onto the deck after her before holding back as the pair stood back-to-back against the Stacked Hand's crew. "Hold!" Bjorn commanded, swapping his position with Ohno and stepping down towards the main deck. His crew held back, and, cautiously, so did Fleet Admiral Exarga. The second woman had ghostly-white skin, a white hooded leather jacket across her upper body and a cyan skirt covering her legs. Her eyes were the same reptilian cyan as Thákane's Dragonlord form. The Ancient Dragon Nanabolele, Bjorn realised, exactly as Arthuria had described.

"Why have you attacked this fleet?" Bjorn questioned the Dragonlord and her Dragon, plainly and promptly – battle still raging around them. "You'll doom us all!" Thákane declared, still clearly eager and ready to fight. "An invasion will only wash away what little temporary peace this side of the Frontier has!" She was young, Bjorn could tell that much, but it was clear that she had been through a lot and her words were not meant in harm or confrontation – they were out of genuine fear. Equally he knew that that meant she wasn't going to back down.

"Peace is a lie," Cassandra inserted. "The Null Legion, the Sovereign – it isn't peace, it's conquest. They have subjugated the New World and the Old, this is how we start to take it back. Call off your Dragons, now!" she commanded. Thákane shook her head. "No!" she returned, the pair darting towards the edge of the ship through their shared idea of the path of least resistance – that path being through Morgana and Gaea. With a heavy splat the pair crashed into Soteria's barrier, only to immediately pass through Gaea's portal in the floor of the main deck, throwing them somewhere Bjorn could only question. "Where did you send them?" Admiral Exarga asked immediately, Gaea pointed vaguely ahead through the trees. "To my mother," she stated with a proud smile. Bjorn shook his head. It was a trick they could only use in the Frontier, but it had worked. "That'll buy us some time," Bjorn stated, "we need to

clear out these Dragons and fast before their leaders return.” Cassandra nodded in agreement, leaping back towards her own ship.

Despite the heavy losses the Dragons had taken, countless more seemed to be continuing to arrive and descend from above. The noise was overwhelming: screams from the fallen consumed by the fires, acid, lightning and ice of the Dragons, the roars and screeches of the dying reptiles, the thundering of the cannons. But then something cut through it all: a cry that turned the heads of every Rising Ace, and every Dragon. “It can’t be...” Bjorn muttered, another long cry echoing through the battlefield.

A large winged creature darted around an upcoming bend, the shadow dark against the wood of the trees behind it. She flapped her wings, darting forwards before flying over the Stacked Hand with a cry declaring her hunt. A pair of figures fell off her back, landing onto the Stacked Hand with a duo of soft thumps. A familiar fox therian looked across the crew, immediately rushing towards his brother’s arms. An unfamiliar wooden figure stood next to him.

The battlefield became irrelevant in an instant. Between Wren engaging in a brutal feast on any of the now smaller Dragons in her path, and the arrival of Falconer and Fenn, Bjorn and the others had their attention solely fixed on their returning companions. “By the ancestors...” Bjorn muttered, handing off control of the wheel to Xarga who gently nudged him forwards. Falconer looked... inhuman.

His head was still shaved, albeit shaved a little imperfectly. His unique eyes were still the same: both a firm green with a golden cross across his pupils and iris. For the most-part he looked well, muscular, strong, confident, but there was also a distinct sickness to him. The wooden arm had grown, turning from something vaguely humanoid into something intimately monstrous. It was huge, extending downwards in length all the way until his ankle, with a width more akin to a muscular leg than an arm. The shoulder carried upwards, as if to protect the face like a large pauldron. Bjorn could see Falconer’s old bow buried within the wood, a now permanent feature to his body. The twisted wood had entered his torso, spreading beneath and through his skin to cover almost a third of his torso and then upwards to cover the right half of his neck... and face. Where the wood met his face it looked skeletal, as if exposing a wooden skull beneath his skin.

“Fucking hell,” stated Ordo as he landed on the main deck, returning from the rear. “Language,” Falconer scolded comfortably, breaking the looks of unease and worry with a firm reminder that their friend was still who he was. Falconer looked around, his green and gold eyes scanning the faces. “Is this... everyone?” he asked, a hint of nervousness on his voice as he looked towards Bjorn. Bjorn returned his gaze with a nod, stepping forwards and placing a hand on Falconer’s left shoulder. “It’s good to

see you, my friend." Falconer nodded, taking a raspy breath before standing up straight. "Does she still sail the same way?" he asked Bjorn. "Like a drunk ox," he returned back with a grin. Falconer chuckled, placing his left hand on Bjorn's arm. "Then she'll need a firm hand to guide her." "And a keen eye, held by the keenest of navigators. Welcome back, Falconer." "Good to be back, Captain. We have an interesting tale to talk to you about."

"Incoming!" came Xarga's voice from the helm. A heavy cracking sound drew all of their attention towards one of the colossal Frontier trees to their right. "My gods," muttered Zeta, the kilometre high tree slowly beginning to fall. Falconer stepped forwards, extending his right arm – his bow sprang out of his arm, a silvery green strand snapping taught. "Gaea," he called out, the dryad rushing to his side. Falconer grabbed a small round seed from his bottomless bag, holding it out to her. She tapped it with her finger and he then inserted the seed into a small hole within an arrow he drew from his quiver. Her pulled the string back and let the arrow fly. Gaea vanished with it.

"Arthuria, Thalia, Morgana, Ordo, deal with Thákane and her Dragon!" Bjorn commanded, the Dragonlord and her Dragon breaking free from the foliage. "Aye Captain!" they returned, the quartet rushing forwards along with the trio of Dragons. The wind whipped across the deck of the Stacked Hand as a redhead set off after them. Bjorn turned his attention away, back towards the falling tree. Fresh stems and vines were coiling around the trunk of the tree, snapping onto the stump beneath the cracks. The slow topple halted, and eventually began to reverse. Bjorn turned towards Falconer, nodding to him before turning back towards the helm. "Let's wrap this up, we have the Old World to invade!"

Seize the Seas Tales: A King's Throne

The wind whipped the cloak wrapped around Jayce's face and body. His knees lay in the red sand, his eyes shut as he meditated within RK's gentle embrace – the huge rokken guarding him from the storm. In turn, he held Little Witch – the young black cat cradled in his lap. The howl of the wind didn't bother Jayce, his mind was elsewhere – his very soul wandering the darkness of the Underworld, and he wasn't alone.

His eyes snapped open, Caelie had filled him in. It had been nearly a year since he had regained his title as Pirate Lord, a month less than that since he had last truly seen his crew. "RK!" Jayce called upwards, tapping his fist on the rocky underside of his companion. "Time to move!" he told him, taking Little Witch and placing her gently inside his backpack – protecting her from the worst of the weather – before standing

up and re-entering the storm. Jayce strode forwards, a wall of Focus surrounding his body and guarding him from the wind, the rocks and the sand.

He thought as he walked south, thinking on everything he had learnt about the state of affairs from Caelie. Everything from Alara's campaign to Bjorn's defence of the Capital, it hurt to think about how much he had missed but also felt overwhelming joyful that his crew had continued on without him. A grumble came from behind and Jayce glanced at the lumbering rokken. "Soon," Jayce stated without any real evidence. "At least, I hope so."

Months of walking and scavenging had taken their toll on him, and every other night he wished he could have stayed with Rosalynn for just a little longer than he had, but he knew he couldn't have. He'd have never left otherwise. "There!" Jayce eventually called out, the wind settling and a mountain emerging from the sand. But as he glanced back, he swiftly realised that the wind hadn't settled – it was circling the mountain and he had simply stepped into the storm's eye. A loud roar then echoed from somewhere nearby. "Let's move!"

Jayce spat out a hefty amount of blood as he finally staggered upwards and onto the flat top of the mountain. He held his side, the flesh torn and sore. The monsters of the Scourge had been harsh and dangerous and he felt ever-so-grateful that he might finally be able to leave them behind. Ahead of him, on top of the plateau, was a huge and ancient citadel comprised of dark stone blocks and surrounding pillars. Only a single, temple-like building remained intact, the surrounding buildings reduced to rubble and ruins. A deep orange glow weaved itself out through the gaps in the surrounding pillars, giving an illusion akin to the glow of hot coals.

Jayce limped forwards, Little Witch wriggling free from his backpack and walking ahead of him. "Little Witch, it could be dangerous," Jayce warned, gesturing for her to return to his side. But the cat ignored him, her tail upright and flicking as she followed the stone path across the barren mountaintop. Jayce and RK followed after her, approaching the giant building's main entrance. Broken stone guardians lay in fractured heaps by the main entrance, and almost immediately Jayce found himself caught between a cat that hurried on ahead and a rokken that began to gorge on a fresh meal. "RK!" Jayce attempted, trying to physically pull the mountain onwards, but the rokken grumbled, shovelling the pieces of dark stone into the furnace in his back.

He turned to watch Little Witch but she had vanished. "Let me die..." Jayce muttered, looking upwards towards the clear and sunny sky. He bit his lip, debating between leaving the mountain behind and likely any chance of defeating any creatures that had made their home within the Great Forge versus letting the cat explore and trigger any

traps that may be waiting. "We can take some with us!" Jayce told RK firmly. "I'm going in." RK ignored him.

The Anvil of Agron was very different from what Jayce had been expecting. For one, he had been expecting some semblance of life inside – whether ancient creatures or golems smithing away. Instead he found inside a giant, and almost flat, stone conical disk taking up the majority of the space. The disk was covered in countless metal moulds, awaiting something to fill it and above it swirled a ball of golden and crimson metal. The ball looked almost alive and was held between four large pillars sparking with red lightning. Little Witch sat curiously in front of the stone disk looking up at the fidgeting ball of metal. "Little Witch?" Jayce questioned cautiously, approaching the cat with his eyes on the orb. The cat ignored him before getting up and approaching his legs, rubbing herself against him as if to stop him going any closer.

A spark of lightning hit the metal disk, the entire object grinding loudly as it began to spin before slowly lifting up. The ball of metal twitched and lurched, as if trying to break free. It was then swarmed with red lightning before falling still and dripping onto the floating and spinning stone disk. The moulds were filled with the entirety of the previously suspended liquid metal, the disk taking the balls place amongst the four pillars. The lightning then bombarded the stone, breaking pieces of it away until only the metal weapons remained, which floated for a moment longer before dropping downwards through a hole that had been covered by the stone disk. The Anvil then fell silent.

Cautiously Jayce approached, looking down into the pit. Countless weapons lay beneath him in a colossal mound, slowly filtering away as they slid down towards a ring of glowing portals at the edge of the room. A hiss drew Jayce's attention to Little Witch and then a huge stone disk slammed down to cover the hole, where his head had been a moment before. "Thanks," he told the cat, grateful for the warning.

A loud audible pumping sound then filled the air, Jayce's eyes falling towards a series of bronze pipes connected to several of the dark pillars around him. They led upwards, the ends depositing a thick and crimson liquid into the position where the moving metal ball had been. But instead, now a stone bowl floated between the four pillars, catching the falling liquid. Little Witch once again began to explore, setting off past the Anvil. Jayce pursued her, the pair of them following the pipes to another huge room, only this one filled with various colossal vats and a conveyer belt covered in glass vials. The automated machinery in this room was filling the vials as well as pumping the liquid to the Anvil and downwards through the floor to presumably other parts of the Great Forge.

Cautiously, Jayce plucked a red vial off one of the belts, dipping his finger in the hot liquid and tasting it. He then poured the hot liquid onto his wounds, the flesh knitting together. "I guess this explains where the magic items and potions in the Dungeons come from," he muttered, looking around at the operation and scratching his head. A meow drew his gaze to the cat as she sat on an ancient terminal. "Get off that, you don't know what it could do!" he scolded, approaching it and quickly picking her up. A stone tablet covering in glyphs sat to the side, the words glowing and moving before his very eyes. It seemed to be an instruction manual of sorts, carrying out orders written long ago. Little Witch wriggled free and dropped to the floor.

Jayce set it down and followed after her. She led him down a set of stairs, the pair of them stopping in front of a colossal vault door. With a bit of manual effort, and Sola worming his way into the machinery the door opened, revealing a small circular room displaying countless ancient weapons neatly on various racks. The cat then sat on his foot. "Well done," he told her. "This will do. Let's find something that will take us home."

Chapter 223: Crusade

Alara wished it was raining. She always felt so much better about her situation when it was raining. It made it feel... right, right to be trapped on an island in a slow crawl towards the Sentry she had been sent out to conquer months prior. She had known when she had first arrived that the crusade was going to be anything other than a speedy mission, and the last five months had proven exactly that. She had lost people... countless people... so many friends and faces left behind in the mud, or shipped back to what dwindling remains were still supporting her advance. For most of the war it had been cold and wet, but now as she lay in a dirt trench, completely unaffected by the explosions ringing around her, the sun lay warm on her face. A face grizzled, scarred and broken with grief and fury and fatigue. An ironic smile crossed her face as the clouds parted above her. The final push was here, but she could only wonder just what the lasting cost would be this time.

"Morning," came a shadow, as a figure stepped to loom over her. Cyrenna held the same grim expression as she did, only with a dirty hand holding a dry sandwich. "Is it already?" Alara questioned. Cyrenna nodded, tearing off a piece of her rations and extending it down to Alara. "Did you sleep out here again?" Cyrenna questioned with somewhat genuine belief. "It's a stupid risk," she reminded.

Alara knew that already. She had been told off by anyone and everyone who had thought she would listen. "The backlines are unlikely to be hit by bombardment," she repeated. It was true. The Sentry mainly targeted the frontlines, as did the ships along the southern coast, but Alara had spent many a night hoping for once the enemy would change things up a little. "Still not worth the risk..." Cyrenna muttered, crouching down next to her and then letting out a pained groan as she lay back in the mud with her. "What's the worst that could happen?" Alara questioned. "Death is the easy way out by this point," she added.

"Coward."

"Fraud."

"Asshole."

"Loser."

"Fuck off..."

"No, you."

Alara shut her eyes, enjoying the sunlight on her face and the cool breeze. By all accounts, her parents were dead. She was not naïve enough to believe otherwise – Khalid had no reason to not kill them. Months prior she could have deceived herself

into believing they were still alive, but not now, not after all this time. Nothing had been said of Jayce to her. She had received no letters. Nothing. He was probably dead too, or else he'd have come and visited with enough reinforcements to guarantee she could have rescued her parents.

Cyrenna continued to munch away on her dry meal – the sound irritating but also comforting. A small laugh escaped Alara – a dry and emotionless laugh as tasteless as Cyrenna's food. "Something funny?" Cyrenna questioned. Alara nodded. "We're the highest ranked members here and we're laying in a ditch. Fleet Admiral Exarga would be pissed." Cyrenna didn't laugh at first, but eventually a small chuckle emerged. "Probably in this entire detachment," Cyrenna corrected. Alara giggled – they had practically lost all contact with the two Rear-Admirals that had been reinforcing them. They knew one of them was dead, but had heard nothing from the other. But supplies were still coming, albeit slowly – so there had to be some allied forces still out there. The laughs stopped abruptly.

Alara forced herself to sit upright, slowly looking past Cyrenna towards Riley as she stood with Wulf, Brett and Weapon. They looked at her, their bodies and souls worn and tired. A fire still burned quietly in their eyes, a faint light amongst the deep darkness. Alara let out a sigh, patting Cyrenna's knee before standing up. Cyrenna's obsidian eyes met hers. "Last push," Cyrenna said firmly. Alara nodded. "Last push."

Alara let out a yawn and then a groan as she stepped out of the foremost trench and up into the open air. Immediately a hail of bullets and magic flew her way, but she remained unbothered, completing her stretches as she made minor adjustments to ensure that they missed her. Cyan flames licked her body, her Focus honed and controlled like it had never been before. As if to show disrespect to her directly, the clouds above began to part, a cyan energy filling the skies as the Sentry – a little under a kilometre ahead of her – fired directly upon her. "Go!" she stated, her allies spread as far away along the trenches as possible all clambering out and beginning their charge, the enemies' attention locked solely on Alara.

Alara broke into a sprint, the cyan bombardment turning the mud and sand to glass behind her. Cyrenna darted out a trench to move along with her, the pair of them running in sync. Cyrenna pointed her father's gauntlet towards an enemy emplacement, the heavy guns thundering large chunks of metal towards them. Wulf's squad of therians split off from the main charge, rushing towards it to wipe it off the face of the planet.

Alara's eyes ignored the emplacements, her attention instead on the fortress surrounding the Sentry. Mages and Null Legion lined the walls, throwing everything they had at them. Alara angled her glaive as she ran, sending out a singular bolt of

energy that impacted a spot near the top of the walls. A second later came a hail of bullets from Riley's marksmen, picking off any target they could.

They broke through one defence and then another and then another. But Alara knew it could not last. "Mages!" she called out. "Trenches!" The few remaining mages in her army stopped chanting their defensive spells, the Marines that had been protected by them instead switching to shielding them with anything they could – not limited to their bodies if the needs arose. The ground shook as spells and the Sentry's bombardments hit the ground around Alara, but she ignored it, diving forwards and ducking behind a heavy wall of stone and mud.

She kept her eyes open, watching as her stragglers got caught in the spells, bullets and explosions. She could mourn them later, her mind taking in those that had made it and those that hadn't. A lot hadn't. A lot of not many hadn't. Alara grit her teeth as she turned towards Cyrenna. "Bombs!" Cyrenna commanded, the Marines carrying the explosives designed to blow open the fortress walls all taking off their backpacks and setting the charges.

Cyrenna moved to take a backpack but Alara stopped her. "Stay here, give us cover," Alara told her. Cyrenna shook her head but Alara met her eyes, her expression conveying enough to Cyrenna to warn her not to protest. "You'll have your chance if we fail," Alara told her. "Volunteers!" Alara commanded, the numerous Marines around her that weren't too terrified to carry onwards all stepping forwards, Brett amongst them. Alara briefly glanced towards him and he winked at her. "Till the end," he reminded her. She nodded, approaching the edge of the dirt wall and holding up her arm.

She dropped it and darted forwards, emerging into a fresh hell of enemy spells and bullets. A golden ring painted the ground to the side of her, a fellow group desperately trying to flee out of it before a colossal and solar beam of light slammed down from the heavens and disintegrated them almost instantly. Their screams passed straight through Alara. Alara stared at the wall ahead of them. They just needed one pack to make it. Only one and the Sentry was theirs.

A yelp came from behind, a second later a blast sent her tumbling forwards through grass. Alara's ears rung, her vision blurry and pain filling her lower back. A voice called down to her. A hand shaking her body and shadows surrounding her. "Get up!" yelled Brett, Alara's eyes refocusing onto his scarred face and the other Marines guarding her as they crouched in the shadow of the fortress behind a small mound of sand and dirt. Alara forced herself up, looking across the six Marines with her. None of them carried a backpack with the explosives. "Where...?"

"Gone," stated Brett firmly, scanning their surroundings as more groups fell around them. Another group pushed past them, some twenty metres away from them, clambering the final wall of dirt before toppling backwards as they were gunned down. One of the Marines crawled across the ground, leaving behind her a red trail. She dragged herself upright behind the sand and grass, taking off her backpack and hugging it to her chest. Slowly she leant back, her head angling towards Alara's direction. "Here!" she cried, before her body tilted to the side, her arms still hugging the mission.

Alara and Brett met each other's eyes. With this distance to the Sentry's fortress it was their best chance. "Covering fire!" Alara commanded to her small squad, stepping forwards. But a golden ring began to surround the bunker with the bombs and the fallen Marine. Alara faltered. Brett darted forwards, bullets peppering the ground at his feet as he ran. One caught his shoulder but he ignored it, the world sluggish and slow.

Alara screamed at him, her words inhuman and animalistic. But he couldn't hear it. The golden ring began to spin, as it did just before it was about to unleash its devastation. Without thought, without hesitation, without question, he dove forwards, grabbing the pack, twisting and flinging it towards Alara. She stared in horror as it landed by her feet, her eyes locked onto his bright smile and shining blue eyes, just before he disappeared in a beam of golden light.

More golden rings painted the floor between where Brett had been and the ground between them before one surrounded Alara. She twisted her glaive, slamming it into the ground before pumping the staff. A bubble emerged outwards, surrounding her and her Marines as they desperately tucked into her. The entire bubble erupted in golden light, the heat even through the shield agonisingly painful. But Alara screamed in a different kind of pain: a howl of agony for the man that had been a thorn in her side right at her beginning and a loyal friend until the end.

The divine wrath scoured the ground around her, eventually subsiding and leaving a ring of orange glass around Alara and her survivors. Alara grabbed the bag, clambering up over the mound and throwing the bag with every ounce of strength she had left. It hit the wall, dropping to the floor before exploding in a sharp and immediate blast that cracked the entire wall and left a sizeable hole for her and her Marines.

Cheers rang out but they fell on Alara's deaf ears. She darted forwards with her glaive in hand, the first into the breach and the first into the Sentry's fortress. Null Legionnaires rushed towards her with their swords and bayonets, their faces hidden behind their masks, but their red lenses reflecting the pure expression of agony in her

face. She tore them apart, her glaive abandoned after she thrust it with too much strength through too little a person, snatching and stealing weapon after weapon from her foes.

She took a bayoneted rifle, aiming it quickly and firing – its bullet shattering the face of a Mage before she threw it like a javelin at a charging Legionnaire, taking his bouncing and dropped sword and turning it on a trio desperately moving to block her advance towards the sole tower in the middle of the fortress. Alara threw a Focused fist into the chest of one of them, sending him backwards into the wall of the tower. He impacted hard, his chest caved in and a large red splatter left behind him as he toppled to the ground. Alara lunged at the other, jumping up and diving down to impale her borrowed blade between the breastplate of his armour and his collarbone. She pushed off the corpse like a beast, grabbing the helmet off the final soldier and twisting. She felt a crack and released, darting up the stairs unarmed as her Marines flooded the courtyard of the fortress.

“Commodore!” came a voice from below. Alara caught her glaive with little more than a side-glance, surging into the control centre of the Sentry. Several of the technicians, all desperately trying to input commands into the main terminal, immediately raised their hands in surrender. Alara fired a bolt of energy from her glaive, searing a hole through one and painting several others with his hot blood. She lunged towards the others, slashing and hacking away as those that had surrendered cowered away, screamed and begged for their lives. “Move and you die!” Alara growled, scanning the terminal to see what commands had been inputted. She immediately stabbed her glaive into a still moving body and began to furiously input commands.

Alara’s gaze looked up past the terminals towards the ocean stretching ahead of her. A small fleet lay before her: all bearing Null Legion colours. More Marines rushed into the control centre. “Target those ships,” she commanded, stepping back and letting those with the capabilities to intricately plot the coordinates necessary to target them do so. The entire tower began to vibrate before it unleashed its artillery, smiting the ships one after another as their own weapon was turned against them.

But Alara didn’t care for the destruction of the small fleet, she instead stared at the large Fortress sat beyond them, now desperately approaching the Sentry’s island with a clear intention to destroy it. “Cripple it!” Alara commanded, pointing at Barca Khallid’s fortress ship. The weapon once again thrummed with energy before it launched upwards its heavy ball of cyan. The glow arced through the sky before coming crashing down, directly into the side of the Fortress Ship. A cruel grin spread across Alara’s face. “Victory,” she told herself.

The ship rotated, bringing its undamaged side to face the island. "Evacuate the Sentry!" she ordered, a rumbling filling the air as the Fortress Ship's numerous cannons unloaded on the island, releasing a heavy and long-ranged bombardment of its own. Alara dashed out of the Sentry with her people as the bombardment landed, devastating the fortress and the Sentry. The bombardment ended almost as soon as it had begun, a slow silence building in its wake.

Alara's knees hit the ground. One after another so did those of her fellow Marines, tears filling their eyes, their lips quivering and smiles crossing their faces. "We did it!" cried a young man, cheers and sobs danced all around the fallen fortress. Alara's eyes dripped, her body too heavy to move, her soul so crushed that she couldn't even make a sound – even as she mourned the loss of all of those that she had lost. As she mourned the long forgotten Witchford, and the recently departed Anson Brett.

There was no words that Alara could even begin to form to describe her feelings as Wulf and Riley stood in front of her. But from the expressions of their own devastation, she could tell that they knew what had happened. They fell in the dirt beside her, their own howls of pain and grief filling the choir of Alara's fleet. But amongst the pain and loss stood a singular figure. "It's not over," stated Cyrenna, standing tall. Alara looked up at her through her blurry vision. So did the numerous others all around her. "It's not over!" Cyrenna roared. "To your feet Marines! We have wounded the Betrayer's ship but the mission is not over! We push forwards!"

Alara stared at her in agony, but she slowly lifted a knee, resting her hands upon it before shakily standing up. Alara wiped her eyes, the red around her irises almost demonic. Blood, dirt and grime covered her face and body. Cyrenna turned to face her. "We need a clear leader," Cyrenna said quietly. "I need you to lead." Alara looked at the older woman and shook her head. "Where to next, Commodore?" Cyrenna asked loudly. "Back home? Or after the man who so many gave their lives to wound?"

Alara looked at Cyrenna weakly. She was tired. So tired. They both were. "Onwards," Alara said quietly, slowly turning and looking at her people. "Onwards!" she roared. "Take what you can! Leave nothing behind but corpses of our enemies!" She reached up for her communicator. "The Sentry is down and the Fortress Ship is wounded. All forces are to retreat to the ships and the ships are to move up to the south of the island for pickup. Anyone who has not made it within six hours is getting left behind!" Alara turned back towards Cyrenna. Cyrenna simply nodded to her before turning and walking away.

It took some time, but eventually Alara found a moment's reprieve, a chance to slip away from the countless questions and requests sent her way. To even begin the task of locating all of bodies of the fallen would take days if not weeks, and that was not

time Alara had. There was also the matter of the various injured, and of the enemy prisoners. These were not questions Alara had answers for. She wasn't sure she would ever had answers for them.

Instead Alara found herself limping through the hole she had made in the fortress and down the slope to where she had crouched in cover only an hour or so before. Her eyes lay low, unable to look at the fallen all around her. She stumbled, catching herself at the edge of a burnt pool of glass. There were no clothes, no bones, but frozen inside was faint piece of metal. With nervous and slow steps she approached the last spot she had seen Brett, his grin still etched into her mind.

She reached down, placing her metal hand to the cool glass before pulling it back and shattering the large disk. She punched again, and again, and again before finally she reached the metal. Alara let out a sigh as she held it up to the sunlight, the last remnants of her friend in her grasp. "You idiot," she said quietly, slowly bringing the tag to her chest and hugging it tightly as a fresh batch of tears were released.

Seize the Seas Tales: Brothers

Fenn refused to let go of Wam and Ohno, and they for the most part, did the same with him. He had of course let go of them physically repeatedly throughout the mop up of the Dragons assault and the continued advance through the Frontier, but at every waking moment he had ensured to the best of his ability to remain within eyesight of at least one of them for fear of losing them once again. The tales they had each shared with one another had brought laughter, grief, and pain. And it had all served to only remind them all of just how lucky they had been to find each other again and to survive their separation.

"You... died?" Fenn repeated once more, looking toward Wam with abject horror. Wam simply shrugged in response. "It happens," he returned. Fenn shook his head vigorously. "Yes but... no! Absolutely not does it happen like that!" he protested. His larger brother wrapped an arm around him, pulling him tightly into an uncomfortably hot headlock. "Get over it, just be glad I had Asmodeus when I did or we wouldn't even be having this conversation." Fenn wriggled free, as he always did, glaring at his brother with a firm fury. "You cannot die again, you hear me! Not without us, and not without one helluva explosion! You hear!"

Wam chuckled and nodded. "Yeah, yeah, sure. No dying on anyone's behalf, okay?" he returned. Fenn nodded – at the very least he was glad they could still agree on that. The pair then slowly turned and looked at their vacant-eyed brother. "Okay," Ohno grumbled, drawing smiles out of them both. One-by-one they lay back and looked upwards at the Frontier canopy. "I thought I'd lost you both," Fenn admitted.

The head of a large polar bear soon came into view. "Bed. All of you. Now." "Oh come on, we've only just managed to-" protested Fenn, trailing off as he read Bjorn's unimpressed expression. "I'm surprised a real bed isn't more of an appeal to you, of all people, Fenn." Bjorn glanced to his brothers. "Make sure he has a wash before you sleep," he commanded, turning and walking away. Fenn gulped nervously, sensing his brothers' gazes upon. "Now," he began, slowly sitting up, "I don't think that's necessary. I'm clean."

He stood up, he'd never enjoyed bathing – it had also been an uncomfortable and humiliating process. "You're back sharing a room with us, brother," Ohno stated, cracking his knuckles as he stood up. Fenn glanced towards Wam, the badger rolling his neck before a sinister smile spread across his face. "You get a five-second headstart," he declared. Fenn strained his fingers, swiping upwards towards them. In the gap between erupted a short flash of hot orange flame, he then turned and broke into a fast sprint – desperately thinking of the hiding places he had used to use when avoiding bath time. He didn't even make it to down the stairs before his two larger brothers crashed down on top of him.

Chapter 224: Reunification

Astris held her breath as Final Bastion came into view. It had been a long and slow journey back north - one taken deliberately, much to her frustration. The only real benefit of the journey was that it had been the perfect chance to keep in contact with Jayce – entirely through Caelie’s shamanic technique of entering the Underworld. It felt awkward talking to him through her, and the information he provided was far from helpful: often only a brief interrogation on their status before he disappeared back into the Scourge. Still, if the Anvil of Agron panned out then hopefully she would see him soon. Hopefully.

The fortress island ahead of them was as massive and defended as she remembered, but now in addition to the heavy cannon emplacements were countless floating airships, all armed to the teeth with their own swarms of flyers. A sizeable fleet was staggered between the fortress island and the Frontier, and a backup reserve was stationed on and behind the island. The Null Legion were prepared with a vengeance, clearly eager not to let any more Republic vessels break through and into the Old World.

“Commodore!” came a voice from lower down on the deck. Astris immediately glanced towards her brother, his attention also on the enemy horizon. He turned and looked at the sailor, who pointed outwards to the east. An advanced and armed flyer was coming towards them on a direct intercept. “Battle Stations!” her brother declared. But the flyer then flashed a light at them, repeatedly in a pattern. “Hold on!” Astris called out, her brother shaking his head and making a single gesture to end the alert. A smile spread across Astris’ face as the flyer zoomed over the ship, barely avoiding the masts but angling the cockpit to give the only two people on the ship it mattered to a clear view of the pilot. Astris reached for her communicator, as a blue portal formed next to her and Caelie dashed through it. “Marisha?” Astris questioned, stepping through and finding herself inside the flyer.

“Good to see you,” Marisha stated, leaning her head into Caelie’s shoulder as she adjusted the controls whilst Caelie wrapped her arms around her. Eventually Caelie released her grip and Marisha glanced backwards towards Astris, the pair seeing each other’s faces for the first time in quite a while. “Just the two of you then?” Marisha questioned, turning her attention back towards the controls and the ocean below them. “I’m afraid so, but we know where Jayce is – roughly.” “Glad to hear. The others should be coming in just... about...”

A series of large and continuous explosions erupted across the bow of the Stacked Hand as it leapt free from the trees of the Frontier, the various spells and cannonballs all getting caught in Soteria’s and Tempest’s shields. “Captain, mighty generous of

you to let us be the vanguard!" Ordo half-complained, an irritating grin plastered across his wrinkled face. "Quit your whining, sink some ships! Away team, get the hell out of here!" Bjorn commanded, spinning the wheel so as to get out of the way of the fleet hot on the winds of the Stacked Hand, but also to provide cover for the two gleeful Dragons and the large roc, all waiting below deck. He heard the clatter and thuds of the hatches built into the hull flapping open before quickly closing and almost immediately the loud roars of Taranis and Zhurong began to lure away some of the hefty cannon fire.

"Much appreciated, Rising Aces," came Fleet Admiral Exarga's voice through the Rising Aces personal communicators, the orders and commands of Admiral Exarga echoing in the background from the communicator machine provided by the Republic. "Do what you do best!" Bjorn returned, scanning the battlefield for any weak points he could exploit to break out of the kill box. "Falconer, give me an overview."

The New World Fleet was currently caught within a semi-circle of death, with the circumference manned by all manner of enemy ships. The airs above was littered with enemy flyers, gunships, and airships, albeit now with the added chaos of two Dragons, their Soulbound, and a few other airborne members of the Rising Aces with distinct orders to destroy anything hostile. The island of Final Bastion was utilising all of its long-ranged coastal artillery, and a reserve battle-cluster of enemy ships lay beyond the initial line, ready to patch holes and hunt anything that broke through. "There is also an allied fleet of ships not too far beyond the rear line," filled in Falconer, a great relief filling Bjorn's very soul as the Navigator resumed his duty as eyes-in-the-skies. "And another allied bird in the skies!" Marisha stated through the communicator, drawing out a bold grin from Bjorn. "Respectfully, I'm not coming anywhere near that field of death with this new flyer I have on loan. But I have two others with me who are itching for a scrap. Eyes up."

Astris kept one hand-cannon laden hand firmly planted to her head as she held her hat down against the wind whipping past her as she fell. A loud whooping was following behind her, Caelie quickly diving past her with her arms tucked into her body, her mask firmly stuck to her face, and her feather and fur cloak whipping in the wind. "You could have made a portal closer to the ground!" Astris yelled on deaf ears, sighing as she abandoned her hat and tucked into a dive.

A pair of whoops and screams quickly shot by Wren, the bird several hundred metres up in the air, startling the roc as she quickly flapped backwards. "Sorry!" came a trailing voice that sounded like Astris. Falconer sighed, tucking into Wren and encouraging her to dive as well. She let out a loud cry of joy as she dove after Caelie

and Astris, the pair quickly falling behind as she shot past them before pulling up only at the last minute.

Astris landed with a splash of red mist, the enemy crew of the Null Legion ship immediately turning towards her with fear and confusion as she bent her arms and held her pistols ready. "Watch your footing!" she warned. The masked figures glanced at each other with confusion before a shadow covered them, as a skeletal whale burst out of the ocean and crashed down towards the deck. Astris vanished in a burst of red mist, teleporting off the deck of the ship as it burst open, the wood of the deck suddenly reviving and growing large and twisting roots. She broke into a run, spectres and skeletons clambering out of the ocean and beginning to fight the Null Legion in her path, her eyes locked on Final Bastion.

Bjorn span the wheel of the Stacked Hand, bringing the bow towards the island. A huge swirling blue portal formed in front of the ship and a second later it landed on emptier waters, the battle far behind. Another portal formed nearby, the Ursus Ultra sailing through it. Another portal followed, then another and another as Caelie circumvented the enemy blockade from her new seat on Wren's back, using the height and the line of sight to manipulate the battlefield to her liking.

A flash of red lightning erupted next to Caelie, a gentle and familiar hand caressing the back of her head. "Good girl," stated Cassandra before crashing down like a meteorite to Astris' side. "Status?" Fleet Admiral Cassandra Exarga questioned. "Wounded are stable, dead have been buried and their tags retrieved. Commodore Kai is holding back until invited," Astris stated, the pair of them weaving across the deck to cover each other's backs from the onslaught of enemy soldiers. "Very good. Can I leave Final Bastion to you?" Fleet Admiral Exarga questioned. Astris nodded, vanishing in a splatter of red mist. "Deploy the Jets," Cassandra ordered.

A roaring of engines drew Bjorn's attention to the rallying Republic Fleet arriving through the portals all around him, his eyes immediately landed on several small boats being placed in the water. They had no sails, no immediate and obvious weapons other than a forward-mounted machine gun buried within a small canopy of metal. Marines crowded into the back, no more than ten in number, before the small vessels launched forwards sending a huge spray of water behind them. They were astoundingly fast – basically bullets skating across the surface of the water. "Tempest, make us one or buy us one!" Bjorn called out, gesturing to the Jets. The djinn ignored him.

"Bjorn, I could use some assistance taking control of Final Bastion!" came Astris' voice across the communicators. "Away team, leave the remaining flyers to the Dragons and move to assist your Commander," Bjorn ordered. Zeta's voice then drew his

attention to the deck, his eyes following her pointed hand to the reserve fleet moving towards them. The now-repositioned Null Legion ships were creating a wall of ships on either side of the Republic fleet. They had escaped the kill-box formed around the Frontier and had now put themselves in even more danger. "Brace yourselves, it's going to get bumpy!" he called out, choosing to turn towards the enemy reinforcements. "Captain!" called Wam. "Look!"

The clouds in front of the enemy fleet had begun to swirl, turning into a funnel that was lowering down towards the ocean. It sparked with purple lightning, a large purple magic circle forming on the ocean surface as something prepared to teleport in. "More enemies?" questioned Zeta in disbelief. But Bjorn shook his head, the tension in his body fading as a colossal bolt of purple lightning crashed down onto the ocean – leaving a single body behind, standing on top of the water with a pair of huge swords. "I don't believe it..."

"Status?" Captain Jayce Exarga questioned across the Rising Aces communicators. "All crew present and accounted for, providing you have RK in that pocket of yours?" Bjorn returned, ignoring the cheers of his crew throughout the ship and the communicators, angling the Stacked Hand away and leaving the enemy fleet to his Captain. "Perfect, let's bring this home!" Jayce stated, darting forwards and cleaving a ship cleanly in half - those behind it quickly beginning to turn away.

Astris ignored the bubbling emotions building inside her as she darted through the tight streets of Final Bastion. Jayce was back, the Rising Aces were back together at last – after almost a whole year of separation. Civilians cowered at the edges of streets, rushing back to their homes. Guild soldiers threw down their weapons, surrendering without a question of fighting. She couldn't blame them – it wasn't really their fight, and death was bad for business. But the Null Legionnaires were relentless, appearing from every nook and cranny with little concern for the people they were supposed to be protecting.

Astris darted from Marine squad to Marine squad, often firing off a single shot or two before moving on to ensure the small conflicts scattered across the island turned in the favour of the Republic. She kept moving upwards, each break in the ceiling of the tight streets showing off a golden Paladin darting through the air, or a draconic old man with a sparking greatclub. She could feel her allies fighting around her, and eventually she felt them come to a stop.

Astris broke into the enemy command centre just as Fleet Admiral Exarga quartered the Null Legion General put in charge of Final Bastion. With six fast shots from Astris' two hand cannons she dropped the remaining dozen soldiers engaging Fleet Admiral Exarga's elite squad, a cold silence filling the room other than the heavy breathing of

the survivors. The Marines all immediately dashed to defensive positions, their rifles trained on the doorways. "Raise the flag, I want every last one of Scáthach's soldiers routed from the city!" commanded Admiral Exarga. "Orders?" Astris questioned, stepping forwards to stand next to Cassandra. "Go home to your crew, Commander – then bring him to me. I want a chat with Pirate Lord Exarga."

With the flag of the Republic raised high at the peak of Final Bastion the few surviving Null Legion ships quickly began to retreat, separating in all directions and quickly making for the horizon. But Jayce didn't care – it wasn't his fight, not really. Instead he stood on the deck of his ship, surrounded by his people. But they didn't want anything to do with him. "For the sake of everything that is good in the world – go shower!" commanded Bjorn, desperately holding his nose as he stared at the scaly, dust and dirt-covered, feral Jayce before him. Even Caelie was hesitant to stand near him, her hand pinching her nose tightly as she poked and prodded Jayce. "Alright, alright!" he protested, backing away from his crew and letting Little Witch be the focus of the attention instead. He flicked his wrists, Sola and Luna both dropping to the floor with a squelch before they both slunk off somewhere in search of real food.

He retreated to his room, leaving his long hair but cutting off his ragged beard. After a long wash, he tied his hair up and threw on his old clothes – now all several sizes too large for him and hanging off his skinny frame. He then stepped out to the sounds of celebrations, to flowing booze and delectable food. "You have a lot to explain," Marisha immediately stated, hugging Jayce tightly in almost a tackle as he descended the aft-deck stairs to the main deck. "Me? I feel like I'm not even top ten in the order of explanations," Jayce stated, glancing towards Zeta's short hair, Wam's magma-like fur, Falconer's wooden appearance, and the talking Dragons. He let out a short whistle, feeling Sola and Luna stick to his legs and slide their way up his body. They took back their positions on his forearms, creating an appearance of white dragon-like tattoos – the new colour a consequence of their visit to the Great Forge.

"There's a lot of stories to tell," Bjorn confirmed, grabbing Jayce's shoulder and wrapping him in a literal bear-hug. "And they will be, I'm sure. Thank you, Bjorn – for not... well... abandoning this," Jayce said earnestly, when he was allowed to breathe again. "In all honesty, she is the one who brought everyone back together," he returned, pulling Marisha into his body. Jayce met her eye and nodded appreciatively. "Of course it was. Nice job, Marisha – I owe you several." "Oh you owe me more than that, but that conversation is for another day."

Jayce felt Caelie's arms wrap themselves around his waist. He turned and held her tightly before looking towards Astris as she approached with a somewhat serious expression. "Alara?" he questioned, thinking back towards what she had conveyed to him through Caelie. "Alara," Astris confirmed. "Your mother wants to see you in the

command centre.” Jayce let out a sigh, looking across his friends and family as they all once again looked to him to lead. “Let’s find out what the Fleet Admiral has for us.”

They docked temporarily at Final Bastion before Jayce pulled the Stacked Hand back into its container. He had been expecting some of the crew to remain on board, but no one wanted to be left behind. The Dragons took to the skies to scavenge and Wren set off on her own flight, enjoying the once-again quiet skies to herself. Everyone else then followed after Jayce, Bjorn and Astris towards Final Bastion’s command centre.

People parted for them, some bowing their heads in reverence, children pointing in awe at them, and Marines and Navy standing at attention as they passed. Little Witch remained firmly in Caelie’s arms as they walked, the cat purring softly as they travelled upwards. “Is Myra here?” Jayce questioned towards Marisha on route. “No, she’s heading up the Syndicate with Holli,” Marisha answered casually. “What?” Jayce questioned in distinct confusion, but Marisha shook her head. “Later.” He simply sighed and shook his head.

His mother was waiting for him, the command centre containing a whole variety of Admirals, Commodores, Captains and Commanders. Jayce immediately noticed his father. Philip gave a quick look of concern his way and a silent question of if Jayce was okay. Jayce nodded back, looking back towards his mother. “Fleet Admiral,” he greeted, stepping through the mess of command staff towards the centre of the huge room. “Pirate Lord,” returned his mother, her eyes twinkling and a pained expression crossing her face before firmly being buried as she shunted away her feelings. “Thank you for your assistance,” she added. Jayce grinned, turning and looking at Bjorn. “Oh, it was all him.”

“Indeed. Captain Bjorn, you have my gratitude,” Cassandra stated, the words unfamiliar in Jayce’s ears, but not exactly uncomfortable. “Captain?” Jayce questioned, looking at his first mate with a raised eyebrow. “Someone had to be.” “Fair enough. Anyway, Fleet Admiral – you wanted to see me?” Jayce stated, folding his arms. “Seizing the Frontier and Final Bastion was the first concrete step in our invasion into the Old World. Now is the time for expansion and to cement our position here!” Fleet Admiral Exarga declared. Astris stepped quietly away from Jayce, taking a position next to her brother.

“But first we must reclaim what is ours. At this very moment, Rear-Admiral Atin and Commodores Kai and Vanathur are undertaking an invasion of their own. As of just yesterday, they successfully invaded and took command of a Sentry, using it to damage Betrayal Barca Khalid’s Fortress Ship. They are now in pursuit of the vessel

with intention to force it to ground and to then stage a rescue of Admirals Vanathur and Vanathur. I am dispatching Admirals Exarga and Yashiro to--“

The lights in the room cut out, sending the entire room into an unnerving and thick darkness. The only light in the room were seven pairs of eyes: Jayce’s glowing orange eyes, Mai Lu’s pink and red eyes, Caelie’s hazel and gold eyes, Tempest’s electric blue, Wam’s red and orange eyes, Astris’s white and obsidian – the inside glowing blood red, and a pair of eyes floating above the central table locked firmly on Jayce: brown with a purple glow. Jayce felt his body freeze, the brief panic across the room silencing as everyone felt their lives hang in the balance.

“You will do no such thing,” Scáthach stated firmly, the lights returning solely to illuminate her in the centre of the room. In the room full of the Republic’s best and Jayce’s entire crew, no one dared to move. Scáthach hopped down off the table, stepping forwards towards Jayce and looking up at him. She had grown out her dark orange hair, shaving the sides of it into a messy mohawk. A black lip ring sat in the left corner of her mouth and she had added extra piercings to her nose, a trio of black rings linking together. Her dark makeup was fierce and she looked ready for war, even though she wore casual clothes – a tank top and a pair of shorts, wooden sandals on her feet, her nails painted black.

“Lovely to see you, Pirate Lord Exarga – I thought Kaina had killed you. I’m glad to be proven wrong, albeit I see that you still haven’t shaken your attachment to the Republic. Can’t deny that I’m not disappointed, but I’m not here for you. Fleet Admiral Exarga!” she chided, turning on her heels and showing her back to Jayce. She lay within an arm’s reach of him, completely exposed – yet Jayce felt she was anything but.

“As your... ruler, Sea Sovereign – blah, blah, blah – I’m denying your request to send assistance to Commodore Vanathur. You are not to send a single ship. A single soul. I have endeavoured to keep the prize of your dear Alara alive, and I’m having a ball seeing how she engages the task. It’s remarkable, honestly – I’m so proud. But if I catch wind of anything, and I will know, I will slaughter those Admirals publicly and will deliver their heads to their daughter, before her head to you.”

“Why intervene? Why is this a game to you?” Cassandra questioned, stepping forwards towards Scáthach. “Game? This isn’t a game, this a crucial moment for that young woman. A chance for her to be the hero of her story – would you dare strip that from her? She succeeds and she becomes a legend, and gets her parents back. I lose a used-up tool and gain a far better replacement. Win-win,” Scáthach answered. “Now, I’m not unfair – you’ve earned your place in this side of the world. Final Bastion is yours,

as is anything else you can conquer. Make your mark, bring about some change. I'm rooting for you, honestly."

"Why? We're fighting your people, your Null Legion! Conquering your lands! What do you get out of this?" came Astris' voice. Jayce glanced towards her, as did Scáthach, but Scáthach just grinned. "Little Astris, this world is mine – in its entirety. Why should I care if some pieces move around. It's all mine regardless. It doesn't affect me in any way at all." The words rung out across the room, countless faces all turning pale and grey as the inevitable truth rang out. "It's all pointless..." muttered Morgana somewhere behind Jayce, her words trembling.

"Keep yourselves busy, just... you know, don't go anywhere," Scáthach stated, approaching Fleet Admiral Exarga and looking up at her with a cruel smirk. "Am I understood, Fleet Admiral? You're not to help Vanathur in anyway at all." Cassandra remained silent for what felt like several minutes before finally she slowly opened her mouth. "Yes... Sea Sovereign," she practically whispered, the words feeling like knives in her throat. "Attagirl," stated the younger woman, patting Cassandra on the shoulder.

She then turned and looked at Jayce, walking across the room and standing in front of him with her hands on her hips. "The same goes for you. I don't know your connection or investment, and frankly I don't feel the need to know... yet. But this isn't your fight. In fact," she then stated, leaning to the side and glancing towards Zeta with a sadistic grin. Morgana flinched, cowering as she stood next to Zeta – her very breath stopping. "You've got your own battles with my Betrayers to undertake. I loved your songs, Blue Bard," Scáthach stated. Zeta shuddered, forcing a nod and a fake smile of appreciation. "I loved how much it pissed Strigon off even more, he begged me to kill you. So... kudos to you. Astris!" Scáthach then called out, turning on her heels and looking towards the Vampire Lord. "Kill him for me. I'll do anything for you if you're successful. You're much nicer to look at."

"Will you kill yourself if I do?" Astris stated. The entire room flinched, but Scáthach just smiled. "Noooooo," she returned with a chuckle. "But nice try. I hope that's enough motivation for you, Rising Aces," Scáthach concluded, turning on her heels once more to look at Jayce. Her face was angled towards him, but her eyes were looking elsewhere. Jayce heard feet moving quickly across the floor, someone racing out of the room in a panic. Scáthach's eyes finally looked back towards Jayce. "You might want to follow her. Desperate people do desperate things."

Scáthach then vanished into thin air and the room took a collective breath of relief. But Jayce turned immediately, looking where Scáthach had been looking. Morgana was gone.

Seize the Seas Tales: On The Hunt

“Commodore?” questioned Rear-Admiral Marka Atin, leaning on a crutch with fresh stitches across his right cheek and left stump of an arm. “Sir?” Alara returned, looking back across her shoulder as she stood in the doorway of his quarters. “Vanathur... we can’t. Surely you understand the situation?” he questioned. Alara more than understood. She turned and faced him with cold fury. “Before you arrived, sir, this mission was to injure and wound Betrayer General Barca Khalid, to then hound him and retrieve our stolen people. A lot of time has passed and our forces have been decimated down to the few ships we still have, but I will complete the mission.”

“Vanathur, I understand your... attachment, but...”

“There is no ‘but’, sir!” Alara returned on the brink of yelling. “We have lost so many and to give up now is to spit in their faces. My comrades’ faces. Rear-Admiral Robot’s face. My friends’... faces. I am going, whether you give permission or not, Admiral. If I have to go alone... I will.” The hardened Admiral in front of her, the one who had desperately supported her campaign, looked at her with an expression she was not expecting, not from him: it was fear, and Alara flinched from it as he stumbled back and sat down on the bed behind him.

He looked up at her with his one good eye, his singular hand trembling as he cautiously looked to the edges of the room. “There are eyes watching, and externals are invested in this Vanathur. Don’t, please. I cannot help you if you decide to go,” he warned, a genuine tremble on his voice that send shivers down Alara’s back. “How did... Rear-Admiral-” He shook his head, shutting off her line of questioning. “I will not stop you, and I can’t help you – I’m sorry. You may ask for volunteers, I will remain with the wounded and a single ship until our allies arrive. If I hear confirmation of your failure then we will retreat to the New World. Am I understood?” Rear-Admiral Atin questioned. Alara nodded, standing to attention before leaving the room and shutting the door behind her.

Alara looked at the assembled Commanders, Captains, and Commodore before her. They were weary, tired, and some injured to a serious degree, but they had all come when she had asked. “I am setting off in pursuit of Khalid,” Alara stated immediately, standing next to the wheel of the Omen – her latest adopted ship since the Blood Moon had met a slow and inevitable end after dropping her forces off. “When do we depart?” Commodore Kai questioned. “I take it the Admiral asked for a delay?”

Alara smiled and shook her head. She had intended to leave immediately, but the state of her forces had been worse than expected. “As soon we can. The wounded will stay here with the Admiral,” Alara stated. There were several immediate looks of concern and surprise. “The Admiral is not coming?” came Wulf’s voice. Alara shook her head.

"He's too wounded," she lied – a lie pretty much all of them immediately saw through; none of the Republic's Admirals would take anything less than death as a reason to not lead. "Is this sanctioned?" Alara nodded. "Will you join me?" she asked back. The entire group stepped forwards. "The Guard will remain here with the Admiral and the wounded. Any Marine or Sailor that wishes to stay behind may do so. Volunteers only, this is likely a one way trip. We are hunting a Betrayer after all."

The sun was setting by the time Alara's forces were truly ready to set off. It felt like her body was burning as she impatiently tended to all documentation that was sent her way, but at least she had something to do whilst volunteers were rounded and rudimentary restocking was undertaken. She couldn't allow herself to stop. She knew if she did, then the emotions of the loss of Brett would destroy her, and any willpower she had mustered to continue the mission. Of the original Wolfpack, now only four of them remained: Alara, Riley, Astris and Wulf. Everyone else had retired or died. She shook her head, slapping her cheeks as she shunted the thoughts back into the darkness of her mind.

"Alara, we're ready," Cyrenna stated, stepping into the Captain's Quarters of the Omen. "Then let's go. Even split – choose your three ships, I will take the other three," Alara stated immediately, abandoning the paperwork and walking towards her. Cyrenna caught Alara's shoulder with her hand, blocking her path and setting her gaze firmly on Alara's face. "There's nothing for you to do. We have time, so rest. Weapon is sorting out an interception path, we'll cut off the Fortress Ship and delay its path back to Chull. As it stands, we need reinforcements."

"I can't guarantee anyone is coming."

"That's where you're wrong. The Brunxchume Fleet Admiral asked to see you if we were successful. Well, now is the time. I will take the five ships and hound that Betrayer, delay him as long as we can whilst you muster up some allies." "Cyr, I need to go with you, I need to--"

"Exactly why you're not. You just buried a friend, a damn good one at that. I've buried almost all of mine. I'm not burying you. We need fresh forces, and your team needs to rest, I need them to take him down and get your parents out of that fortress. Agree to whatever conditions he requests: introduction to Fleet Admiral Exarga, acceptance into the Republic, whatever is needed, but get us reinforcements. Understood?" Alara didn't respond. "Alara?"

"Okay," Alara said quietly. Cyrenna reached up and placed a rough hand on Alara's face. "Commodore, I'm counting on you. Come rescue me, I'll keep him busy, and then we'll rescue your parents."

Chapter 225: Damnation

Jayce shoved his way through the mass of terrified, high-ranking Republic officers. Politeness didn't matter at this point, and their views on him were irrelevant. "Morgana?" he yelled out. "Morgana!" he screamed, dashing out into the open air and watching in horror as she soared off into the horizon aboard her broomstick. It was the fastest object they had in their possession, faster than the Dragons or Wren, faster than the Stacked Hand by far, and even faster than the flyer. They couldn't catch her. It simply wasn't possible. He took a step forwards, faltering as he felt a pair of lips breathing in his ear. "A crew is only ever as strong as their weakest mind."

Jayce shook off Scáthach's taunting, turning to his crew – now recovering from the shock of the Sea Sovereign's manipulations, threats and taunts. "We have to go after her!" Arthuria stated firmly, walking past Jayce and beginning the descent towards the docks, only to falter as she realised everyone had paused and was instead looking towards Jayce – his face twisted in pain and hands clenched. "What are we waiting for?" Arthuria practically yelled.

"Arthuria..." Jayce said quietly. Alara was outgunned, she didn't really stand a chance against Barca Khalid. There had to be a way to help her, damned be the consequences. A hand placed itself on his shoulder and he flinched, turning to look at Bjorn. "Morgana comes first, you know that," he told Jayce firmly, shutting down any question about their next move. "Fuck!" Jayce cried, grabbing his long hair and looking up at the dark skies. "You're right," he admitted. Scáthach had made her demands clear: there was nothing the Rising Aces could do without serious consequences that they weren't ready for, and there were far more pressing matters than Jayce's beloved. "Caelie, get us to the docks, we're going after Morgana!" Jayce declared, a portal appearing for the entire crew.

They stepped through, other than Jayce, Bjorn, Astris and Caelie, who instead looked back towards Final Bastion's command centre. His mother looked busy, dealing with the fallout of Scáthach, but he managed to catch her eye for the briefest moment. "Go!" she stated clearly, "we have her." He nodded, turning away and following after his crew. "Before we go, I'm taking one of those Jet things," Bjorn told Jayce. "We can't catch her. But that doesn't mean we won't catch her. Do we have any idea where she would go? She didn't go towards the Frontier, why?" Jayce shook his head. He didn't know, but there had to be clues... somewhere.

It felt wrong going through Morgana's things. It was something no one wanted to do, and inevitably that task of breaching her privacy fell on Jayce, Arthuria, Bjorn, Astris, Marisha and Yuthura: those in command and those that knew her best. "Anything, Doc?" Jayce questioned, ignoring the array of clothes and undergarments being tossed

across Morgana's bed by her sister. Yuthura faltered, glancing at the others in the room as she went through her therapy notes. "Doc, I need to know."

"She's been terrified of Scáthach for some time now. The split up of the crew gave her a chance to see her old family and in a lot of ways that reinforced her attachment to... well, us. It made her think on just what we meant to her, and everything she stood to lose. That... woman, she terrifies me too. All of us, but she targeted Morgana and there's no telling what she could have been seeing instead of what we saw and heard."

"Marisha, did you see or hear anything when you two were travelling together?" Arthuria questioned. "Nothing more than I would expect any of us to have gone through. Nothing particular traumatic in relation to the Sea Sovereign. We found out information on the Guild's connection to Scáthach but... I guess Morgana is young – I don't know. I-I couldn't have predicted this. Maybe I just wasn't looking close enough?"

"You're not to blame," Bjorn comforted, tossing a notebook to Jayce who glanced through it before handing it to Yuthura. Yuthura seemed to grow paler by the minute as she flicked through the notebook. "Get Mai Lu, now!" she told Jayce with a great sense of panic. Jayce glanced towards Astris, who dashed out of the room immediately. "What is it?" he questioned. Yuthura slowly sat down on the bed, shaking her head and rubbing her forehead. "The ritual that doomed the Witches, that was only a precursor to the magic they intended to use. Morgana has..."

Mai Lu and Astris both stepped into the room and Yuthura immediately scowled and shot a glare her way. "Just what in hell have the two of you been concocting together?" Yuthura snapped, throwing the book across the room to land at Mai Lu's feet. Mai Lu picked the book up, brushing the leather cover before holding it with reverence in her hands. "Nothing particularly special," she returned. "Morgana was curious, and frankly so was I. It's purely hypothetical."

"Just... explain!" Bjorn interrupted, ignorant of what they were talking about, and uncaring about the major intricacies. "It's a ritual to turn back time, one that requires a mass sacrifice of lives to achieve fruition," Yuthura stated clearly. All heads turned towards Mai Lu. "The number of souls would be... extreme, and it's impractical – a waste of time when you cannot predict the consequences of simple changes. You also effectively doom yourself, planting yourself backwards into the time stream in an adjacent manner. It would shred this universe down to next-to-nothing. It's like blowing up a house in order to stop a draft."

"When was this... discussed?" Jayce questioned slowly, his voice almost in a growl. "A while ago – I pointed out the flaws in Zoya's work and clearly Morgana decided against the advice of Baal and myself. As said, time is not our specialty." Jayce felt a

twitch in the back of his mind, an awkward bubble of emotion spreading outwards from the other soul in his body. "Paimon?" Jayce questioned aloud. "I... saw no harm in assisting," came the Demon's voice out of his neck. "Fuck!" Jayce yelled, kicking a hole in Morgana's wardrobe. "So she's looking for somewhere to do this ritual? Somewhere where she can sacrifice people to plant herself back in time – to do what, kill Scáthach before she becomes a threat?" No one could answer, there was no telling what Morgana was thinking. "How many souls?" Jayce questioned.

"A hundred-thousand or so," Paimon answered. Jayce shut his eyes – at the very least there weren't many places she could find that. "And what of the spell components, where could she obtain that without the Witches' Philosopher's Stone?" he questioned, grateful that he had ordered it dismantled and the souls released. Yuthura looked at the floor and this time it was Jayce's turn to turn deathly pale. "No..."

"It was a waste and too useful to--"

"Yuthura," Jayce groaned. "You've got to be kidding me? Tell me you're joking!" She shook her head. Jayce crouched down and hugged his head, groaning loudly. "Right!" he stated firmly, accepting just how much trouble they were in. "I want Falconer to list every possible location in the direction she headed. We're then to head there as quickly as possible. I'm guessing it won't take her long to set up the necessary ritual circle for whichever city she chooses. We're all dead otherwise."

The following days of travel brought nothing but anxiety to the entire crew. Every passing moment they questioned whether everything would simply end, whether they'd blink and find themselves in oblivion, or maybe they'd feel the world shredding apart. It was unknown what would happen to them if she succeeded, and there was genuinely no way to tell when it would happen – they could only hope they made it in time.

They continued sailing southeast, following any magical hints they could to track her. She ignored every attempt they made to contact her, likely having already either ditched her communicator or buried it deep within her bottomless bag, but Jayce had a feeling that she was still listening. "I understand how you're feeling," he said into his communicator late at night, staring out of his window at the large moon ahead of him. "I'm scared too. Believe me, I'm terrified too Morgana. Scáthach... she's a monster. But all monsters fall eventually, and I know that together we can defeat her. Please... If you can't believe in yourself, then believe in us. Don't throw everything we've done together away." Silence followed, but for the briefest of moments he thought he heard a faint sound slip back through.

They came to the Brunxchume city of Winow, a large city build in an open plane of sand and mesas, a city that both filled the necessary population size and was

surrounded with a large enough expanse of earth that a ritual circle could be formed around it. "Falconer, scout it out – if she's not here then we need to move quickly to our next destination." Wren and Soteria shot up into the air, the pair of them flying quickly towards the island ahead of them. The minutes passed slowly, the entire crew holding their breath as they awaited confirmation. "She's here." Jayce looked towards Caelie, a portal immediately forming to take them forwards. The pre-agreed group of Arthuria, Jeanne, Jayce, Caelie, Astris, Zeta and Yuthura immediately dashed through, landing on top of a huge, flat mesa.

Jayce darted towards the edge, skidding to a stop as he looked down at the large desert city before them. It was pretty, built with large surrounding walls to defend against the orange sands, with a city build mostly of saloon and ranch-style buildings. Cacti lined the streets and open desert and a huge river cut through the circular walls. But the river itself seemed to be drying up, and on either end – outside of the walls – the river had been dammed, huge masses of sand and rock placed in the river to stop its flow. "My gods..." Jayce muttered, glancing across the start of the colossal ritual circle surrounding the city. "There!" cried Arthuria, pointing to the south of the city. Morgana was floating on her broomstick, using spells and a small workforce to carve into the sands around the city. "Caelie!"

"Morgana!" Jayce yelled upwards, landing on the sands as he passed through Caelie's portal. She flinched, noticing him immediately and rounding her broomstick to face him. "Don't stop me! This is the only way!" she cried. "Morgana, enough! Stand down!" Jayce returned. She shook her head and pulled back on her broomstick angling towards the city. "Zeta, Jeanne, stop the locals from finishing the circle. Everyone else, intercept her!" Jayce commanded. "By any means necessary!"

Jayce dropped down through Caelie's portal, landing in the sands in the centre of the city. Morgana turned and glanced back at him with a teary expression of frustration. "Leave me alone!" she cried, drawing her wand and angling it towards him. "I can't let you do this, Morgana! It isn't the way! It isn't our way!" "And I can't let you stop me!" she cried, unzipping her leather jacket and throwing it aside. She wore a simple black bralette and a matching skirt. She kicked off her shoes, stepping backwards and taking a defensive stance. "Morgana..." Arthuria said softly and with subtle shock. Morgana's entire body was covered in countless magical tattoos, an arsenal of preloaded spells ready for a serious engagement. "I'm sorry," Morgana returned. Jayce lunged forwards, commanding Sola and Luna into a pair of longswords. "Me too."

An explosion send Jayce springing backwards, a duo of red and green bolts carving through the air towards him immediately afterwards. Jayce swung with his blades, ducking the red bolt and batting the green blast aside – it impacted a house, the front

wall turning grey before crumbling away into dust. Morgana was slinging lethal spells, and that immediately changed the group's response. Astris unloaded her pistols, the first volley loaded with impact rounds designed to incapacitate. Morgana tapped her shoulder and ankle, weaving to the side with an unusual speed – any shots she couldn't avoid harmlessly bounced off a red transparent barrier. "Caelie, get reinforcements!" Astris stated, the ground igniting below her feet before erupting in a hot blast.

Jayce didn't have time to worry about his companions. Morgana knew them as much as they knew her, and that meant she knew their weaknesses whilst she had prepared to cover hers. He glanced up at the hot sun, there was little cover other than buildings for Astris and an unknown number of civilians were hiding inside, reducing her usage of them. Arthuria darted forwards leaving a trail of glowing golden feathers from her wings. But rather than retreat, Morgana got in close, leaping and landing on her broomstick before riding it like a board up into the air. Arthuria followed closely, resistant to using her most powerful spells against her own sister, whilst Morgana kept a clear distance – counting down the seconds.

The wings faded, Arthuria's clock with her greatest weapon hitting zero. Morgana then struck, twisting on her broomstick and arcing downwards towards her falling sister. Their golden eyes met, Arthuria's wide in shock, Morgana's cold and emotionless. "You always were too trusting," Morgana said quietly, unleashing a point blank blast of black energy into Arthuria's chestplate. Arthuria flew across the sky, leaving a smoking trail behind her from the impact as she descended like a downed flyer towards the ocean and the approaching Stacked Hand.

A bolt of golden light impacted the sand next to Jayce as Morgana descended back towards the centre of her ritual circle. The bolt faded, leaving behind it a glowing spear reminiscent of Jeanne's banner. Jayce's eyes widened and then his vision disappeared as a blast of heavy heat and light shut off the world to him. He heard Astris screaming, somewhere nearby – the intense light forcing her way from the centre of the circle. "Astris, fall back!" he ordered. She grit her teeth, her skin bubbling and melting with every second she remained nearby. "Fuck!" she yelled, dashing backwards towards cover, leaving Jayce alone and blind.

He turned towards the centre, extending outwards with his senses to feel Morgana's presence. "Go on then!" he yelled, feeling her watching him from atop her broomstick. "Finish this! Kill me! It's what you're going to do anyway!" She shook her head, descending to the ground – her wand still pointed at him. "You don't understand, do you? I'm doing this for you! For all of you!" she screamed. "A world where this never happened! A world where you and Alara are dumb and happy! A world where my

family are together again! A world where we can be happy and free from the inevitable loss that she will inflict on us! We will lose, Jayce, this is how we win!"

"By sacrificing thousands of lives? How is that a win?" he questioned back. She shook her head. "These lives mean nothing. They won't even realise they're dead, it's just a cost and then it undoes it all. They live too! Are you blind?" she questioned, only to then immediately regret her choice of words. "Yes!" he returned with genuine anger. "What about us? Your crew? Your friends? Your family? You're throwing us away, after everything we've done together! It will all go."

"Yes... it will. And I'm sorry for that, but I will treasure it, always. I will bear the burden of our memories and what we lost, but I cherish that you will all get what you have always deserved in exchange – peace."

"Morgana, please – I beg of you, don't!"

Morgana descended down to the floor, placing her hand into the sand. Jayce lunged forwards but a bolt caught him in the chest. He fell to his knees, eyes wide and unseeing before he hit the ground – his body refusing to listen and his very breathing hot and painful. "Forgive me..." Morgana said quietly, pulling out the red orb containing the souls of the Daughters of Shade from her bottomless bag. But she then yelped, turning and pulling a dart out of her backside.

"You!" she stated, a heavy explosion of dark smoke detonating at her feet. She coughed, staggering backwards as her vision blurred. "No! Stop it!" she yelled, her words slurring and eyes closing on their own as she tried to keep them open. "Yu-" Morgana slumped to the floor, the red orb rolling free from her hand. A cane prodded Jayce's lower back. "Come on, get up. It takes more than that to put you down," Yuthura stated, a sharp pain between Jayce's back jolting him back to consciousness, his vision slowly returning to see Yuthura place a pair of antimagic shackles on Morgana's wrists. Jayce groaned as he looked up at her. "It worked then?" he questioned to her, forcing himself to his feet and looking down at the unconscious member of his crew. "Indeed, but I'm hesitant to call it a success. Now what do we do with her?"

Jayce genuinely didn't know. No one did. For the first few days, whilst the Rising Aces were destroying any and all traces of the ritual circle and Morgana's notes on it, she was sealed within her quarters – kept under guard by rotating members of the crew, except to Jayce who focused on catching up on everything he had missed. It had been a lot, but his one relief was that it seemed that Wicke and her little group were doing well on their mayhem-causing journey. He sat in his quarters, staring deeply into Little Witch's large eyes whilst pondering his options, until finally he made his decision.

"You're to leave this ship and not return until I send for you," he stated firmly to her in front of Arthuria, Bjorn and Yuthura. Morgana looked up at him, her eyes wide and mouth slightly open. "Jayce?" Arthuria questioned on her behalf, sitting down next to her sister with a groan – her ribs not entirely healed yet. "You're to go north to the Ice Floes. You will find Wicke, Damian and your sister – Morgause – waiting for you. You will help them with the Dungeon there and will give them these communicators such that we may keep in better contact with them. This is your punishment and I hope whilst you're there you will think over both how lucky you are that it is this light, but also why I am giving you this chance to make up for your actions. Do you understand?" he asked. Morgana looked down at the floor, silent tears falling from her chin and nose as she nodded. "Pack your things. You leave in an hour. Soteria will go with you, she'll keep you safe. She has already been informed, the others have not."

The goodbyes were tense and brief – the majority of the crew having already had their chance to voice their anger and bitterness towards her across the previous couple of days - and without anything more than a simple: "I'm sorry," she departed – flying off north aboard her broomstick with her Dragon following behind. They all watched her disappear into the horizon, the eyes slowly drifting away one by one towards Jayce. "How do you know she won't try it again?" questioned Wam.

"She's young, like you, it's only normal to be afraid of the monsters that await us and the consequences that will happen to us for challenging them. She'll grow from this – I know she will – and the Morgana that comes back will be different from the one we sent away." Jayce then turned towards Zeta, Ordo and Astris. "It's time to put some fear in those Betrayers. A promise was made to give aid to those people in the east, so let's make good on it."

Somewhere, far to the south, an entire island disappeared – consumed by a cataclysmic blast of fire. "Test complete," stated Pheldor – the Elephant War Hound. "Perfect," stated Xerxes, with a malicious grin enjoying the scent of vaporised flesh and smoke. "Begin shipping. We will wipe the seat of the Republic off the face of this planet," he ordered. "And send the Rising Aces a gift."

Seize the Seas Tales: One Leader to Another

Alara glanced towards the row of armed guards stood before her. They were all heavily armoured, dressed from head to toe in golden metal with mirrored glass visors that shone in a brilliant blue – flashing back her own expression of unease. The Brunxchume Elite were something completely different from anything she had seen before, and they all bore royal insignia that implied they were reserved purely for guarding only the most important people within the hollow kingdom and its greater islands. With an empty throne and no royal line to succeed it, these Elite had likely

been retired, and as Alara read them through her Focus she sensed no young men or women amongst them. They were all hardened veterans, called back to serve by the retired Fleet Admiral.

"You are expected, Captain," stated one of them, the two closest to the middle turning to their sides to let her pass between them. Alara glanced back to Wulf and Riley, Artemis and the therians were stationed at other ends of the alleyway, keeping guard. "Wait here," she told them, their personal protests hidden well but far from invisible in Alara's eyes. They knew her, and they knew that this meeting meant everything to her. They also knew that she was compromised. Just that morning she had called on Brett to scout ahead, the cold and cruel loss digging in deep as she remembered his absence. They stepped back, watching the Royal Elite with caution, as she stepped forwards – down into the underground bar she had once visited, so long ago.

Just like last time, the small bar was empty other than a barkeep dressed in smart black and white flowy clothes and another old man sat on a stool at the bar. Alara approached cautiously, glancing around in anticipation for a trap; the low light left countless shadows and Alara had felt constant eyes upon her for some time now. She ran her fingers across the smooth wooden surface of the bar, stopping as she stood next to the seated old man. "Captain," said Advisor Abdul Malik, swirling the glass containing an ochre-liquid and not looking her way. Alara sat down on his left, an identical glass immediately being placed before her and a matching drink filling it. "It's Commodore now," Alara returned, "Advisor."

He looked directly at her, glancing down towards her metal right arm, the new scars on the lower part of her face. She met his gaze, glancing away from his hardened and grizzled face to the formal yet casual clothes adorning his body. He wasn't wearing anything distinctly militaristic and Alara sensed that was deliberate. This was personal, in more ways than one. "Among my people, to become a Commodore is a badge of a lifetime of hard effort and work. It is not a title for the young and inexperienced, but... although I see that you are still young, Vanathur, you are certainly more experienced than last we met."

Alara nodded, taking an unafraid sip from her drink. It was bitter, but smooth. "I also see that you are still on the same crusade, the same foolish mission that I last recommended that you abandon. But this time it appears that the consequences of your objective have fallen on my people, as well as yours," he stated with a cold fury that Alara felt to her core. "You wear marks of grief, I see it all over you," he then added, the fury dissipating and a solemn sadness lining his words. "I am sorry."

Alara shook her head. "I am too. For the losses of my people, and yours. They were casualties in a battle that wasn't theirs. I am here-" He held up a fast hand to stop her,

taking in a long inhale before following up with a longer exhale. "I have heard of your... victory. My people's guardians are gone and Khalid's Fortress has a new skylight. He is on his way here for repairs and a resupply, his movements hindered by the cunning positioning and sacrifices of your partner Commodore. My people will be casualties of this fight, and yet you have come here to ask for my aid?"

"Captain Irall--"

"I am aware of what he said to you. I also recall he told you I wished to speak to your command, not to you – as pleasurable as it is to see you. Where are they?" Alara looked down. "I don't know. I am still receiving resources but I am alone." Advisor Malik rubbed his chin. "Then the tidings surrounding you are even more dire than I thought. My spies informed me that Betrayer Khalid was given orders to keep your parents alive, on consequence of his own death."

Alara felt her heart stop for a second. "The Sovereign interfered?" Alara immediately inferred. "Indeed, she must have. Then that means she likely also interfered in assistance coming to you. Your people have made landfall and have claimed Final Bastion for themselves – aid is present and in remarkable abundance," he informed. Where his words would have brought relief to her, instead they only brought worry. He met her eyes, his gaze shining with fascination and curiosity. "Why you?" he asked.

Alara didn't know. She had no idea, but the truth was obvious. The Sea Sovereign had interfered against her and also for her. He looked down. "And what could the Warhorse be thinking in letting us meet?" he questioned aloud. "Am I to aid, to deter? What is asked of me in silence?" he pondered. Alara felt the invisible eyes upon her back – her next words would mean everything. "She doesn't care – she's never cared," Alara stated. "To the Sovereign we're all just toys, pieces on her chess board. She's set a stage for us to entertain her and all this time that we spend wondering about what it is she wants, we fall deeper into her clutches. This world is hers, she doesn't care about the changing of borders and allegiances, she just wants something to happen. She's like a child, desperate for her next fix of excitement, and at the moment I am her favourite toy. But it doesn't have to be that way. The small changes might lead to big ones. And the big ones may result in a cascade of small changes that will affect her in ways she couldn't possibly predict."

"Advisor, your people look to you – those guards outside tell me exactly that. Once you were a Fleet Admiral, perhaps it's time to be again, and if not that then that empty throne you watch so carefully might be better suited with you in it. I intend to kill Khalid or die trying. There may not be anyone else who will come along with as great

a chance to succeed. Give me that chance, that opportunity to end his grip on you, and your people. Please?"

Fleet Admiral Malik eventually nodded. "The foolishness of youth is an inability to wait. The foolishness of the old is to not see that the world has already changed. The world has changed, maybe I need to as well. Passivity is to live a long death. You will find Irall and a small fleet of renegades at these coordinates," he stated, handing her a small scrip of paper. "When you return, this city will be in lockdown. My people will forced to fight against you and you will find no refuge. But any allies that I can muster will wait for you in the desert beyond the city wall. That gate has remained unbroken for millennia – you will be the one to change that, and, if you succeed, then my people will rally to you. From there the Fortress Ship will fall to you."

"Thank you."

He shook his head. "Thanks is not necessary. By all likelihood we will be long dead before we reach Khalid. Instead, thank you for giving me a chance to die standing, rather than kneeling. Take this bottle, and guard it as a symbol of our connection. With good fortune I shall drink a toast to you with your Admirals once this is over. Farewell, Commodore."

Chapter 226: Confrontation

The Brunxchume Capital lay on Alara's horizon with a heavy and continuous rumbling of cannon fire echoing across the waters. There were no grand fleets that had risen to Khalid's defence, but the city of Chull was not making it easy for Commodore Kai's forces. But Alara didn't need it to. Cyrenna's fleet was swarming the Fortress ship, unloading volley after volley on the docked vessel desperately making repairs and resupplying for a counter.

"Irall, send three of your ships to reinforce Commodore Kai," Alara commanded through her communicator, looking across the waters to the majestic gold and blue ship sailing alongside her patchwork hull. "Aye Commodore," he returned, gesturing towards three of the six ships he had under his command. They remained on their heading whilst Alara and her new friends' ships turned further south. "I would like to remind you, Commodore," Irall stated as respectfully as he could, dressed in a somewhat renegade and flowy outfit to indicate his less than official status, "that the Gate has not been breached in more than a hundred years." Alara was never one to shoot down a challenge but even she couldn't help but feel a little underprepared for such a task. "Well, it's not seen us attempt it yet," she returned. His expression across the waters was not full of confidence.

"Make your way back to Cyrenna and do what you can," Alara called up to Navy Commander Vayle of the Omen, as she finished unloading her Marine forces onto the desert sand. "We will breach the Gate within the next four hours, if not then we're dead," she stated grimly. Vayle nodded, immediately barking out orders to her crew and walking away from the edge. It wasn't for certain, but Alara doubted that it would take forever for the Fortress ship to be repaired enough to truly fight back. Khalid would do everything he could to buy time, but Alara had no doubt that, after the threats made against the local populus proved to be useless against a cold and dominant Commodore such as Cyrenna, it wouldn't be long before he would soon turn to executing his prisoners. The more desperate he became the harder it would be for her to fulfil her main task: rescuing her parents. Killing him came secondary.

The Omen and the Brunxchume renegades sailed away, leaving Alara alone before her Marines and Irall's hand-picked soldiers. They numbered a little over three hundred. Three hundred bodies tasked with opening up the city to the rest of their forces. "I was hoping for more from your ships," Alara said with unfortunate honesty. "You would be surprised how difficult it is to find people willing to betray their own country that you can trust," Irall returned. Alara almost smiled: it was a truthful and honest retort about the position she was putting him in. If they succeeded he would be a hero, if they failed...

"Fair point. Thank you for joining us in this fight," she stated, extending a hand to him. He looked down at it and shook his head. "Thank me afterwards. Is now the time for one of your rousing speeches?" he questioned. Alara withdrew her hand and shook her head, turning and looking at her forces as they finished their preparations. They were all tired, and all had been through more than enough to last countless lifetimes. There was no speeches that would help, they had jobs to do, and would do them to the last breath. "Ready?" Alara questioned loudly. "Oohrah!" Alara turned to Irall and nodded, beginning the long march across the sands.

"No wonder this thing hasn't fallen in however many years!" Wulf stated, laying in the cover of a sand dune as bullets peppered the sands around them. "We're still hundreds of metres away, just how tall is that wall?" he questioned. "Almost one hundred metres," returned Irall, wiping his brow before placing his peaked cap back upon his head. "Fuck me!" Wulf complained. Alara elbowed him. "Quit your whining. We're the ones with distance on our side," she stated, giving the signal with a single gesture. Streaks of cyan and blue light stretched across the skies above as Riley and her snipers began to surgically cut apart the defences.

"By the great tides..." Irall muttered, watching through his binoculars. "Most of the standard defenders will have been pulled away, either through Fleet Admiral Malik's interference or by the fact that an enemy fleet is assaulting the Capital," Alara stated, standing up into plain and open view. A bullet grazed her cheek, not even drawing blood as her Focus defended her. "My snipers have enough ammunition to continuously fire at least for a few more hours. They won't need it," Alara stated, the gunfire on her position halting entirely. "Forwards!" Alara commanded, pointing her glaive ahead at the colossal and narrow stone wall. "I want those mines dealt with, and I want those heavy weapons emplacements destroyed!" Alara commanded, looking up as the first rockets began to fall.

Alara carved her way through the air, deflecting and redirecting the heavier artillery away from her forces beneath her. The mages she had brought along were tilling the sands, tipping over and revealing the mines buried beneath – both mechanical and magical. Between Riley and Artemis, the gunners had begun to falter. Even within weapon emplacements covered in thick metal they found no refuge from Alara's snipers, the pair terrorising the defenders whilst the others surgically isolated the others.

The charge was slow, but Alara didn't need to hurry. She could feel the terror growing before her. She could smell it as enemies began to flee their posts. "Now!" Alara commanded, Irall's men taking up positions with their heavy weapons and unleashing explosive rockets of their own towards the stone wall. No desperate shots

sprayed towards them, no magical shields were raised. Only the dead still manned the wall.

Alara surged forwards into the cracks that had been created. Null Legion surged towards her, reinforcements summoned to replace the fleeing Brunxchume military. She unleashed a wave of panic, staggering them backwards long enough for her to fire a bolt of energy into the concrete floor. The ground gave way, opening up to the floor below, Alara slung off and dropped her backpack down into it. The Null Legion stared at her across the gap in the floor, their eyes wide behind their gas-mask lenses. Alara lifted up her metal hand in a two-finger salute, stepping backwards to the edge of the crack she had entered through before backflipping out as the explosives detonated.

The wall crumbled inwards, bringing down with it the heavy emplacements above it to crush those below. Alara landed in a crouch, rolling backwards to her feet before she began to dust off the sand. "How many years has that wall stood?" Alara questioned to Irall as he approached with disbelief on his face. "One-hundred-and-forty-three years," he stated, waving away the settling dust and sand. "May the next one stand longer," Alara told him, patting his shoulder. "We have a city to take! Forwards!" Alara yelled out, turning away from Irall and looking through the dust at the Fortress ship docked more than a kilometre away. She gestured with her hand for the snipers to move up and rejoin the assault force.

"You have your objectives!" she stated, striding forwards. "Weapon, take control of the harbour – let our reinforcements in." A hand reached out from the rubble and grabbed her ankle. She looked down at the partially-crushed Null Legionnaire. "Wulf, Riley, we're breaching the main defences around that ship," she commanded, swinging with her glaive and beheading the crushed body. She had no time for weakness. Her parents' lives were on line, and so was her vengeance for the deaths of Witchford, Brett and so many others. "Irall, rescue your Admiral," she stated, relieving him from her command. He nodded appreciatively and dashed off with his forces towards the city's palace.

Alarm bells were ringing across the city of Chull. Civilians had, for the most part, fled inside their houses for safety, but some stubborn stragglers had remained outside. Alara didn't know why. Some stood in their way, desperately wielding ancient weapons or kitchen utensils. But others called out to her from windows and doorways. "Liberators!" they cried. Alara didn't quite feel like a liberator as a house detonated, a large shell raining down from the sky as Khalid fulfilled his threat to bombard the city. "Weapon, progress?" she questioned. No response immediately followed.

"We're experiencing more resistance than expected," eventually came a winded emotionless response. "Do you need reinforcements?" Alara questioned, vaulting over a temporary barricade and cutting apart its defenders with her therian squad close on her heels. "Negative, keep fighting Commodore. Don't stop." Alara nodded, not that he could see it, staring up at the colossal ship as it grew closer and closer.

A lone bridge lay ahead of them, connecting to the specialist harbour designed for the Fortress ship. Countless Null Legion stood in preparation, along with several mounted machine guns, cannons and distinctive mages. An army stood between them and Khalid. "Break through them!" Alara commanded, activating the barrier shield in her glaive and charging forwards. "Alara!" came Riley's voice. "There's too many!" she cried, her voice falling on deaf ears as Alara charged alone with only Wulf behind her.

So many weapons unloaded upon her that Alara could only see a continuous flash of weapon fire ahead of her. They shattered against her shield, fragments peppering the ground around her, but Alara pressed forwards, Wulf physically pushing her forwards as he placed a hand on her back and they pushed through the swarm of bullets. The shield began to crack, the army still twenty metres ahead of them. "We're not going to make it!" Alara realised, faltering as the reality that she had doomed one of her closest friends to inevitable death dawned upon her. "No, we are!" Wulf declared, a shadow growing across the bridge ahead of them as a burning ship barrelled straight into the bridge.

"Clear a path!" Cyrenna yelled, the stubborn gunners aboard the doomed ship unleashing their cannons upon the army of defenders, even as the ship cracked and broke apart under the impact. Cyrenna leapt free, landing to her feet next to Alara and turning on the fortress. "I liked that ship," Cyrenna stated with a snarl. "I like you even more," Alara stated, wiping her tear-filled eyes and steeling herself as her followers surged past her and across the amalgamation of broken ship and bridge towards Khalid's Fortress ship. Cyrenna placed a hand on Alara's shoulder. "Finish the mission, we have Admirals to save," she stated, stepping forwards and charging after their forces. Alara felt the palm on her back retreat, Wulf stepping forwards beside her. "Come on. He's waiting for us."

The Fortress ship roared to life, beginning to drag itself free from the piers and cables holding it in place. "Vanathur, you take the control room, we'll rescue the prisoners," Cyrenna yelled out as she leapt into the Fortress. Alara dashed forwards across the longest pier with Wulf and Riley, the sudden acceleration throwing waves across the planks ahead of them. "Leap for it!" Alara commanded, dashing towards the colossal opening left by the Sentry. She landed to a quiet silence, followed only by the soft metallic landing of Riley and the scrabble of claws from Wulf. "Stay close," Alara

warned, her heart pounding in her head as she edged through the wreckage towards the central lifts.

There was a worrying absence of guards as they climbed the stairs circling the elevators upwards. They could hear fighting far below, but there was no way that the command centre had been left unguarded. The circling stairs began to come closer together as they neared the peak of the fortress. "Alara," came Riley's quiet voice. She pointed upwards and Alara reached out with her senses, trying to feel for anyone above them. Like a sudden snarl, she felt a presence back – a singular presence surrounded only by a handful of others. "He's waiting for us," Alara informed Wulf. "There was never any doubt of that. Let's make this quick."

They stepped out onto the top floor, a small ring of a walkway surrounding the command centre of the Fortress Ship. It was designed like a bunker, with heavy metal doors sealing the inside and folded down metal panels acting as large windows that could be sealed at a moment's notice. They stepped in front of the main doors, the metal grinding open before them. "Vanathur," came a cold growl of a voice from inside the red room. Elevator doors lay at the back, connecting to the rest of the ship, but the tethers had been cut. Large projections floated over control panels, showing the status of the ship and the outside world. A huge map lay across a large central table, with countless pins and figurines acting as markers. Facing the doors, facing Alara, was a large throne, with the Betrayer General Khalid sat upon it.

Alara looked to the pilots manning the ship. "Leave," she commanded. Khalid tutted, shaking his head. "No, they will not. And you will not do anything to them," he stated. He wore a military uniform, a red-brown colour that was decorated with countless golden medals. A warhammer shaped like a judge's gavel sat with its head on the floor next to him. His hand rested on the handle of the weapon, a small trigger-like device in his other hand. "The Sovereign expects me to handle you, and you to handle me. Neither situation is what I wanted. I respect a warrior who knows herself, and knows how to draw out a victory regardless of the cost."

He stood up, hefting the warhammer over his shoulder. "That trigger?" Alara prompted. "Explosives placed on the various prisoners of importance within my cells. You can guess the placement of at least two of the bombs," he said with a cruel grin. "Coward!" Alara yelled. He shrugged, approaching the map table and placing his foot onto the edge of it. "Perhaps, but sometimes cowardice is the only way to draw out a victory – and in the end, victory is the only thing that matters."

"Why? Why is the Sovereign's commands final? Why go this far for her? Fall so much?" Alara questioned, looking at the numerous medals from battles long gone. She had no doubt in their validity. "Why betray your people?" she asked. "The

Sovereign is like a force of nature, created by our sins. You cannot stop her.” “But-” He held up a hand, shaking his head and kicking the table towards Alara. She, Wulf and Riley stepped aside, the heavy table crashing into the railing behind them and toppling over the edge towards the ocean. “In another time I would have appreciated a conversation, a discussion between soldiers, but that version of me is dead. I am he who remains. We are what remain,” he stated.

His form twisted, his reddish-brown eyes dividing so that two eyes filled the sockets, his uniform split as he swelled in size, his medals sinking into the grey flesh that lay underneath. His skin then bubbled, countless black feathers bursting out from the flesh before a colossal pair of wings emerged from his back. “A Demon,” Wulf stated. Alara didn’t respond, they’d figured that out long before. “Alara – the bombs have been disarmed,” came Cyrenna’s voice through Alara’s communicator. “Go wild,” Alara commanded.

“Fools!” came a deep guttural voice that was both Khalid’s and someone else. He pressed the trigger, but silence followed. Riley fired off a shot, the bullet passing cleanly into Khalid’s head. His brains splattered outwards, his huge body staggering backwards. The opening in his head gushed blood but he remained standing in a stooped form. Slowly his hand clutched one of the medals on his chest. “Die for me,” growled the creature before them, the metal dripping out of his feathery fingers. One of the pilots screamed, clutching their head in agony before it exploded outwards in a fast spray of gore. Khalid’s head healed closed. “Not good,” Riley stated.

Alara surged forwards, aiming to put herself between Khalid and Riley as the Demon General flapped his wings and darted forwards. There were at least twenty or so medals across the Betrayer’s chest, there weren’t that many pilots, but Alara doubted that mattered. Khalid had once ordered Riley to announce her identity using the same method. If the medals represented commands then they were in distinct danger.

Alara swung her glaive downwards towards Khalid’s neck, the warhammer rose up to block it and Wulf embedded his blade deep within Khalid’s stomach. A following shot sent the Demon Lord crashing backwards. “Pathetic!” Khalid growled, grabbing Alara’s entire torso with his huge hand and beginning to squeeze. Alara groaned in pain as she fought back against the crushing grip. Khalid flapped his wings, flying upwards to his feet. He then swung his warhammer, Wulf foolishly blocking the swipe with his sword. The weapon shattered and, with a yelp, Wulf flew backwards across the room in a similar manner to the map table, tumbling over the side. “Wulf!” Alara groaned.

Khalid lifted her up, preparing to slam her head-first into the floor, but a bullet severed the joint in his wrist and she broke free, leaping off him to land in front of Riley. “We

may need a new plan," Riley warned, sensing Wulf beginning the slow climb back up. "Agreed," Alara stated, noticing two medals drip off Khalid's body without him touching them. "He doesn't need to touch it to use his powers," she declared, watching as two of the remaining three pilots expired. "Then what's the trigger?"

Alara darted forwards, but Khalid swung wildly at her, forcing her to slide underneath the blow as he flew past her directly at Riley. "You're becoming a nuisance." Riley changed her aim, firing off a single shot towards the control panel controlling the heavy metal doors. The doors slammed shut, crushing Khalid's outstretched arm. He roared in agony, pushing back and turning towards Alara, now alone with him. "Hang on!" came Riley's voice through Alara's communicator.

Alara stared up at the Demon in low red light. "And now you're alone!" he growled. Alara tried not to smile. She fired off a quick shot, killing the final terrified pilot. A medal did not drip from Khalid's torso. "And you're alone with me. And I'm not afraid," she stated, voicing her guess. Khalid grabbed a medal. "Grovel!" he commanded. Alara felt invisible claws scratching the back of her neck, a heavy weight threatening to press her to the floor, but she stood tall. His eyes widened. "And so it becomes clear," she said, finally smiling as she twirled her glaive and took a defensive stance.

Khalid yelled as he charged towards her, but she ducked under his two-handed swipe, swinging with her glaive to cut free his left wing. He crashed to the floor, the severed wing thrashing around before falling still. Riley had sealed him inside whilst removing Alara's worry for her wellbeing, whether deliberate or not - Alara didn't care, it had heavily helped her. "I don't know your name Demon," Alara stated, striding forwards and meeting Khalid's heavy downwards swing by deflecting it to the side and then returning a heavy gash to the arm that followed. "but I am friends with Jayce Exarga, and on his crew is your king: Baal."

Khalid's body twisted as he rushed to attack her, but something held him back. "I can bring you to him. But you need to leave this body," Alara commanded. "Or else you will die with him," she threatened. Panic crossed Khalid's bird-like demonic face. "No! Don't listen to her!" he cried. Alara struck, severing the hand holding the warhammer and then embedding her glaive deep into his bloated torso. Alara stared the Demon right in the eye. "I offer you refuge in my body," she stated, sliding her flesh hand into the wound and deliberately cutting herself. "I-I," gasped Khalid's mouth. "I accept."

Alara yanked her glaive free, Khalid falling to the floor, his mouth and eyes wide. "No!" he cried, shuddering and thrashing as the feathers fell off his body. Alara turned her glaive around. "Your sentence," she said coldly. He raised his human hands

towards her. "Mercy!" he cried, blood spurting out of the wound in his side and dribbling down his chin. "Is death!" she concluded, firing a bolt of energy into his chest. He fell still, his eyes unseeing.

The doors to the command centre slid open, Wulf, Riley, Cyrenna and an entire squadron of armed Marines stood outside waiting. They stared at Alara and she slowly turned and looked back at them her reddish-brown eyes glowing. "It's over," Alara declared. "I have his Demon, and the Betrayer, General Barca Khalid, is dead." There was movement to the edge of the squad, two figures pushing through the group to step out into the open: an olive-skinned tall woman with wavy silver hair and hazel eyes, a similar height man with a very skinny build, messy grey hair, pale skin and brown eyes. Alara stood frozen as they stared at her, both in horror at the blood across her body and her glowing eyes and the stranger that stood before them. "Alara?" questioned her father Silas Vanathur. "Hi... Dad," she said quietly, her glaive clattering to the floor by her feet as her mother tackled her.

Seize the Seas Tales: Punishment

The days after Morgana's exile were quiet, unusually so for the reunited crew. The feeling of betrayal had hit hard, and what's more was that it had shone an uncomfortable light on what lay ahead of them. The end was in sight, and most likely a final confrontation with the Sea Sovereign at the end of it all. They would have to be ready for it, one way or another, and not everyone was certain they would be.

"Taking on both Strigon and Armin... it's a lot, Jayce, and that's coming from me," Astris stated, slowly pacing back and forth within the living quarters. Jayce glanced over his shoulder to Bjorn leaning against the far wall. "Thoughts?" Jayce questioned, still barely comfortable being back in his position of Captain. "She's not wrong, but the real question is can we afford not to?" Bjorn returned. "How so?" questioned Astris, stopping pacing and folding her arms.

"Think about it. The Sovereign has shown her hand: she's stated outright her interest in Alara, and that she's growing fed up of her current Betrayers. That they're boring her, or something along those lines. She named you as another one, asked you to replace Strigon-

"I'm aware," Astris stated.

"Zeta was another. We still don't know anything about the Sovereign or her Betrayers, how they've come to be under her command or why they follow her. She's already choosing new ones and I have no doubt in my mind that she will cut us apart with a scalpel and take the pieces she wants. We need to show the world that the Betrayers

can be beaten. We need to show ourselves that they can be beaten. Or else... it's inevitable that we will lose each other, maybe even ourselves."

The door opened and Marisha stepped in with a stack of letters and newspapers. "He's right, this is our fight. We beat Strigon before, we can do so again." "It just feels like a trap, that's all I'm saying. And with Morgana out of the picture we've lost a consistent supply of potions and a potent aerial combatant," Astris stated. Marisha handed Bjorn a rather thick wad of letters. He frowned as he took them but then faltered as he spotted a red patch on the paper.

"I agree we have to do this, but we need--"

A guttural gasp drew Astris, Marisha and Jayce's attention to Bjorn, the papers falling to the floor apart from one in his hand, his other hand gripping the back of the sofa so hard that he actually tore it open. "Bjorn?" Jayce questioned, getting to his feet and approaching him as the giant bear-man dropped to his knees, shaking his head in disbelief. Marisha rushed to Bjorn's side. Astris began to pick up the letters, tearing them open. Jayce stood in front of his friend, Bjorn's gaze slowly looking upwards to him. Tears stemmed from his eyes, a growl of rage following them.

Bjorn held a photo in his hand, the letter accompanying it discarded on the floor. "Fucking hell..." Astris muttered, placing her palm to her forehead and shaking her head. Jayce took the photo, staggering backwards and shutting his eyes. It showed a severed head: the head of a polar bear therian - Magnus. "Who?" Jayce questioned. "Who do you think?" Bjorn returned, a snarl on his face. "Xerxes, that bastard! I'll kill him for this!"

"Jayce," Astris said quietly, handing him a letter.

'The Frostbear tribe is mine, part of my army, conscripted to refill the ranks you emptied, Bjorn. You stood on the wrong side and now blood has been shed that cannot be undone. I will blow away all remnant of our cursed past, and then I will come for you. I swear on it, as King of the Therians, that you will never find refuge amongst our people again.'

"Jayce..." Bjorn said with cold steel. Jayce nodded, glancing towards Astris as she showed the front page of the newspaper: it displayed the scorched ruins of an island. "This takes priority. If Xerxes is targeting our friends and blowing up the world, then we have to put an end to him."

"No matter the cost," Bjorn growled, looking sadly at the array of images showing the corpses of his family and friends.

Chapter 227: Boys to Men

The news of an island blowing up had spread quickly. Destruction of that scale was not unheard of, but it was beyond rare. The Rising Aces didn't have time to worry about it; another explosion was going to occur, when and where were the questions, and how to stop it was the follow-up. Marisha put down her transceiver, standing up and rubbing her forehead before flicking through her notes. "I've got it. I know where we need to go!"

"Run this by me one more time," Jayce told her, the crew assembled in the living quarters. "Whilst Morgana, Ohno and I were with the Guild, we came across records of explosives being bought and shipped by the Sea Sovereign. A lot of them, but to who was unknown and by whom was also something that was a mystery. She was basically acting as the middle man," Marisha clarified. "It's pretty obvious who, right?" Ordo inserted. Marisha nodded and then glanced towards Bjorn. "For an explosion of that size... he would need a lot, and a lot of financing. Even with the Therian lands under his command, to get that sort of money without notice..."

"Means that the Sovereign in one way or another is supporting him," Jayce concluded. Marisha nodded. "But why?" Astris questioned. "What purpose does blowing up the New World provide that benefits her?" No one had an answer. "And that's what we need to find out. We need to know who in the Guild is supplying Xerxes, that will give us a pressure point to work on against the Sovereign. We also need to know where it is being supplied to." Marisha cleared her throat, drawing the attention back to her. "We know that part already."

After a quick teleportation, the Stacked Hand eventually set its eyes on the familiar seas of the southwest of the Old World. Xerxes had been storing the explosives on an island not too far from Belluabella, a reaching point close to the therian capital that would, for the most part, go unnoticed. It was also unfortunately so close to Belluabella that any alarm would likely spring a wave of reinforcements far larger than anything the Stacked Hand was equipped to deal with without maximum bloodshed.

"I need a group who can go in and get out without drawing attention and who the therians will not be expecting," Jayce stated, as his crew gathered on the open deck. He looked towards Astris and Caelie. "We'll do it," stated Wam, stepping forwards with his two brothers. Jayce looked at the Demon therian; he wasn't unrecognisable. "Absolutely not," stated Bjorn, stepping forwards and placing a hand on Wam's shoulder. "You will be recognised," he stated firmly. Wam shook his head, the magma colourations fading from him. "Maybe I will, but these two won't," he stated,

gesturing towards Ohno and Fenn. "You're too recognisable, and there's no point sending anyone who isn't a therian. They'll get recognised almost immediately, especially given what we are after."

"Captain, there is literally no one better suited for this job," Fenn stated. "Wam is the muscle we need if we get into trouble. We'll be in and out before they've realised they've been robbed. We can confirm the island has the explosives and also confirm where their targets are. That information can be sent forwards to the Republic and then we can return to dealing with the Vampires and Cannibals. Trust us, we've got this."

Jayce looked towards Bjorn, who firmly shook his head. "Boys-" Jayce began but the trio stepped forwards, past Bjorn, to face him directly. "We can do this. If it was anyone else you wouldn't even question sending them," Fenn stated. "We've got this, Captain!" Ohno stated, pumping his fist. They looked towards Jayce, who looked towards Bjorn. Bjorn shook his head and Jayce then looked towards Marisha. She turned away, unwilling to give an answer. "Okay," Jayce confirmed. "Get your gear, you'll take the Jet. In and out with no fighting. Take photos and return. You pull out the second it gets too much, am I understood?" The Beastly Boys nodded, rushing off to get their things. "Jayce, a word," Bjorn growled.

"They're not ready," he stated firmly inside Jayce's quarters. Astris and Marisha both stood to the side, both with their arms crossed and deeply uncomfortable. "They said it themselves," Jayce stated, "it's the best chance we have and they're not kids anymore. We have to count on them, or otherwise countless lives could be lost. If we did nothing and the New World Capital was the price, then how could we live with ourselves?"

"It is too dangerous and those boys' lives are not worth it!" Bjorn snapped. "They are not soldiers to be used and thrown away, they are just boys eager to prove themselves, and too stupid to understand just what they're throwing themselves into. They play with fire and are walking into an island full of fuel." "I'd have thought after what Xerxes did to your tribe that you'd-" "This is not a game! Not some petty feud, and it is not their war! Xerxes can't understand that, he physically cannot understand that his war is over – that is why he is dragging new blood into his lost war. I will not do the same! Don't do this, it will go wrong! They're not ready!"

A knock came from the doorway, the three therian boys all looking at the floor. "Bjorn, we are ready..." Wam said quietly. "You can't protect us forever." Wam then looked up, his fur turning a magma orange. "You couldn't protect me before, it's time we

stand on our own feet.” Bjorn glanced towards Fenn and Ohno, who both nodded in agreement. “Please,” Bjorn pleaded quietly. “Don’t do this.”

“They’ll be fine,” Marisha reassured, holding Bjorn’s hand as they watched the trio fly forwards across the top of the water aboard the Stacked Hand’s jetboat. Bjorn glanced away from them towards Jayce, his arms folded and a similarly nervous look on his face. Slowly he glanced back towards the skull-like island ahead of them. Something in his stomach was twisting, an unconscious feeling warning him that something was going to go wrong. Disastrously wrong. “I hope so.”

The ride over was quiet, all three of them feeling the monumental pressure of the task that lay ahead of them as the island grew bigger and bigger. “Tell them you know how they’re feeling - that you care,” stated Asmodeus into Wam’s head. “In and out,” Wam stated. “We can do this. I’m nervous too, but they’re all counting on us. So is the Republic.” Fenn scoffed, glancing up at the dark clouds above them and steering the jet towards a small pier. “Since when has it been about the Republic? This is for us, to show them all that we can do it. That we are Rising Aces!” he stated. Wam nodded in agreement, looking towards Ohno. The panda turned and looked to him, extending out a fist. “Together,” he said simply. Wam nodded, tapping it back and so did Fenn. “Together,” they both said. “Together,” followed Asmodeus’ voice.

They parked the jet facing outwards, such that they could escape at a moment’s notice, before creeping up along the pier into the caves of the large island. It didn’t take long to confirm that they were at the right island. The entire skull-shaped mountain covering the island was hollow, full of countless caves and caverns with connecting tunnels laden with rail tracks and minecarts. And there were also countless crates all marked with warnings of highly flammable and explosive material. “Not a single flame,” warned Wam to his pyromaniac brothers. “You, of all people, don’t need to tell me,” Fenn retorted.

They followed the tracks inwards, staying in the shadows and behind cover as they took notice of the therians moving items around. They were loading the crates carefully into the minecarts before slowly pushing them along and eventually bring back out empty ones. The workers didn’t look particularly special, they didn’t wear any special clothing nor did they look like civilians. “Hurry it up!” growled a boar therian. “Boss wants the crates counted and ready for transport.” Two of the other therians near him scoffed. “Like we aren’t already aware. Shut up and help.” They sauntered off and the Beastly Boys crept out from cover.

Wam and Fenn began to move forwards in pursuit of the workers but Ohno stopped them. “Look,” he stated, pointing at the crate. The other two looked at him with

confusion before he pointed at the image of a small green serpent on the crates. "It's the Serpent," Ohno stated. Fenn shook his head in disbelief. "Probably just from her suppliers. It's just a stamp. Doesn't mean anything." Wam wasn't so certain. "Come on," he stated, snapping a quick photo before moving on.

They followed the tracks forwards, sticking to the shadows as much as they could before eventually deciding instead that the best cover was to work in plain sight. Grabbing a minecart of their own, Fenn dove inside, the other two placing crates around him before covering the entire cart with a simple cloth. Together Ohno and Wam then began to push the heavy and slow cart, the rusty wheels grinding loudly as they pushed it forwards. The tracks undulated as it dug deeper into the heart of the island, eventually opening up into a colossal cavern filled with searchlights.

The bright beams of light slowly panned across the ground, passing over rows upon rows of flyers, stacks upon stacks of crates, a huge magical circle carved into the floor, and a sizeable army of workers loading the powder within the crates into bombs. "Gods..." Fenn muttered, staring upwards through a gap in the cloth at a huge airship hovering thirty or so metres above them. It was a flat crimson colour, a large black lion's skull painted across its sides. A flat platform was slowly raising up towards its open belly, carrying countless crates and prepared bombs.

"What a monster..." muttered Asmodeus in Wam's head. He shook his head, keeping his head down, grabbing Ohno's arm and pushing the cart forwards into a siding. Fenn tumbled out of it, crouching behind it before looking up at his brothers – only stepping out when they were certain no eyes were upon them. A pair of unknown therians working on the island was plausible: a trio stood out too much. "They could bomb the entire New World without much effort if that thing can teleport," Wam told his brothers. Fenn snatched the camera out of Wam's hand, darting forwards and snapping a quick photo. There was a brief flash, but he believed he had timed it well enough to blend with the panning searchlights.

Near the edge of the cavern was a stack of large metal boxes, a small improvised structure with visible wooden boards covered in sheets of paper. Fenn turned and looked at his brothers, pointing forwards before dashing ahead. "Idiot," Wam uttered harshly, faltering as the spotlight panned between him and his brother. The crates had been stacked to create small roads throughout the cavern, leading to key destinations like the command centre Fenn was rushing towards, but also to the improvised accommodation and hangars. The only difference was that the other areas were busy, the command centre was notably, and suspiciously, empty. "Come on," Ohno stated, darting somewhat clumsily forwards and sticking close to the cover of the crates as he rushed after Fenn. Wam followed after him, the pair of them having lost sight of Fenn.

“Wam...” came Asmodeus’ voice in his head. The voice was cautious, nervous. “What is it?” he questioned back, his heart slowly racing as he and Ohno were forced to stop and crouch down as a searchlight panned over them. “This feels off,” replied the Demon, Wam’s entire body tensing as he heard a yelp from up ahead. “Fenn!” called out Ohno, dashing forwards from their cover. Wam reached out after him, his heart pounding in his chest. “Ohno!” he yelled after his brother, the Demon physically holding him back. “Wam, if there is a single spark – not even my affinity for fire will protect us.”

“That doesn’t matter!” Wam returned, breaking forwards after his brothers. He ran out of cover, darting through the small labyrinth of crates until he emerged into the open in front of the command centre. Ohno stood frozen ahead of him, Fenn squirming in the air with a large hand around his neck. Wam froze too, his body tensing in fear as he locked eyes with a huge shaggy white boar therian stood in front and an even larger pink hippo therian holding Fenn. He knew them both, Bjorn had spoken of them – warned him of them. They were two of Xerxes’ War Hounds: Mardoni and Hydar.

“A liar as well as a spy then!” Mardoni growled, turning his huge head away from Fenn towards Wam and Ohno. “Well spies, I hope you’ve enjoyed your visit but nothing escapes here – you’ve made a one way trip, but first you’re going to tell us who you work for,” he declared, tightening his grip on Fenn. The fox gasped for air, but he didn’t yield. Fenn dug the claws of his left hand into the wrist of the Mardoni before raising up his right. A flash of orange flame spread across the fur. “Fool!” yelled Mardoni, immediately slamming Fenn to the ground. Without hesitation Fenn rolled over, scrabbling forwards whilst reaching into his bottomless bag.

“Wam!” Fenn yelled, tossing the camera across the way – the small device clattering across the floor and skidding past Ohno and the boar War Hound to Wam’s feet. Mardoni snarled, lifting up his huge hoof before stomping down directly on Fenn’s back. His eyes widened, a horrific and grotesque crunch following as the impact met his flesh and then broke down through his spine and into his chest cavity. Fenn’s body briefly lurched before his arms slapped the floor, his death instantaneous.

“Fenn!” screamed Wam, Ohno letting out a roar and charging forwards towards the two War Hounds without any weapons. “Brat!” growled Hydar, hefting a heavy hammer and swinging it down towards the foolish panda. But Ohno dropping his shoulder and dove forwards, slamming his mass into the chest of the boar and sending him staggering backwards whilst grabbing his arm and yanking downwards, hard. The boar yelled out in pain as his arm snapped and Ohno snatched his hammer, swinging the weapon straight into the white boar’s head. Flesh and bone splattered across Mardoni’s torso. The boar going down by his feet. Ohno didn’t turn, his shaky

hands gripping the weapon as he faced down the hippo that had killed his brother. "Wam, go! Get out of here! Finish the mission!"

"No, not witho--"

"Go!" Ohno screamed, charging forwards. The boar getting back up, his torn open head fading away into a human face before returning back to therian form. "Run!" Ohno bellowed.

"Wam, run," came Asmodeus' voice in his head. Wam's body unfroze and he grabbed the camera, turning and rushing forwards. Bullets peppered the floor ahead and behind him. "Fools, stop shooting!" bellowed a voice. "One wrong shot and this entire place will go up in flames. After him!" Wam ignored it, following the tracks back the way they had come, his vision blurry and entire body burning with rage and sadness. "Don't stop!" Asmodeus told him, partially hijacking his body to stop the magma therian from staggering straight into a box of the explosive crates. Wam couldn't think, he couldn't breathe, but he couldn't stop – the Demon dragging him forwards and a pair of invisible hands pushing him onwards.

He broke out into open air, the Stacked Hand somewhere far on the horizon and small army of Pirates behind him. He looked down at the jet, already prepared for a fast getaway. He clambered down onto it, dropping the camera into a bundle of cloaks before turning on the engine. But he didn't stay on it, instead he stepped back onto the pier connecting to the island. "I can't leave him..." Wam said quietly to his Demon, well-aware of the likely one-way trip that it would mean. Silence followed before a sigh emerged. "I'm with you until the end," Asmodeus stated. Wam reached forwards and pushed the handle controlling the jet's acceleration, the vehicle launching forwards in a spray of water. "Together," Wam stated. "Together," agreed Asmodeus, the pair of them rushing back into the island.

Ohno staggered backwards clutching his bleeding ribcage, his breathing ragged and arm limp. The two War Hounds stood ahead of him, the hippo's left arm covered with a large and spiky gauntlet covered in Ohno's blood and fur, the boar held a large metal crowbar. "You fought well for a boy, your life would be wasted if it ended here. Join us, King Xerxes needs spirited youths like you. We assure you will suffer no further harm," offered Mardoni. The boar glanced towards him, his therian face now covered with a fresh scar from Ohno's initial swing. "Absolutely not," he complained.

Ohno almost smiled, but between the void of sadness and the bursting anger he had no room in his mind to think on anything other than killing them... and stalling long enough for Wam to get out. "I was never good at reading time," Ohno stated, throwing the hammer at the boar before reaching into his bottomless bag. The War Hound knocked it aside. "It was always Fenn who was in charge of our getaways.

And Wam always dealt with the plans,” he stated, pulling out a small metal lighter. “But I was always good with blowing shit up!” Ohno yelled, igniting the flame and punching his fist into the nearest crate.

Bjorn dropped to his knees as he watched the island inhale, a singular thin twister of blue flame piercing upwards through the rock and into the clouds high above. The flames then split, dropping down to surround the island like an umbrella before it was rapidly sucked in from the bottom in a large sheet of fire. The flames then launched upwards in a colossal pillar of blue and orange power before erupting outwards into the largest explosion anyone on the Stacked Hand had ever seen. It was devastating, primeval.

Flames and smoke continued to blast outwards as a colossal wave of wind and force rolled across the ocean. It impacted the Stacked Hand, blasting the ship backwards even as Tempest mitigated it with his shield. The noise then followed, like the bellow of a monster that shook every cell in Jayce’s body. He held his gaze towards the blue flames fading into black smoke, only breaking away his gaze as he noticed a small vehicle racing ahead of the tidal waves blowing outwards from the remains of the island. “Falconer, get it!” he commanded, the frozen navigator forcing himself onto Wren, cowering on the floor with her wings over her head. They took the air in pursuit of the empty jet, its riders lost to the explosion.

The Beastly Boys were gone, but somewhere, deep underwater, sinking slowly into the darkness, was a faint orange glow.

Seize the Seas Tales: Cold Relations

There was not much that Soteria could say to Morgana to comfort her. They didn’t really have that kind of relationship, nor could Soteria truly empathise with the human. They were different, completely, regardless of their bond. A few months back, Soteria wouldn’t have cared, but now that they could truly communicate she felt something for the girl. Something alien, something strange. The humans may have called it love, but Soteria called it a pain. Their contract was a binding, a mutual agreement of growth. She didn’t want it to become anything else, but as she watched the tears continue to fall, trailing behind Morgana like her own personal rain, Soteria couldn’t help but want to help.

“We can speed up, if you desire,” offered the Dragon, only just able to keep up with the speed of Morgana’s broomstick. They had long crossed the Frontier, stopping off only occasionally for sleep and some food on their journey north. “No, it’s fine...” Morgana said quietly, her eyes down on her bloody hands – the skin raw from consistent scratching and picking. She wasn’t even looking where they going, flying beyond second nature to her. “Then what is the issue?” Soteria growled, the

pearlescent Dragon moving up to fly alongside her. Her ice-coloured right eye glared directly at Morgana.

Morgana began to scratch her skin again, but it felt smooth, hard. She looked at the Dragon, its shield lining her skin. "Nothing," Morgana lied blatantly. The Dragon huffed. "Sure," she stated, returning her gaze onwards. Morgana sighed, taking out a healing potion and sipping it. "I just... regret failing to do it. I should have fought harder, I've doomed us." Soteria shook her head. She didn't necessarily disagree with Morgana's decision: the predator of all was a monster, and something far beyond almost anything Soteria could think of facing, but Morgana's actions had been cowardly. "A coward's perspective: a selfish one. You shouldn't fear the greatest predator, you should seek out the means to turn it into your prey. That's the Dragon's way, and you possess a Dragon's heart, so use it. Do not... fear what could be. See what is, and go from there." Morgana faltered, it almost sounded like caring advice. "Since when do you care?" she asked. "I do not. But I would like to feast on the Sovereign someday, and at the moment that dream seems far from reality."

Eventually, after flying through wind and rain, the weather turned to soft and continuous snow, an unfamiliar environment surrounding them. "The northern Dungeon should be... there," Morgana stated, a surprising amount of ships surrounding the most northern landmass. She frowned, pulling back on her broomstick and assessing the environment. The ships all belonged to the Guild, and there was a surprising amount of armed guards and new buildings surrounding the Dungeon. "Curious..." she mumbled, reaching for her communicator.

"Wicke, it's Morgana. Jayce has sent me to join you," she stated, looking around for anything that stood out. "They might have not arrived yet," she stated to Soteria. "Morgana?" came a broken and staticky response. She sighed – her communicator could reach almost anywhere thanks to its upgrades, but Wicke's was outdated. "We best get comfy," Morgana warned her Dragon, looking down at the outpost below before turning away and heading towards one of the many drifting icebergs.

Eventually a somewhat derelict boat made an appearance on the horizon. "Is that you?" Morgana questioned, brushing the snow off her tent and beginning to disassemble it. "It's us," Wicke returned, her voice clear and uncertain. "Where are you?" she questioned. Morgana mounted her broom, Soteria letting out a yawn and slowly dragging herself to her feet. "Here," Morgana stated a moment later, hovering over the main deck and looking at the alarmed ragtag group before her. Her eyes landed on Wicke, her burns healed and expression cautious but also full of relief. "Morgy?" came a voice Morgana was not familiar with. She turned her gaze towards a silver-haired girl with golden eyes wielding a very large sword. "Hello sister. It's been some time."

Chapter 228: Lost Time

Alara stood somewhat frozen as she watched her parents weakly limp away, supported by medical personnel. She wanted to follow, but knew there were bigger priorities at hand. "Are you okay?" Cyrenna stated firmly, both her, Riley and Wulf looking at Alara with deep intensity and care. "Yeah, uh, fine," she lied, her head pounding, chest tight, skin clammy and face pale. "Absolute crap," Cyrenna stated, whistling over a medic. "She's on observation, I want a full check-up. Sedate her if necessary," Cyrenna ordered. Alara held up her hands and shook them in protest. "Whoa, hang on! Don't I get a say, Commodore?" Alara returned. "No."

Alara sat in her assigned temporary quarters, a firm silence across the room other than inside her head. "Explain again," Alara commanded to the Demon taking lodging within her. A sigh followed, the voice gravelly and deep, and still bearing the grudge of having been forbidden from speaking, under duress of exorcism, whilst Alara was having her check-up. "The Sovereign will be coming for you," Raim repeated once again. "Not that," Alara stated aloud, shaking her head. That much was obvious – she had killed a Betrayer, there would be consequences. "How did the Sovereign control Khalid? How could she control me?"

"The Sovereign revived him. He was a great General. She killed him and brought him back, much in the same way she was. That tether to life, through her, is what controlled him."

Alara frowned. "She died? When? How? Who killed her?" she questioned quickly. She sensed the Demon shrug. "So she has a Demon too? Does any other Betrayer?" Silence followed, the Demon pausing out of hesitation rather than inability to answer. "I will remove you from my body, I have ways," she threatened. "Lord Astaroth is within her. I don't know if there are any others. I was captured and entombed for... a long time. The others have not shown themselves, and Lord Astaroth has been silent to me, but I recognise his powers." "Astaroth..." Alara murmured. "I need to tell Jayce."

"This Jayce person, he is with King Baal?" Raim questioned. Alara nodded, standing up and walking towards her door. "Then we must make our way immediately!" stated the Demon. It wasn't a bad idea, she missed him dearly, and he would most certainly have a way to remove the second voice now clouding her head, but there were bigger and more immediate things she needed first. "I have more questions for you, until then you're to be quiet. I will get you to your King, I promise. Now, be silent."

Alara found her parents waiting for her in the local hospital. Several wards had been isolated and dedicated to the Republic for the Marines and Navy that had been injured during the conflict, but her parents had been given a more private section – one that

was heavily guarded. "Alara!" cried her mother, dashing forwards and pulling her in tight before poorly-hidden expressions of shock and horror crossed her face as she looked at Alara's missing arm and countless scars. "Mother," Alara said softly, burying her head into her mother's hair and unearthing long buried memories of her scent and feeling. "Are you okay?" Alara asked immediately. Both her parents looked worse for wear, underweight with dark marks under their eyes, but intact, and for that Alara was grateful.

"Us?" questioned her father, placing a calloused hand onto Alara's head before touching her slightly scarred cheek. "You look... so much older. So much time has passed and you're... far more than I ever imagined. We dreamed of you, held you deeply for all this time... you shouldn't have followed our footsteps." Alara faltered, behind their sad gazes were flickers of anger and frustration. "But... I thought you would be proud? I-I followed you, here, through the Marines and... What?" Alara questioned in confusion.

Her parents sat down on a bed and invited her to sit between them. Alara remained standing, her arms folded. "We've been given a rough... recap, but I want to hear it from you," stated Silas Vanathur, looking at Alara. "What happened to the Empire?" he asked firmly, his brown eyes reading her intently. "Well..." Alara faltered, lowering her arms and dragging over a chair. "It's not a short story..."

"And... well, we defeated Fleet Admiral Gamble and the Church. But then the Sovereign attacked. Jayce fled with Corina and his crew, we stayed behind and the Sovereign snatched the Empire from us," Alara concluded. Her parents hadn't spoken throughout the entire history lesson. They had hardly moved, their faces stony and cold. Her mother eventually spoke first. "So... Cassandra is the New Fleet Admiral?" she asked, her voice layered with anger. Alara didn't quite know what to say – this was not the reaction she had been expecting. "Yes."

"Unbelievable..." muttered her father, shaking his head and looking at his wife. "What do you mean? That's good, right? I was left in their care, you left me in their care, right?" Alara questioned quickly. Her father held a hand, silencing her as she looked at them with desperation. "Yes, but... Alara, my Little Blossom, you lost us for nothing at the behest of that woman. You lost us because Cassandra was unwilling to go, and now she's Fleet Admiral. She's the reason you lost us, and she helped to make you into her weapon."

Alara knew that already. "So was Jayce. We were both guided the same way," Alara defended, shaking her head. "He has been through so much more than I have. He... he..." She faltered and looked down at her boots. Had she been manipulated? Her family sacrificed for his? Her mother stood up and stepped towards her, resting a

hand on her shoulder. "We're together now, but you cannot trust the Exargas," said her mother softly, the words colder and sharper than the most deadly steel. "I..." Alara stood up, knocking the chair she was sat on over and backing away. "I need to think about it. I need to speak to Jayce." Her parents looked at her with confusion. "Why Jayce?" asked her mother. Alara froze, a realisation dawning upon her. "We're, um, together," she said with an awkward smile.

Alara sat in the dark of her room, tucked up in a ball in the far corner. The tears had dried, the frustration of her parents deep hatred of Alara's other family having eventually faded. They had been vocal about her... feelings for the devilspawn she was practically betrothed to, and now she almost felt like she'd have preferred them absent from her life. Alara slammed the metal of her palm into her forehead, drawing blood that quickly healed over. "Idiot!" she scowled, hating that she had even thought the strangers that were her parents would magically fix everything.

To their credit, she knew that they had stepped back into their roles as Admirals, and were currently in talks with Fleet Admiral Malik whilst bringing about a successful conclusion to the Khalid War. They were tidying up her mess, and for that she was grateful, but as she stared into the darkness – feeling an awkward presence in her mind – she couldn't help but think about everything it had cost: Witchford, Brett...

A knock drew her attention to the door, light spreading into her room and illuminating her like a monster caught in the glow of a light. Her glowing eyes locked onto Riley, a soft and pained expression mirroring her own as the anti-climax of their deathmarch had settled in. "The Fleet Admiral wants us back north. The fleet will sail with Cyrenna, we're teleporting – along with your parents," she informed, stepping into the darkness and shutting the door behind her. Alara heard it lock, dropping her eyes onto her knees and hugging her legs.

The soft clink of Riley's metal legs rattled across the floor as she approached Alara, sitting down next to her and wordlessly pulling Alara's slightly larger frame towards her before wrapping her arms around her. Riley rested her head against Alara's. "It's over..." Alara said softly. Riley nodded, copying her words. "It's over. They're gone... they're actually gone," she admitted, silent tears dripping along with Alara's. "I killed them..."

"No. No-no," Riley hushed. "They chose their deaths. They chose it..." The words caught in Riley's throat. "They chose it for us. For you." Alara hiccupped, sniffing as she wiped her face. "Stupid fools," she uttered, shaking her head. "It was all for nothing. They died for my parents who hate Jayce, hate Cassandra, Philip, and feel like it was all wasted. They looked at me with... shame. I'm a stranger to them. They're... strangers to me."

"Well... at least you have parents," Riley stumbled, like an ox through a glass house. Alara pulled her head away and looked at one of her closest friends with distain. "Idiot," she stated, a weak smile appearing on her face. Riley stuck out her tongue. "They're alive, be happy about that. If it turns out they're assholes then sobeit, fuck them. You've got me, and Wulf, Weapon, the three Kai's..." Alara reached out and wrapped an arm across Riley's shoulders, pulling her in for a tight squeeze. "Yeah, I still got you," Alara stated, placing her head to Riley's. "You die on me and I will kill you," she then threatened. Riley grinned. "Yeah, me too."

"This will get you to Final Bastion," stated Fleet Admiral Malik, glancing from Alara's parents to her. "Thank you, Fleet Admiral. We will be in touch, once we've reconnected with Republic high-command and passed on your message," stated Admiral Victoire Vanathur. He nodded to her, the Admirals giving a courteous nod before stepping away. Alara's father glanced back towards her, gesturing for her to follow. Alara remained where she was and he frowned before turning away. "Family is often complex," Malik told Alara. She smiled weakly at him before standing at attention and giving him a Republic salute. He did the same, giving her a salute of his own. "Commodore," he said with the utmost respect. "Fleet Admiral," she returned, turning and stepping away to follow after her parents.

The teleportation circle span and then flashed purple, and a moment later she found herself stood on a large stone platform, high up with a firm view of the surrounding ocean. "Welcome back," came a familiar voice, Fleet Admiral Exarga stood waiting, along with Admiral Exarga. Alara stood at attention, as did Wulf and Riley and the other officers that had come with them, the rest remaining behind to travel with Cyrenna's fleet. Alara's parents did not. "Fall out," Cassandra stated, her eyes curious and locked on Silas and Victoire. "It's... good to see you alive," Cassandra stated once the majority of Alara's forces had departed, leaving only the three Vanathur's, Wulf and Riley behind. "If only we could say the same, Fleet Admiral," Victoire stated with distinctive malice.

Cassandra looked down in shame, but Philip stepped forwards, standing beside his wife. "Damn, cold," muttered Riley, drawing every set of eyes towards her. Alara cleared her throat. "Shall we debrief inside?" she stated, taking control. The four Admirals looked at her. "A good idea. Wulf, please remain nearby with Riley. You will be needed once we're done," Philip stated. Wulf nodded, placing a firm hand on Riley's shoulder and forcefully dragging her away. "I want to watch," she protested as she was dragged away. Alara tried not to smile. "This way," Philip stated.

They soon found themselves within a large office, the colours mostly red – distinctively Cassandra's. "Alara, perhaps it's best that you wait outside," Philip

advised as tension filled the room. "You will not tell her what to do!" snapped Victoire. "He's probably right, dear," Silas stated, the briefest glances of respect crossing the pair of men. "She shouldn't be forced to be here." Alara opened her mouth but then closed it, turning and stepping towards the door. "Alara," came Cassandra's voice just as she reached the handle. Alara glanced back. They locked eyes, a pained expression on Cassandra's face. She then simply nodded, a faint smile flickering as she silently told her what Alara had always known through her communicator. "I'm proud of you," Cassandra said silently. "No matter what, I will always be proud of you." Alara stepped outside, shouting erupting before the door had even closed.

Eventually the door opened, Alara's father stepping out and approaching her before sitting down on the seat next to hers. "We have come to an arrangement," he told her, Alara immediately feeling like a child. "I want you to leave the military, for your safety. The Sovereign will want revenge for what has happened and the Exargas cannot be trusted to protect you. We'll go and be a family, somewhere safe, somewhere quiet." Alara looked at her father with disgust. "Go to hell!" she stated, standing up and looking down at him.

"You've known me all of two days, and clearly you've not thought of me once – only who I may have been years ago! I am who I am, whether you like it or not. I'm sorry you had your life stolen from you. I'm sorry I lost you and all the time we could have had, but you left. You left me! You're my father, so be one! Gods, I dreamt of reuniting with you. I cried myself to sleep more nights than I can count thinking I would never see you again, and it doesn't matter who's fault it is, or if it was worth it – you left me! I love Jayce, and he loves me, just as the Exargas do! I am yet to believe that you love me – this me, not the little girl you left behind on an island. I am Commodore Alara Vanathur, you do not speak for me!"

He stood up and met her gaze. "And I am an Admiral, Commodore. This has been decided. If I have to make it an order I will. For your own-" Alara pushed him, hard, forcing him to sit down. "You're still not listening!" she yelled in his face, her mother stepping out from Cassandra's office with a grey face. "Neither of you know me - know any of us. I understand if you've given up fighting, but I'm not running. Too much is at stake and too much has been lost to give up. You're not angry at Cassandra or Philip, you're afraid. You're free, so run away if you want to. I don't care."

Alara strode towards her mother, who opened her mouth and tried to stop her, but faltered as Alara stormed past her. Alara shut the door to Cassandra's office, turning towards the Exarga's with a furious expression and folded arms. Cassandra and Philip looked at each other before at Alara. "Khalid is dead," Alara stated firmly, controlling

the conversation. Cassandra smiled softly, leaning back in her large leather chair. "We heard. Alara--"

Alara held up a warning finger. "I'm angry at one set of parents thinking they're protecting me, don't make it two," she warned. Cassandra looked down and chuckled, shaking her head. When she looked up her expression was hardened. "The Sovereign cut off your reinforcements, with Khalid dead she will be looking to make you hers." Alara let out a sigh, she had thought as much. "So, we're sending you to Jayce," Cassandra stated.

"What?" Alara questioned, looking at Philip. He nodded in confirmation. "You, Riley and Wulf have earned some leave. You're going to teleport to the Stacked Hand, it's been prearranged. Whilst there, you're going to prepare for whatever comes next. Share with the Rising Aces what you did to defeat Khalid... and you're going to grieve." The final words hit hard and fast. "We're sorry about your friends. The Rising Aces are going through something similar, and for the moment there is nowhere safer. We'll handle whatever fallout comes from the Sovereign, and when you come back..."

Alara nodded. "Do or die," she said softly. A final battle was coming, one way or another. "You're to set off immediately," Cassandra said softly. Alara glanced towards the door. "Do they know?" Alara asked. Cassandra shook her head. "We've got them. Whether they admit it or not, they are surrounded by friends. I'm sorry they let you down. I'm sorry we let you down." Alara let out a sigh. "Don't ever think that again. I don't care what they said. I'm not what they imagined I would be, but I'm who you made me to be – and I'm not ashamed of who I am." Cassandra stood up and walked over to her, placing Alara in a gentle and warm hug, her hand inevitably reaching for Alara's still somewhat fresh scars. "You're more like your mother than you know," she told her. Alara smiled before pulling away. "I will come back when you tell me to, Fleet Admiral. Do not shelf me, this is only temporary. Right?" Cassandra nodded. "No, of course not. I need you to kill some more Betrayers for me, Commodore."

Alara left the office, faltering as she found her parents talking to pair of familiar figures. "Ah, there she is," stated Old Dog Xarga, the giant scarred man towering over her parents, with Admiral Yashiro stood next to him and a Killer standing in the shadows behind him. He wheezed as he talked, his one remaining arm resting on a giant cane. Alara approached, both her parents looking at her cautiously before their gazes past onwards to the Exargas exiting the office. "You've gained your fair share of scars Alara, and achieved the first kill against the Sovereign's forces. Silas, Victoire, you should be proud of your daughter and the leader she has become. You should tell her as such," he added firmly, his stern expression cracking briefly to give Alara a quick smile. "We are proud," Victoire stated, almost desperately, and in a defensive manner.

“Good,” Xarga concluded, shutting down any attempted follow up. “Alara, you are now going to be the most watched person on this planet, with the largest drawn target imaginable. Your parents and I shall work to minimise that.” Alara’s parents looked at him with confusion. “Admirals, were you intending to flee and leave your daughter behind?” he questioned. They shook their heads, glancing around at the others with caution and confusion. “No, of course not,” Silas stated quickly. “Perfect, there is much I have to teach you and not much time. Fleet Admiral, I will require the presence of these two for at least a week if not longer. Is that alright?” Xarga questioned, looking towards Cassandra.

She folded her arms and looked instead towards Alara’s parents, giving them one final chance to leave. “That is up to you. I have others that can take the places I set aside for you. I don’t blame you if you stay or go.” Victoire looked desperately towards Alara, but found no sympathy within her. “I will be off base, for an unknown length of time. Either be here when I get back, or don’t,” Alara warned. Victoire looked at Silas and he at her, and then one after another they seemed to physically shed off their fears. They stood taller and had more firm expressions before looking to Xarga. “I am willing to learn,” Silas stated, “if you have something to teach, my old Captain.” Victoire smiled, glancing back to her daughter. “We’ll be waiting for your return.”

Alara left her parents to the undoubtably brutal revivification that Xarga would put them through, finding both Wulf and Riley waiting for her not too far away. “We’ve been told,” Wulf stated efficiently, turning and beginning to lead the way to the nearest teleportation circle. “Good. This is our chance to lay low, but also to make all the preparations we need. The Admirals will be planning in our absence, we need to be ready to provide all the information we have that can fill the holes in their strategies,” Alara stated, trying not to let her excitement show, but also deeply aware of the emotional fatigue affecting them all. A mage stepped forwards, beginning to chant as they approached the teleportation circle.

“See you soon, Rising Aces.”

Seize the Seas Tales: Grief

Silence filled the Stacked Hand as the retrieved photos were processed and analysed. No one dared to speak, no one dared to unleash the feelings they were all bottling up. The only exception was Bjorn, who was sat in the Beastly Boys quarters sobbing wildly as he mourned the boys. Marisha had gone with him, feeling almost identically to him, but she eventually returned, her face red and stained with tears. “Marisha...” Jayce said quietly to her as she entered the living quarters, the photos strewn across the main table. She shook her head, wiping her nose with her sleeve and steeling herself

as she approached the table. "I'm sorry..." he said quietly, the rest of the crew looking to her for her reaction.

Shakily Marisha picked up the photo of a crate, her mother's symbol stamped upon it. She then looked towards the blurry images of documents – transcripts of messages sent from her mother to Xerxes. "The Sovereign... gives permission," Marisha mumbled aloud, her tears resuming but for a different reason. "My mother is a Betrayer, she's the one who gave Scáthach the Guild." Marisha then turned and finally faced Jayce. "Tell them they did well," she told him. "Tell them... I'm sorry." She turned and stepped away, pausing at the doorway but not looking back. "Jayce... it wasn't your fault. I... I... I just want you to know that," she said, departing with tears dripping from her chin.

Jayce set a destination north, somewhere where they were far away from Xerxes - far away from everything – before slowly walking to his quarters. He felt hollow, his emotions unwilling to clarify how he was feeling. Jayce knew he was devastated, but he also felt rage – towards himself most of all. Bjorn had been right – they hadn't been ready, and they had died trying to prove themselves. He had killed Marisha and Bjorn's sons, even if they had managed to provide information that he knew was crucial and had destroyed Xerxes' threat to the New World before it had come to fruition. He let out a sigh as he sat down on his floor and crossed his legs, beginning his delve into the Underworld.

Jayce almost didn't recognise them as he found Ohno and Fenn waiting for him. He had been expecting the panda, the fox and the badger, but instead were two young men. "Captain," they both greeted, looking at Jayce with faint smiles and sad eyes. Jayce shook his head, his face scrunching up as an immediate memory of his farewell to Xander popped into his mind. "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry," he told them, tears filling his eyes as he looked at them both.

"Don't be," Fenn stated, floating forwards and placing a ghostly hand onto Jayce's shoulder. Ohno nodded in agreement. "It's not your fault boss... besides," Ohno stated, a grin spreading across his face. "We killed two of Xerxes' War Hounds," he declared proudly with a big grin. Jayce shook his head, looking down at the dark sand below his feet. "Don't tell us we did bad, please," Fenn told Jayce, stopping him before he could say what they all knew he needed to get out. "We made our choice. Just tell us it mattered."

Jayce looked at them weakly. "It mattered," he stated, uncertain whether he was lying or telling the truth. Fenn nodded, turning and looking up towards the pyramid at the centre of the Underworld and the portal into the unknown at its peak. "Wait," Jayce stated, drawing their attention towards him. "Where's your brother?" he asked. Fenn

and Ohno looked towards each other and then back at Jayce. They both shrugged. "When you find him, tell him we'll be waiting for him," Fenn stated, fading away into nothingness. Ohno lingered for a moment longer. "Tell Boss Bjorn... tell him thank you, and that we're sorry." He too then faded away. "Wait, come back!" Jayce called after them, the two boys vanishing into a sea of souls.

Jayce returned to the world of the living broken, immediately descending into half-cackles and bellows of sorrow and grief. Wam was alive – he was certain of it, but they had circled the ruins of the island for hours before abandoning their search. Jayce didn't know where he was, and now a cruel joke of fate had been thrown upon him. "This is what you showed me," he eventually said in a quiet whisper to the Demon in his head. "Yes. Your choice comes now," Paimon told him. "I have to tell him," Jayce said quietly.

"And will you face the consequences of what happens if you do?" Paimon questioned, thrusting back into Jayce's head a sea of futures that she had first given him. Many of them ended the same way, with he and his crew dead aboard a broken ship. Others showed him dead and alone on the floor of a giant throne room. But countless others showed him being killed by Bjorn, struck down from behind, betrayed and left for dead. "Hope will kill you," Paimon told him coldly. "Bjorn must grow beyond you, and that cannot happen during a search that will take far longer than the time you have." Jayce shook his head, looking towards the photos of the pair of them. Bjorn was his brother, his closest friend. "To save him, you must forsake him."

Bjorn sat alone in the room of Wam, Fenn and Ohno. It was a mess, as it often was, but now it wasn't something that bothered him. He hugged himself as he sat on Wam's bed. He had cried for hours, their loss combined with the loss of Magnus and Inger far greater than anything he had felt before. Marisha had sat and held him, but she had left – her mind too preoccupied with making their deaths matter to stay. But he couldn't do that. He wished he could, but he couldn't.

His foot bumped something solid, his eyes narrowing as he reached down and picked up a sizeable book. He frowned – the boys didn't read. They hadn't read, at least nothing that size. Bjorn opened it, his body flinching as he found himself staring back at himself, the three boys held under his arms as he leant over them as they posed for a photo. "For Dad, thanks for not giving us up."

Chapter 229: Together Again

Jayce sat at the edge of his ship, his feet dangling over the side as the warm sun of the Frontier Archipelago rested upon him. The warm waters were crystal clear, the ocean floor only a few metres down and covered in an expansive coral reef. The sun shimmered below him, only a few wild patches of white cloud breaking apart the expansive blue sky. It was quiet, a few members of his crew lounging on a nearby grassy island decorated with coconut trees. A few more were dotted across the main deck in swimsuits, lounging on sunbeds.

They'd taken it easy for the last few days. They'd needed to. The deaths of Ohno and Fenn, and the alluded death of Wam and Asmodeus had hit everyone. The Demons were solemn, pained by the supposed loss of their own – other than Paimon who was keeping quiet inside Jayce's head. Slowly his gaze drifted upwards from his dangling feet towards Bjorn, sat near the bow of the Stacked Hand, almost as far away as possible from him.

Jayce let out a sigh. Unsurprisingly, Bjorn had been distant, rarely joining the crew at mealtimes and unwilling to even look at Jayce. It hurt Jayce to have lost his friend, it hurt Jayce even more knowing that it genuinely was his fault, and that he was only going to make it worse going forwards. "I should talk to him," he muttered quietly. "No," returned Paimon. "He needs time, and you can't make him feel any better." Jayce doubted it: a single mention of Wam's likely survival would spring hope within Bjorn, and probably also a fury that would be directed solely at him. He let out a sigh, shaking his head and looking back out towards the empty expanse of almost flat ocean. No one would find them here.

Alara clutched her stomach as the purple lightning vanished, depositing her, Wulf and Riley onto the far rear deck of the Stacked Hand. "It's... hot?" Wulf questioned, looking around at the open ocean and bright sunlight. "We're in the Frontier Archipelago," Alara told him, the heat and humidity built into her very soul. "Is this where we will find my King?" Raim questioned aloud, through a mouth on her neck. Riley gagged and glared at Alara. "I hope so," Alara stated, stepping past the hung up Gambit and Last Card, strapped to the dips in the hull of the large ship. She pushed through a door, stepping into the living quarters.

A metal tankard clanged on the floor, bouncing before coming to a rest. "Alara?" Astris questioned, both her and Zeta dressed in similar bikinis – one black, the other teal. Alara smiled softly, Astris diving into her chest with a tight embrace. "What are you all doing here?" she questioned, pulling back from Alara and carrying her embrace onwards into Wulf and then Riley before she paused. "Where's Witchford, and Brett? And what happened to you? You look like shit."

Alara's face fell, and she presumed so did Wulf and Riley's from Astris' ghostly expression. Astris dropped hard to her knees, her arms limp by her side as the realisation hit her hard. "No..." she said almost silently, her mouth open and face quickly looking up to Alara as her eyes brimmed with tears. "No," she stated adamantly. "No," she whimpered, another repetition getting caught in her throat as Alara knelt in front of Astris and pulled her in tight. "They're gone," Alara confirmed. "Killed whilst getting my parents out."

It wasn't fully accurate, but it was true. Witchford and Brett had died for Alara's parents. "And..." Astris questioned, sniffing and wiping her eyes before putting on a brave face and meeting Alara's brown eyes with her heterochromatic obsidian and silver. "Cyr is fine. Don't worry," Alara reassured, maintaining her grip on Astris' shoulders before eventually standing up. Astris remained on the floor for a moment longer, shaking her head before letting out a sigh and standing up. Riley stepped forwards into her arms and they danced as they stood in an embrace, tilting from one foot to the other. "No one else is allowed to die, am I clear?" Astris questioned, levying a painted fingernail at the trio. Alara agreed entirely. They were all that remained of the Wolfpack.

A cat brushed Alara's leg, but it wasn't Little Witch. Immediately a sharp pain pressed outwards from in, the Demon inside her trying to break out. "No!" she growled, kicking the Demon back and hugging herself. "Alara? What's going on?" Astris questioned, looking at the other two. Wulf and Riley didn't know, their expressions as desperately confused as Astris'. "It's the Demon, he wants out!" Alara growled, partially in a voice that wasn't hers.

"Demon, she has a Demon?" Zeta questioned, Astris turning and looking at her. "Get Mai Lu!" Astris commanded, Zeta dashing off without question. "Byleth!" Alara growled, looking down at the orange cat with shining green and blue eyes standing on his hind legs. The door to the living quarters burst open, Mai Lu and Caelie both dashing inside with Falconer and Zeta. "Cease!" commanded Baal, Alara dropping to the floor in a slump as the Demon she had been suppressing immediately gave up.

When her eyes flickered back open, a large lump of clay was twisting in front of her, a small arcane circle painted on the floor around her. It sprouted black feathers and then a beak before the tips of the feathers turned golden. The Demon cawed at her before clearing his throat. "I apologise, Alara Vanathur," stated Raim, the large bird bowing to her. "It felt like you were tearing me apart from the inside out!" she growled, grabbing his legs with her hand and getting to her feet. "Alara!" came Jayce's voice, the Demon dropping from her hand to the floor.

Jayce stood almost frozen as he looked at her. He almost didn't recognise her. Her soft, almond-shaped, brown eyes were cold, harsh, and lacking the light he remembered. Her long, wavy, brown hair was a mess, tangled and uneven. She was broader, but also looked malnourished, as if she had been eating the bare minimum for a while. And her olive skin was covered with deep, scattered scars, leading all the way up from her exposed collarbone, up her neck and across her jaw before fading out around her cheeks. It looked like she had survived an explosion face first. But his eyes inevitably drifted to her metal right arm.

Similarly she stared at him, her eyes reading the glowing orange eyes on his gaunt face and the way his clothes hung off his previously broad and muscular frame. He had lost a lot of weight, and if she hadn't looked more closely she wouldn't have recognised him. "Jayce...?" she questioned cautiously. He stepped forwards and she mirrored him before diving into his chest and burying her face in his shirt. "You look like crap!" she told him. "What happened to you?"

She felt his hand hover over her scars, unwilling to touch her for fear of hurting her. She immediately pressed her cheek into his hand, feeling the rough touch of his calloused hand that felt like the gentlest touch she had felt in a long time. "It's a long story..." he told her, pulling back and looking at the other three guests who had come with her. His eyes landed on the ritual circle. "How did you come to have a Demon?" he asked her.

"I killed Barca Khalid."

The room froze. Jayce's eyes widening as he locked his gaze upon her, all of the Rising Aces turning and looking at the pair of them with admiration and distinctive horror. "Oh crap," Astris stated first, her and Jayce locking eyes. "Right," Jayce said, more gently. "Table any thoughts. Make sure everyone knows," he commanded. He then stepped forwards towards the ritual circle, Alara's hand trailing after him. "I need Paimon out of me," Jayce told Falconer. He immediately began to shape a vessel for her. "Why? A Demon only makes you stronger," Mai Lu questioned.

The real answer would have sounded insane. "You Demons have a lot to catch up upon." He turned and looked at Alara. "As do we," he stated with a warm smile. "Ugh," Mai Lu stated, shaking her head. "Just get used to it." Jayce scoffed, the ritual circle glowing and the clay taking the shaped of a crowned bear as Paimon evacuated his body. He felt hollow without the Demon he had grown accustomed to, but equally it felt good to have his own body again. He then stepped back towards Alara, sweeping a hand under her legs and lifting her up with a yelp and simple ease. She hugged his neck as he turned and looked at his and her crewmates. "Don't disturb us," he said with a dumb grin.

Many hours later, Jayce found himself gently running his hand up her thigh, her breath warm on his neck and body laying across his. She felt hot, but the metal arm of hers was icy cold. He still wasn't used to it, and she could tell. There was no hiding it from her, in the same way she touched him with a gentleness that was unusual and felt more like she was worried he would break under her rough touch. They lay together, sweaty and tired, in the darkness of his quarters and the soft mess of his bed.

They'd said a lot, but nothing they needed to say, and finally they both knew the time had come to ask. "My parents hate you," Alara said first, guiding the conversation her way. He faltered, frowned and then looked at with absolute confusion. "What did you tell them?" he questioned in disbelief. "I know they say your in-laws are always..." She pinched him and he shut up. Alara shook her head. "They hate your family."

"Well that's rude. I mean I understand Damian but--"

"Jayce! Serious time, please." He could feel from the way she was touching him, the gentle tension across her muscular back and the firm squeeze she was craving, that she was nervous – afraid. "Sorry," he said earnestly, kissing her forehead and paying the utmost attention to her. "What happened?" he asked. Alara remained silent, trying to process her emotions and her feelings as she fished into a well of memories she would have preferred to leave alone. "We set off with a goal of eliminating three weapons platforms that we called the Brunxchume Sentries..." she began.

He held her as she cried softly, slowly working through the last year of her life. It took Alara several minutes to work through the deaths of her closest friends – deaths that even Jayce felt impacted by. He stroked her hair and cradled her until she was ready to continue, the sadness fading into a fiery rage. "I told Raim to abandon Khalid, offering myself to him. It was the only way I saw a chance to defeat him, but..."

"It shouldn't have worked like that," Jayce told her. "For a Demon to break its pact like that should have had consequences. It's why we had to use a ritual to release Raim from you and Paimon from me." Alara nodded - she had thought as much herself. "I think it's to do with how Raim first joined with Khalid. They were forced together by the Sovereign, it wasn't really their choice." Jayce frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Scáthach revived him. She brought him back from the dead – that's why he was a Betrayer, because she literally held his life in her hands." Jayce pondered for a moment. "She has a Demon herself. Its name is Astaroth," Alara interrupted. "How do you-" he began, only to set it aside. "That's what we thought too, but we hadn't locked down a name. The Demons are probably talking about it right now. So you killed Khalid, took his Demon, then what?"

"I saw my parents. But they were... shocked to see me like this. My mother had seen me before but..." Alara faded away, tucking into herself defensively as her hands rose up to her scars. Jayce unfurled her, entwining himself with her and gently lifting her up so her face was directly next to his. He guided her hands to his own scars, the ones she had once expressed great concern over. "Now we both match," he told her with a genuine and gentle smile. She looked away, not quite willing to accept his words, but not deaf to them either. Cautiously she guided her human hand towards her metal prosthetic, unclipping it with a grunt and slowly detaching the mount.

Almost challengingly, she watched his expression as he looked at her stump – cautiously letting her guide his fingers towards the raw-looking mess of grizzly flesh. A single touch send a storm of pain flashing through Alara's body, his hand quickly retreating as he saw her discomfort. "I've never heard you complain about wanting to lose weight but even I have to say that's drastic," he joked. She bit the inside of her lip to force a serious glare his way. "Sorry," he quickly added. "I'm sure you've already had the best medics look at it..." She shook her head. "Not the best. Will she be able to help?" Alara asked somewhat hopefully. "Doc regrew my eye, but that took a while – and arm will be... a while." "That's not a no. I'll pay her a visit in the morning," Alara said softly. "Morning? It's only mid-afternoon," Jayce said in confusion. She nestled her head into his neck. "Oh, we're not leaving until then."

"Fine by me." He held her in silence for a few minutes before he inevitably felt the need to speak. "So your parents don't like me?" he questioned with mild curiosity. "Not exactly... more that they don't like your parents, and, by default, you. They were even a bit hesitant towards Old Dog Xarga." Jayce raised an eyebrow. "You saw him? Bjorn and the others said he was in the Old World but I didn't get a chance to see him. Is he..."

Alara sat up, repositioning herself to sit in front of him and using her one arm to wrap his arms across her with the giant duvet wrapped around them both. "He was... ill. He looked half-dead. I think your gramps is slowly dying, but he's still hanging on strong." Jayce looked out towards the enchanted windows, the glass tinted to darken the room from the bright sun beyond. Alara's hand caressed his chin and cheek. "I'm sorry," she said gently. He placed his temple to hers and shut his eyes. "So why do they hate my parents?"

"Well... beyond the – you know – long mission across the world and missing my life because of it, they came back to find your mother as Fleet Admiral and that their sacrifice had been arguably... pointless. You could imagine why they're not... overjoyed by everything. But it seemed more to do with me than anything. I think

they imagined someone... softer. I think they hoped I wouldn't have followed them into the military, but I don't know. It's messy and your family are an easy target."

"Fair enough... I guess," he said somewhat glumly. Alara rolled her eyes. "Don't take it so personally, I doubt you were ever going to be my parents' first choice – even if they had been around, Pirate Lord Exarga." He squeezed her and she pinched him back. "Criminal," she added, sticking her tongue out. "I'm sure you've done worse," he returned, his face immediately falling as he saw her expression change into one of guilt and hurt. "I didn't mean that," he quickly added. She shook her head, clenching her jaw and fist before letting out an exhale and letting it go. "So... given how rough I look – what in the abyss happened to you?"

"After we rescued you–"

"Rescued is a bit of an exaggeration," she inserted. It was his turn to roll his eyes. "Hardly. Anyway, after we intervened against the Sovereign, Scáthach decided to punish us. She sent the Betrayers after the Pirate Lords. We got Kaina, who – as it turns out – is a Dragon." Alara frowned, looking at him with confusion. "A Dragon? Like the ones that belong to Arthuria, Morgana and Ordo?" she inquired. Jayce twitched at Morgana's name and Alara looked at him with passing suspicion before moving beyond it. "Yeah," he answered. "When a Dragon becomes... strong enough, advanced enough – I don't really know – they evolve. She could transform into the form of a humanoid, but still retain some of her abilities. When she transformed into her Dragon form... she was one of the most fearsome creatures I've ever seen. Absolutely colossal, and she forced us to teleport away, but the spell was interrupted and we were scattered across the world. I ended up in the Scourge, the others all over the place."

One by one he filled her in on the adventures of his crew, a variety of expressions and emotions crossing Alara's face as she listened to the story. "And... you?" she finally asked once he had finished. "I met someone... a Lich." She attempted to cross her arms, but struggled with only one. "Like... a Necromancer?" she asked. "Yeah, exactly that. She was older than the Dungeons. In a land without mana, she had managed to create an army of skeletons feeding solely upon hers. It's not an understatement to say that she could easily take on the Sovereign. I stayed with her for a few months whilst I trained and figured out a plan."

"And?"

"And she was nice. It took time to get used to being in the company of a skeleton, but she wanted to learn more about me and us and everything, and she had lots of stories to tell. She told me about the world before the apocalypse – and the creatures that invaded the world. Eventually I headed south, to an ancient forge that is still making enchanted weapons now. I found a weapon with the means to teleport and headed north, reuniting with the others."

"Then we were threatened by the Sovereign not to help you," he stated. Alara let out a sigh. "Just you?" she asked cautiously, her feet restless as she waited for an answer. "No, the whole Republic high command. We just happened to be there." "Good, it's in everyone's interest she doesn't know about us." Jayce smiled, nodding in agreement. "Is that everything?" she asked curiously. He shook his head. "Her threats spooked Morgana, so we had to track her down and stop her from wiping out the world."

"Right..."

"And then we received a threat from Xerxes. He had killed Bjorn's father and had blown up an island."

"Okay... what?"

"So we set off to stop him. Marisha had found out that the Guild had been sending off shipments of explosives somewhere, which turned out to be to Xerxes. We found his base and Wam, Ohno and Fenn went to investigate... They found out that the Sovereign has another Betrayer within the Guild: the Serpent." "Marisha's mother?" Alara questioned in alarm. "What else did you find out?" "Xerxes had built an airship that could teleport, one loaded with enough explosives to wipe the Capital off the map. The boys blew it up, but they didn't make it out."

"Oh, Jayce, I'm sorry," she said with genuine sympathy. He shook his head. "It's Bjorn that your words should go to. They were like his sons... they were his sons. He had argued they weren't ready, but I let them go... it's my fault they're gone." Alara shook her head profusely, turning to face him directly. "Don't ever believe that. You can and should always take responsibility, but the blame is on those that forced you in that position to begin with. It's Xerxes' fault, no one else's. The same way it was the Church for Xander... and Caelie."

Jayce didn't agree, but he could understand where she was coming from. The amount of lives that had lived and died for her were likely uncountable, to accept blame for them all would have destroyed Alara. "Well, afterwards we came here... and so did you," he concluded. She smiled gently at him, turning back around and letting him hold her again. "One hell of a shit year," she stated. He scoffed. "Understatement of the century."

Astris, Wulf and Riley had decided it was best to leave their esteemed Captain and Commodore to their reconciliation, and, by the time they noticed Alara stealthily sneak out of Jayce's quarters in search of food, night had fallen and they were all very drunk. "Shhh!" Alara hushed, holding her finger to her lips as she hurried past her waving friends all lounging on deck chairs in the dark with various empty bottles and glasses. She peered up through the window into the living quarters, Jayce's borrowed shirt not quite long enough as she stood on tip-toes. Immediately two sets of giggling hands covered Wulf's eyes as Astris and Riley defended Alara's modesty.

Marisha let out a sigh as she picked up the tray she had covered and set aside, opening the door and presenting it to a blushing Alara. "I hope to see you both a bit more sociable tomorrow," Marisha told her, handing her the food. Alara smiled appreciatively, holding the tray with both hands. Marisha's eye glanced to the prosthetic. "Doc said she'll see both you and Riley tomorrow for a check-up. That one hasn't been in a fit state for any examination since she arrived," Marisha levied, pointing at Riley who burst in cackling laughter along with the other two. "Thank you," Alara whispered. Marisha nodded, gently closing the door. "Sleep well," she said, just as it shut.

"Well?" Bjorn questioned, as Marisha stepped back into the living quarters. "Nothing," she answered, joining him on the sofa and picking up her wine. "But it's probably the happiest they've both been in quite some time." For a moment Marisha felt Bjorn tense – as if he was going to say something, and as if what she had said had upset him – but it soon dispersed. "Good... I'm glad," he said defeatedly. Marisha turned and looked up at her partner. "I'm as upset as you are--"

"Are you?" he snapped. "You seem to have forgiven him rather easily." Marisha paused deliberately, letting her emotions focus and the impact of Bjorn's words resonate with him. "I will remind you," she said with a steel tone, "I am grieving my boys too, and you are not angry with me." She remained tucked into him and slowly she felt his tension fade away. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "Good. That anger... you can place it on Jayce, fine, that's your choice, but Wam, Fenn... Ohno... they asked for the mission, and it's because of them that the Republic isn't in flames. You can't let their choice eat you in a way that punishes everyone whose fault it wasn't. It was Xerxes' bombs, and you know better than anyone that those boys... they blew up that island, because of course they would."

"If you can't forgive Jayce, then you should leave. No one would blame you. I would understand completely. I will always love you, and if you need some space then that's fine. But please don't take it out on our friends, on me, on yourself. It's not fair when the person to blame is the person who dragged those boys into this conflict in the first place, the person you pleaded not to," she stated through quiet tears and deep worry. Bjorn slowly stood up, leaving her behind as he walked towards the door. "Bjorn!" she called after him. He shook his head and stepped through the door, leaving her alone.

Seize the Seas Tales: Kin of the same Kind

The Demons all looked at each other, Baal and Belial both through Mai Lu and Caelie's bodies, Paimon, Raim and Byleth in their golem forms. "And..." Raim said nervously. "Asmodeus is for certain... gone?" he asked, looking towards Baal. Baal stroked his pale chin, the white face firm against the red of his dark crimson body. His glowing pink and red eyes bore into the small crow with melted gold on the tips of his wings;

similarly Raim's brown eyes glowed back at his King before they were swiftly averted. "It is believed," Baal confirmed.

Paimon tried not to react, her small bear form sitting quietly as she had listened to the stories of her brethren. King Baal was wise and cunning, and his words did not provide confirmation, but greatly hinted that he knew what she was hiding. "And we know at least that Astaroth is in the Sovereign's clutches, what of the others? Bune? Morax? Avnus? Seir?" Raim questioned. The other Demons all shook their heads. "We do know that Pursan is with a human called Kitty Deliver, but the rest are all unknown," Belial stated, the gold ichor dripping from his crescent eyes fading into the air as it fell from his mask-like face. "So what is our next move, my Lord?" Raim questioned, looking at Baal.

"There isn't one. We're safe here, and here is our best chance of finding the others. Even if it does mean serving the mortals on their journey," the Demon said, almost shamefully. Raim let out a sigh, looking at his companions in their miniature form. "At least in this form we have our sanity and some of our abilities. Are the mortals at least rightfully fearful of us?" Raim questioned to the group.

Astris and Riley leant on their wrists, with a drink each in their other hands, watching the group of Demons with curiosity and bemusement. "It reminds me of my teddy tea parties," Astris stated with a big smile. "Don't you think?" "I had neither teddies, tea, nor parties, rich girl, but I do remember watching a raccoon and a monkey fight over a bagel once. I'd say this is pretty similar."

"So cute."

"Vicious fuckers. The bagel was good though."

Chapter 230: Betrayer of the Rising Aces

"You can go," Yuthura told Jayce and Wulf firmly, the pair of them hovering in the medical room doorway as both Riley and Alara sat nervously on a bed. "Although I suppose I do have some vaccinations you both could use," she stated, hobbling towards a cupboard. Both of them fled like the wind. "Boys," Yuthura scowled. "Your men don't need to hold your hand through every checkup." Alara rolled her eyes whilst Riley blushed heavily. Alara turned and glanced at her. Riley immediately held up both her hands and shook them. "No, no, not at all." Alara squinted at her, only to yelp as she felt a sharp pinch in her right shoulder.

"What was that?" she questioned, watching as Yuthura jabbed a similar and very long needle into Riley's stump. "Let's call it a regenerative cocktail," Yuthura stated, stepping back and cautiously observing them. Riley raised an eyebrow. "My legs are going to grow back?" she questioned. The old lady scoffed, shaking her head. "Not immediately. It'll stimulate cell replication and start to repair you but that means those building blocks have to come from somewhere. So..."

Alara doubled over, clutching her stump and thinly holding back a scream as she felt bits of her body melt away. Riley didn't hold it back, her scream agonising as her nails dug into the bed they were sat on and the ends of her stumps bubbled and swelled. The pain lasted only seconds, but it was agonising, and when it faded both Alara and Riley stared at each other before both looking back at Yuthura with anger. "It didn't work!" Riley protested, her legs slightly longer but only by a couple of centimetres, the same true of Alara's arm. "No," Yuthura corrected, prodding Riley's stumps with a long metal rod. Riley didn't react. Yuthura then reached to do the same to Alara's stump but Alara stopped her, afraid of the inevitable pain. "Trust me, some people call me a Doctor." She prodded the stump and there was no pain.

"I don't understand, what did you do?" Alara questioned, looking at Yuthura with shock and joy. "I've regenerated the ends of your stumps. It'll make any prosthetics you use easier to graft, and when the time is right – it will make it easier to attach your replacements as the flesh will be more uniform. Tempest will sort out your limbs," Yuthura stated, looking at the samples she had taken from the pair of them. "I would prefer to not have to regrow your joints, so I'll need to administer another dose in a few months once you've replaced what was taken, and probably another few across the next year or two. You'll get your limbs back in time, don't worry." Alara wasn't worried, it was the best news she had had in a while. "Thanks, Doc," she stated, standing up and offering her back to Riley. "Yeah, thanks, gran," Riley stated, getting slung onto Alara's back like a backpack.

"Better?" Jayce questioned, as Alara and Riley returned to the main deck. "Most definitely," Riley answered, standing on her tiptoes – a pair of stands dropping to create a pair of heels. The heels looked awfully sharp, and Jayce got the feeling they were for more than aesthetic. The dark black metal had countless glowing blue lines, glyphs and runes. Riley crouched and then jumped, her jump easily landing her on the crow's nest with a faint trail of blue electricity. "I can feel the wood under my feet!" she yelled down, before dropping with the gentlest touch to the floor.

Jayce glanced towards Alara. Her arm was golden, with distinctive muscles and joints. It too had glowing lines, runes and glyphs, but hers were a fearsome red. Alara reached towards her metal hand and pulled it back, the wrist opening up – the inside swirling with orange energy that swiftly roared before unleashing a bolt of energy out towards the ocean. It sailed far and then detonated with a horrifically large blast. She closed the joint. "I'm happy with mine," she said with a menacing grin. "Uh, good," Jayce returned. "No plans for the day. Marisha's running a bar. Fruit and snacks are available and we'll grill some meat for lunch." Alara's stomach rumbled, her body desperate to replenish itself. "Come on, let's find you some food," he stated, standing up and taking her hand.

It felt nice to have guests on the ship once again, and, although there were periodic discussions about the inevitable conflict ahead of them, both the Wolfpack and the Rising Aces did their utmost best to just enjoy the peace. Between an abundance of drinks, consistent good food provided by Marisha, the hot sun during the day and the warm baths during the night, luxury was enjoyed by all. But they all knew it couldn't last.

"We should start to come up with plans for our next move," Jayce stated, summoning all crew of the Stacked Hand and their guests to the main deck. It had been a little over two weeks since Alara had joined them, and she sat with her head in Astris's lap, the others in similar positions across the deck. "And what would you propose?" Wulf questioned, a pair of sunglasses on his wolven head. "Are we truly thinking of taking on the Sovereign?"

Unease spread throughout the entire group. It had all been on their minds but the more they thought about it, the more it became both a task that felt increasingly more dangerous, and also more pressing. "Yes," Jayce answered. "No," inserted Bjorn. All heads turned his way as he stood up and approached Jayce. "Our first priority is Xerxes," Bjorn stated firmly, towering over Jayce. Jayce faltered before shaking his head. "I'm sorry--"

A heavy backhand sent Jayce tumbling across the ground. "Bjorn!" yelled Astris, darting between him and Jayce as he formed a fist. "Those boys are dead because of

him! So is Magnus!" Bjorn yelled. "Xerxes must die!" Jayce stood up, wiping his face and looking up at Bjorn. "A promise was made to help the people of Arcastalum! Cannibals! Vampires!" Jayce returned. "Remember?" Bjorn grit his teeth before he turned away. "Bjorn! Xerxes will pay, I promise you--"

"You promise me, do you? Just like you said Wam, Ohno and Fenn would be fine? That they could handle a mission like that?" he snarled. Jayce looked away, uncertain of how to answer. Alara stood up and approached his side, stepping next to Jayce. "Bjorn--" she attempted, physically seeing Jayce struggling to come up with a way to respond. Bjorn roared at her. "The Marines have no say here! You have no right to speak when it's your failure to handle your own problems that led to this! When it was your desperation to make the world cater to your needs, rather than bring about order and stability and fix the damage that your people did to mine! You sacrificed my family and so many others for yours!"

Alara flinched, her body going cold and face falling as his words tore through her. "Bjorn!" Marisha inserted, spreading her arms wide in front of him to force him to look at her. He faltered, seeing the pain across the faces of his crew and the damage his words had inflicted. Alara buried her face in Jayce's chest, his arms wrapping around her. He shook his head and began to step away, heading for the hold, but he faltered, his eyes widening as he saw a jagged piece of flaming metal cut a glowing line through the air. "No..." he muttered, the line splitting apart and a trio of figures walking through the portal.

"Gods!" Scáthach stated. "I should have brought my sunnies!" Tanare stood next to her, the large tiger therian uneasy with Sétanta on Scáthach's other side. "Maybe a bikini too," she added, looking across the summer wear decorating the crew. Scáthach's glowing brown and purple eyes locked straight onto Jayce and Alara, her eyes widening and a grin spreading across her face. "So it's true," she stated with distinct elation. Jayce released Alara and stepped in front of her, Sola and Luna flicking out into blades as the rest of the crew summoned their own arms.

Scáthach stepped forwards, standing directly in front of Bjorn and looking up at him. "You're in my way," she said softly. "Will you stop me from going to them?" she asked, her face curious. Jayce wanted to rush forwards but he knew Scáthach was after Alara. They all knew she was. But Bjorn stepped aside, looking down at the edge of the ship. Jayce felt his heart twist, like a dagger had been plunged into it. Scáthach patted Bjorn on his arm. "Thank you."

The Sovereign then stepped forwards alone, both Tanare and Sétanta holding back, as if waiting for something. No one other than Scáthach moved, slowly and deliberately she approached the large group – a distinct caution to her face that previously she

hadn't carried. Astris moved first, pointing her pistols point-blank at Scáthach and stepping in front of Jayce and Alara. "Let me make this clear, to all of you, but you especially, little Vampire, I am here to talk. But make me feel that isn't possible and I will exterminate members of this group until only those that are willing to talk remain."

Astris' pistols shook slightly, eventually lowering in defeat. "Good. Marisha, could you whip up a cocktail for me, please? Something like that blue one Zeta has," Scáthach requested. Marisha didn't move. "Tanare." Tanare looked at Bjorn, still stood in silent defeat with his gaze to the edge of the ship. Marisha darted forwards to prepare the drink. Scáthach then walked past Ordo and Thalia unopposed, stopping in front of Wulf and extending a hand. "It's a little bright." Shakily he handed her his sunglasses, but they were too big for her so they sat awkwardly, somewhat stupidly, on her face.

Scáthach then circled around towards Jayce and Alara, sitting down on a sunbed next to Arthuria. "Where's your sister?" Scáthach questioned, maintaining her gaze on Alara and Jayce. "Not here," Arthuria growled. Scáthach sighed. "A shame. Oh well." Marisha returned with the cocktail, handing it to Scáthach in a glass. "Here you go," Scáthach stated, handing it to Arthuria. "Drink up," she said with a sinister grin. Arthuria looked up at Marisha, Marisha giving the faintest of headshakes. "Drink!" commanded Scáthach quietly but firmly.

Slowly Arthuria put the drink to her lips, taking a heavy gulp. Arthuria then presented the drink, only to find Scáthach sipping a drink she had stolen from Caelie. "Finish it," Scáthach commanded, the warning clear. Arthuria lifted the glass back to her lips and Marisha lunged forwards, slapping it aside. "Stop playing with us!" she cried, the glass shattering on the floor. Scáthach stood up, drink still in hand and loudly slurping the colourful straw within it. Scáthach's eyes were cold and dull, and locked hatefully on Marisha. She took a step forwards and Marisha took a step backwards. Scáthach faltered, grinned and then leaped forwards, Marisha tumbling backwards to the floor in fear.

Bjorn turned back towards his friends, crew and wife, Tanare's warning hand resting gently on his shoulder. "Don't," he said quietly. "Please don't." Scáthach stepped over Marisha, standing in front of Jayce and Alara. "You killed my Betrayer, you know what that means," she said excitedly. "I need a replacement." Alara's hand found Jayce's and Scáthach's face softened slightly. "Cute, and disappointing. Because it means that someone," she said loudly and looking in Tanare's direction, "lied to me!"

Tanare met Scáthach's gaze, his expression firm. He spread his arms wide, as if waiting for a killing blow. But it didn't come. She tutted and returned her gaze to

Alara. "I told you that if you succeeded I would come for you. And you succeeded, proving yourself better than that washed up General. But..." her gaze turned towards Jayce. "There is much more that we can do together." Alara's heart stopped. "Will you obey me?" Scáthach questioned to Jayce. "What will it take?"

"I will not betray my people," Jayce stated firmly. Scáthach chuckled, finishing her drink and handing it to Ordo. "Then I will make you kill her, or I will kill everyone else on this ship other than you two. And then I will take you both. Your choice, lover boy? Come with me and serve me dutifully, or I will kill her. That's your choice to make." Jayce faltered, Alara's grip on his arm tightening. "My patience is running out."

"If I go with you then you and your Betrayers will not harm anyone on this ship, deal?" Jayce stated. He felt his crew want to act, to speak, to stop him, but he stopped them with a single movement. He stepped away from Alara. Scáthach nodded. "Acceptable. You know what happens if you break your end?" Jayce nodded. Scáthach then turned, summoning a flame axe out of thin air and slashing another line. It widened into a burning portal and she stepped through. "Jayce!" Alara cried, stepping forwards to stop him, only for Ordo and Astris to stop her. "No!" He turned as he stood in front of the portal, looking at Bjorn who stared at him in horror. "I am sorry, my friend." He then looked at his crew and simply smiled before turning and stepping through. The two other Betrayers followed and the portal closed.

"No!" Alara cried, dropping to her knees and beginning to sob. One by one the others fell back in defeat. "How the hell did she find us?" Riley questioned, shaking her head as she paced back and forth. Several eyes glanced towards Bjorn. "You didn't?" Marisha questioned, desperately approaching Bjorn as he remained looking out towards the water. He shook his head, but the fact that she had even asked hurt more than he could ever put into words. "I... didn't."

"What do we do?" questioned Zeta. "We have to go after him right?" No one answered. "Even if we do... what can we do?" Yuthura questioned. "Jayce will be counting on us to do something," Falconer stated, stepping up. Astris nodded, standing up from her kneeling position next to Alara. "Falconer is right, this is Jayce after all. He will have a plan. His last words to us was to go after Strigon and Armin. Alara has proven that the Betrayers can be beaten, so that is where we should go next. Jayce will find his way back to us... he has to!" she declared. The others nodded, looking from Bjorn's broken form to her. "Looks like you're in charge, Cap'," Ordo stated, placing a hand on Astris's shoulder.

Astris turned towards Arthuria. "I work better with you alongside me," she offered, presenting a hand. Arthuria took it. "Jayce will come back!" she agreed. "Trust in the

Captain!" she stated, turning to the others. Astris' eyes fell on the defeated and sobbing Alara. "He will be fine," she said gently, crouching in front of her. "He's survived worse." Alara looked at Astris, the smile of reassurance genuine. She believed in Jayce. "Now, the Sovereign made her threat clear. She can't do anything if Alara isn't available as leverage. So that means we need to get her to the safest place possible," Astris stated.

"All of us were here and we still couldn't do anything," Mai Lu stated. Astris nodded. "True, but we were at a bit of a disadvantage. Tempest, take us to Final Bastion. We're sending the Marines home to the Admirals. They'll be able to hide her somewhere safe." The djinn nodded and began to float away to make his preparations. Alara didn't feel certain. If the Sovereign had found her on the Stacked Hand then it was highly unlikely that she wouldn't be able to find her elsewhere. "I need that brave face, Commodore," Astris stated, offering a hand to help Alara up. Alara wiped her eyes and took it, standing up and looking down at her friend. "Jayce will want you to make preparations for a war against the Sovereign. Find allies, anyone and everyone who you can, and wait for us to give the signal. I don't know when it will be or what it will look like, but Jayce will have a solution. I know it."

Those words repeated over and over in Alara's head as she sat in front of the Admirals of the Old World, telling them exactly what had happened. "He... went willingly?" questioned Cassandra, sat in disbelief with all eyes upon her. Alara nodded. "The Sovereign threatened my life, the deal was for my safety, but I doubt that it is permanent. One way or another Scáthach has secured loyalty from her Betrayers. She will try to do the same with Jayce," Alara said quietly, rubbing her palms with her thumbs as she looked down at her lap.

Firm footsteps approached her from behind, a hand resting gently on her shoulder. Alara turned and glanced up at the Old Dog. Xarga gave her a big grin of reassurance. "The Pirate Lord's crew are correct, he is his father's son. Jayce will have a plan, but that means that we all have a part to play. The Sovereign will want vengeance for her fallen Betrayer, even with her hand in it. And she'll want our Alara too. Jayce was first, she'll come for you next."

The Admirals all looked at the old man with respect, nodding in agreement with his words. "In which case, now is no better time," stated Admiral Yashiro, standing up and approaching Alara. "Commodore Vanathur, for your actions in the rescue of Admirals Vanathur and Vanathur, as well as your accomplishment in defeating Betrayer Barca Khalid, we wish to present this commendation to you." Yashiro presented a golden medal of a fortress with a blue ribbon. Alara looked at it, glancing from the hollow commendation to the others in the room before she shook her head.

"I don't want it, I don't care for it. I just want Jayce back..." she said, tears falling from her face as she stood up and stepped away.

Footsteps followed her, a cautious hand grasping her shoulder. "It's okay, but now is not the time. You're a Marine," said her mother, but Alara knocked the hand off her shoulder and stepped hurriedly into Cassandra's embrace. Cassandra met Victoire's stunned gaze, giving the softest shake of her head as she held her daughter. Cassandra rocked her gently as she hugged Alara, brushing her hair. "You're safe," Cassandra reassured in a whisper. "I won't let her touch you."

"Commodore Vanathur is grounded until further notice. She is not to leave my side and will aid me in negotiations with Brunxchume's Fleet Admiral. The crew of Pirate Lord Exarga will be endeavouring to ensure that he returns to them – we have to trust in Jayce and his crew that they will sort this. In the meantime, we are to prepare for an outright conflict with the Sovereign," Fleet Admiral Exarga declared. Alara pulled away and looked at her. Cassandra gave Alara a reassuring smile. "Better than anyone, you know we can only trust that he'll find an answer."

"But that doesn't mean we can't help," Alara stated, wiping her eyes and straightening up. "Before he left, Jayce gave me information. The Serpent is a Betrayer. She handed the Guild to Scáthach. Marisha of the Rising Aces has gone to intervene, and is working on depowering the Guild." Expressions of surprise and intrigue spread across the room. "After we speak to Fleet Admiral Malik, we should pay the Syndicate a visit," Alara told Cassandra. Fleet Admiral Exarga nodded in agreement. "Then those are our first moves."

Seize the Seas Tales: The Sovereign

Jayce couldn't help but stare at the enormity of Scáthach's throne room. The ceiling was at least twenty metres in height and painted with beautiful artwork of countless battles waged by warriors dressed in black armour against therians, mages, and soldiers in blue and gold. The colossal walls had ginormous paintings displaying people Jayce didn't recognise and scenes of the ocean and islands. The room was bright, the floor stone and shiny, and a giant crystal chandelier hung in the centre. Pillars lined a long purple rug leading up towards an elevated platform where a colossal gold and white throne with purple cushions sat. The platform had a long set of stairs leading up to it, putting Scáthach's throne well above Jayce's head.

It was just the two of them. Tanare and Sétanta had departed with a simple gesture and no other Betrayers had joined. "Come," Scáthach stated, walking up the stairs to her throne and gesturing for Jayce to follow. Hesitantly he did so, stopping at the top of the stairs as she sat down on her throne. "Do I kneel?" he goaded. She smiled, brushing her dark orange hair behind her pierced ear. "I would be flattered if you did,

but you've been wondering how to kill me since you've arrived, so I doubt it would be sincere."

"Why am I still breathing? Why take me prisoner rather than wipe us out?" he questioned. She crossed her legs and leant forwards. "It would be boring to kill you and your friends. I think you hold the greatest potential to be my rival... my replacement..." she stated. Jayce frowned, a shimmering golden light falling down upon her head. A simple golden crown then appeared. She smiled, taking it off and showing it to Jayce before physically handing it to him. The inside was marked with countless runes and a word: 'Sovereign'. The metal then faded away, reappearing on Scáthach's head. "It's enchanted," she clarified. "It took a lot to find the right craftsman but I think it made it worthwhile."

"This crown will only present itself to the strongest. To the Sovereign of this world. And when I am killed, as all villains are, my replacement will receive it. That could be you."

"Why? To what end?" Jayce questioned. Scáthach smiled, spinning the crown on her fingers. "Because, for once it gives the world a reason to fight together again. I've seen so much pointless death, so many wasteful wars due to kings so far removed from their battlefields, that I wanted to create something that mattered. Every time a Sovereign falls, and their replacement is selected, a new generation of Pirates and miscreants will set forwards out onto the seas to seize the title for themselves. They will seek out a chance to seize the seas for themselves. An endless battle and endless adventure for freedom – one that doesn't require nations to wage pointless wars."

"But won't nations just seek the crown for themselves?" Jayce questioned. Scáthach shrugged. "Not my problem at that point. I'll be dead, killed by someone stronger. If a nation can rise to deal with that person then so be it." Jayce shook his head. "You don't need to agree, or understand, that's not the point. Strive to outdo me, find a way to betray and succeed me, and this crown will be yours. The world will be yours. Thoughts, Jayce?"

She looked at him for a reaction, but instead he turned and began to walk away. "Disappointing," she called after him, appearing in front of him in the blink of an eye. "That was your one chance to woo me, to make me one of your many allies," she warned. "Instead I'll treat you like any other of my Betrayers. You've upset me and now there is a consequence. Pick one of your crew, it doesn't matter who. Kill them for me."

"I'll die before I harm any of my crew," Jayce stated. Scáthach raised an eyebrow, shaking her head. Jayce flicked out Sola into a long knife, immediately pressing his own blade to his neck. Scáthach lunged forwards, grabbing the blade with her fingers

and yanking Sola away. A thin line of blood sat on Jayce's throat, his warning clear. "I respect your resolve, annoying but commendable. You're going to have to pick an ally, someone you care about. Or else it will be Alara. So who are you going to pick? One of your parents? Your brother? Who is someone that you idolise?"

Jayce turned away, shaking his head. He couldn't. A forceful hand turned him back to face Scáthach. "Don't make me, please," he begged. She smiled, a smile of pity. "Your father?" she suggested, looking into his eyes. "Your mother?" "Xarga," Jayce said in defeat. "My grandfather." Scáthach raised an eyebrow. "Please don't make me, he's... my hero." She nodded, stepping back. "You have until sunset," she told him. "If night falls and he's not dead then Alara will be."

Chapter 231: Sisters

Morgana struggled to find a spot that was comfortable enough to sit on as she tested various spots across the deck of the ship called the Reliable. The snow and ice was fine, Bjorn would have killed the crew for not sweeping it away and keeping the deck clear, but everything felt either rotten or rusted and held together by little more than hopes and dreams. She could sense Soteria felt the same way from the Dragon's obvious frustration, but at the very least they had found Wicke, Morgause and the others.

Wicke returned back to the main deck with a cautious expression on her face as she looked at Morgana. "So... Jayce said you're here to help us with the Dungeon, but he wasn't willing to say why. So, no offence Morgana, why you? And where the hell did this... Dragon... come from?" Wicke questioned, glancing from Morgana to Morgause. "It's a punishment," Morgana stated firmly and clearly. There was no point hiding anything, it would likely come out eventually anyway. "Right..." Wicke said, somewhat dejectedly. "Okay, fair enough. Figures... Well you've been here longer than we have, have you seen anything worth mentioning? And you know we're going inside that Dungeon for at least a few weeks?"

Morgana nodded. "The outpost surrounding it is pretty well-maintained and secured, for so far north. Quite a few ships as well. But it's mostly open air, easy enough to drop into from above without much difficulty. Do you have food supplies? Healing potions?" Morgana returned. Cinderlee unfurled her hunched back, opening up the cloak wrapped around her to reveal an array of vials of various colours. "We have food, not enough for a Dragon, but at least enough for us, and you," Wicke stated.

Morgana glanced over to her Dragon. "Go hunt, fill your stomach. There should be magic stones to crunch on inside, but they'll probably be small for a while so make sure you're full," she warned to Soteria. The Dragon let out a grumble, raising several eyebrows from Wicke and Damian's crew. "Did that Dragon mutter something?" Damian questioned in distinct confusion and growing awe. "She does speak, but not often to strangers," Morgana warned. Damian's eyes lit up like a child being offered sweets.

"Focus Damian," Wicke stated, snapping her fingers as Soteria took off into the cold air. "Magic stones shouldn't be an issue," Wicke stated, creating a sizeable purple stone in her palm. "Huh?" Morgana uttered. "Oh yeah, we learnt how to make them in the Dungeon. I'll show you in a moment. Can you get us inside? We're trying to keep a low profile after last time." Morgana smiled. "Not a problem."

Wicke scratched her head as Morgana revealed the plan, eventually walking away below deck. Somewhat unsubtly, the rest of the deck then began to clear, other than Damian, who was too foolish to notice what the rest of his group were doing, and Morgause. "So..." he stated. "You two haven't seen each other in... a long time, right?" Morgause glared at him and he raised his hands in defence. "Just a question."

"Damian," Morgana stated.

"Yes?" he returned.

"Go away."

"Right..." he said awkwardly, standing up and slowly departing. Morgana then let out a sigh and looked up to the grey skies above and the snow continuously falling from it. "I didn't think I'd see you again," Morgause said quietly. Morgana let out a sigh. "I... I'm sorry. It wasn't anything to do with you. I just needed... to leave," Morgana stated nervously. Morgause looked at her feet, her shoulder-length silver hair covering her face. "I wish it had been a little to do with me..." she said quietly. Morgana stood up and sat next to her sister. "It was your home, your life, not mine – and I didn't want to ruin it, to take away from your happy family with my... not-so-happy... situation."

"You sound like Arthuria."

"Well that's rude and not true. You don't even know what she sounds like, you were a baby when the family collapsed and you are just making up what you believe she would say," Morgana scolded. Morgause glared at her out of the corner of her golden eyes. "Am I wrong?" Morgana pressed, poking the pauldron covering her sister's shoulder. "You know what I mean," Morgause returned. "You're acting like we're not family. Your problems were mine, they should have been mine, I'm your sister the same way Arthuria and Elaine are. We shouldn't have – you shouldn't have left me."

"My silver-wolf, I couldn't stay and I wanted you to have a normal life. One without a serial adulterer as a father and more half-siblings than you needed. I was just... a reminder to your mother, she couldn't really..." Morgana couldn't even believe her own words. The last encounter with Morgause's mother had been far kinder than she had hoped. "Now who's making stuff up?" Morgause questioned, leaning into her older sister. "You shouldn't have left me. I just ended up following you anyway, only it led me to the Paladins instead of the Witches. I was this close to both you and Arthuria for ages."

"How do you know about that?" Morgana questioned. It shouldn't have been common knowledge. Morgause gestured towards the hold where Morgana sensed the rest of the group eagerly eavesdropping. "Damian," Morgause answered. Morgana

couldn't help but think back to the endless questions the young man had during the brief time aboard the Stacked Hand after the war. "Of course." Morgana then turned on her sister. "That was stupid of you. Your poor mother and step-father, do you know how much they worry about you?"

Morgause rolled her eyes before standing up. Morgana stood up as well, only to falter as Morgause turned on her. She was younger, and of similar height, the pair of them distinctively shorter than Arthuria, and definitively shorter than Elaine, but Morgause was far from the skinny frame of Morgana. Morgause had brawn, and certainly the means to utilise it. "Forgive me for trying to find my sisters!" Morgause snapped. Morgana shied away slightly, before steeling herself and meeting Morgause's glare. "You could have died, little sister."

"So what? Better that than to never see you again! And all this time, you've been with Arthuria? And you didn't think to even... look for me?" Morgause said, the words catching in her throat. "I thought of you constantly. And once I heard that you were here-" Morgause's face darkened and she turned away, shaking her head. "Not even a letter? How long did you know for?" she questioned. Morgana didn't answer. "How long?" Morgause screamed.

"Morgause, I'm sorry."

There was a lot more Morgana wanted to say. A lot more she could have said. She could have spoken about Elaine being a Betrayer. The Sea Sovereign. Jayce. All of it, and just how much it meant for her little sister to be out of it, and away from the danger. But she knew that it wouldn't have helped. Morgause was not the little girl following her around anymore and, now that she was here, Morgana needed to be the sister Morgause had been craving.

Silence followed and eventually Morgause turned and met her older sister's worried eyes. "You owe me, big time," she stated plainly. Morgana nodded. "I will do what I can to make it up to you," Morgana sensibly appeased. Morgause pouted. "I want a Dragon." Morgana faltered. Morgause had never been above making childish and outrageous demands for appeasement. "Uh, I will see where I can get an egg from," Morgana lied. Morgause nodded in approval, before swiftly grappling her sister in a bone-cracking bear hug. Morgana held her back, sipping in air where she could.

Morgana tossed a large purple crystal into the air ahead of her. Soteria lunged for the stone, crunching it loudly in her jaw before dive bombing through the clouds. She counted a few seconds, trying not to think of the miniaturised ship in her bottomless bag or its crew in a small crystal orb in her pocket, then dove after her Dragon aboard her broomstick. Gunfire rumbled beneath her, the guards stationed around the

Dungeon most likely having never met a Dragon before. Their weapons rattled harmlessly against Soteria's forcefields as she casually strolled up to the huge metal doors and then forced them open. Morgana tucked in tight to her broomstick, twisting her body around the pole and barrel rolling into the Dungeon, in what most likely looked like nothing more than a fast and dark blur.

The doors shut behind Soteria as she followed after Morgana, meeting her at the bottom of the Dungeon stairs and in front of the metal gates that marked the true entrance. With a quick shatter, Morgause and the others appeared, taking in quick gasps of air as they were released from their prison. "I did not miss that," Wicke muttered, nodding appreciatively to Morgana as the broomstick vanished into her bottomless bag. "It won't take them long to rally up the courage to follow after the untouchable Dragon," Morgana warned, looking to Damian to lead. "Right, let's get this done then."

The temporary excitement of the Dungeon faded for Morgana after the first few hours. Wicke had been expecting the excitement to last for at least a whole day, but she knew Morgana was bored when she decided to simply stop walking and float alongside the group on her broom whilst periodically flinging out a spell in the vague direction of an enemy. "So... you've been doing this for how long?" Morgana eventually questioned, laying down on her broomstick and lazily floating back and forth as Soteria crunched on tiny magic stones. "Two years, there about," Damian answered, watching the Dragon in awe as they made camp. "Since you guys left for the Old World without us," he said with a hint of anger. "Not my choice," Morgana assured. "I'd have happily had some extra meat shields along for the ride, I mean the Beastly Boys are practically that anyway."

She smiled as she wondered what mischief they were probably up to. "Didn't Jayce send you here to help us?" Damian returned in frustration. "It seems you're just letting us do all the work." Morgana sat up, crossing her legs and peering at him from atop her broom. "Well duh," she said with a grin. "I'm a Rising Ace." "Hey," Wicke called over. "So am I. And he's not wrong, you could help out a bit more."

Morgana rolled up her sleeve, revealing a patchwork of tattoos. "I am," she stated. "But for the real stuff you guys keep talking about, not these bugs or bats. Besides, Soteria is keeping you guys safe from harm." The Dragon glanced over in Morgana's direction. "Food?" she questioned aloud, jumping Enki out of his slimy skin. "I don't like that the beast talks," he muttered, oblivious to the faces pulled at him – the talking sea monster. "What?" he questioned.

Sleep alluded Morgana for quite some time. It wasn't that she couldn't sleep on the hard rocky floor, even with having gotten used to her luxurious bed she was still

familiar with the lack of luxury from her time as a Daughter of Shade. She missed the rocking of the ship, the noise of someone somewhere doing something even in the middle of the night. She missed her friends, and the growing regret was continuing to build.

An arm slapped her forehead, Morgause's loud snoring right in her ear as she lay partially entwined with her. Morgana remembered agreeing to sleep near each other, but Morgause didn't seem to understand that had meant within the vicinity of each other, rather than having their bedrolls touching. Morgana sighed, the wet breath of her Dragon not exactly far from her head either. "I'm sorry," she muttered, before rolling away from Morgause, thinking of Arthuria's hurt expression the last time they had seen each other. Whether through conscious or unconscious decision, a pair of arms wrapped themselves around her, Morgause holding her tightly before burying her face into Morgana's neck. A slow smile briefly showed at the corners of her mouth, sleep eventually appearing as she lay in her sister's embrace.

Morgana dragged her wand across her arm, igniting a range of prepared spells she had marked on her skin before aiming them up at the stone colossus ahead of her. The spells peppered the gigantic creature, forcing it to raise its arms to block the spells before it staggered backwards. "Now!" she yelled, Damian, Sabine and Morgause all rushing towards the stone creature's left leg to strike with all they had. Morgause's huge sword crept through the large cracks that Sabine and Damian left in the leg, but the sword didn't do nearly as much damage as Morgana wanted and expected. "You can do better than that!" she yelled to her sister, the group retreating behind Soteria's shield as the creature recovered. "Where's your magic?"

"I don't have any! I'm not a Paladin!" Morgause returned. Morgana shook her head, riding high on top of her broomstick and observing the stone colossus for weaknesses. "Why not?" she yelled down, sending a deliberate and precise bolt of decaying magic into the wound on the monster's leg. "I never formed any vows, I don't have access to the tree of oaths!" Morgause yelled up, sliding under a heavy slam and striking back into the wound. "You don't need it! It's always been an illusion, a crutch! A Paladin's power is in restriction, in rules! It doesn't come from some magic tree!" Morgana yelled. She had known it for a long time, but had she said it in front of Jeanne she reckoned she would have been burned at the stake for her blasphemy. "Think on what you are trying to achieve! What do you need?"

Morgause looked up at the stone colossus. It had no emotions, it was only a literal stepping stone on her journey. She thought on what she needed: she needed strength, the strength to pull her family back together and to ensure that nothing could break them apart again. A heavy stone fist flung down towards her. Morgana dove down, grabbing the hood of her sister's chainmail and dragging her a few steps to the left.

The fist slammed into the ground where she had been. Morgause raised her sword. She wanted to never be left behind again. "Don't just swing your sword! Use it!" Morgana yelled.

Morgause screamed, another fist swinging down towards her. She swung up, meeting the giant pillar of stone with her sword and parrying the strike, the huge arm going wide. A red glow swirled around her blade, the already-huge blade lengthening to become several times larger than her body length. Morgause then slammed the blade down into the colossus, cleaving downwards and liquidating the stone as it passed through the giant body. The giant body faltered before cleanly parting in two, eventually then fading into a cloud of white particles. A large and heavy magic stone rattled to the floor, only to immediately be snatched up by Soteria.

"You did it," Morgana said with a grin, landing next to her sister and patting her on the back. "I... did, didn't I?" she questioned back. "How did I do that?" she then asked. "That's for you to figure out, but whatever restriction you placed on yourself must have been significant to do that. I know you'll figure it out." Morgana turned and looked towards Wicke. "So, only a few more floors left, right?"

Morgana scratched her head as she looked at the large frozen tube in the middle of the dimly lit Dungeon control room. "So... that's a Wizard from five-hundred years ago?" she questioned to Wicke. Wicke simply nodded, nervously looking up at the Wizard in brown robes and the crystalised Demon below him. "And we can wake him up?" she pressed, stepping forwards to stand by Wicke's side. "Wait a moment," Wicke told her. "I'll be back," she stated, pressing a button on the main console connected to the stasis tube. Wicke froze in place and Morgana immediately glanced towards the others in alarm. "Give her a moment," Damian advised.

"No, I'm not an intruder," Wicke immediately interrupted. "Yes, I've been in other Dungeons and I've already spoken to Alizia and Porthos. There's not much time, it's been five-hundred years and the Dungeon will collapse. Where is the Anvil of Agron?" Wicke bombarded. The pale figure with a few scraggly brown hairs on his chin and a ring of hair around his bald head looked at her. "Oh, well I appreciate the exposition, even if it is a bit sudden."

"Sudden? It's been five-hundred – you know, never mind. Oh great sage of magic, give me your wisdom," Wicke said, bowing to the middle-aged man in hopes he would answer before time ran out. "Hmph. Well the Great Forge is in it's usual location. The south of the world. You're at the wrong pole. It is also at the peak of one of the great mountains." Wicke couldn't help but feel disappointed. "Oh, okay. Um, did two women who look like me visit you before I did?" she then asked, the plain white world around her beginning to shake. "Who?"

"Okay, well thanks anyway. Do you mind helping my friends and I out of here? I'm guessing you're going to say I'm out of time for any more questions." "Well, okay, fine. Did you not want to at least ask my name?" he asked, more out of annoyance than anything. "You're name is Therazar, I have access to the infinite library so I made sure to look you up beforehand," Wicke stated proudly. "Can't fault you there," Therazar stated.

Wicke stumbled backwards, a brown, earthy grimoire in her hands and a swirling sandy portal appearing in the floor nearby as the ceiling began to crack and the frozen tube shattered. "Nice!" she stated proudly, holding the heavy tome aloft. "Well?" Morgana questioned urgently. Wicke pointed to the sandy portal, the others leaping into it. "Come on!" Wicke stated, rushing forwards and leaping through. Morgana let out a sigh, glancing towards Soteria and then around the room. "So much we could have learnt... Come on, let's get out of here!"

They dove into the portal, rolling out across soft snow as the ground continued to shake and roar, the large white pillar that was the Dungeon quickly falling apart behind them. "Uh, Wicke?" Morgana questioned finding herself and Soteria alone, Wicke and the others already swiftly running away from the falling tower. "Oh come on!" Morgana protested, taking out her broom and quickly propelling herself into the sky as the Dungeon fully collapsed behind in a huge cloud of dust and snow.

"Where's Morgana?" Morgause yelled out to Damian and Sabine, Wicke, Cinderlee and Enki all hot on their tails. "I don't know, wasn't she behind us?" Damian returned, only to yelp as a hail of gunfire sprayed the ground by his feet. "Halt!" yelled a voice, only to disappear in the cloud of snow and dust as the Dungeon collapsed. "Come on!" yelled Morgana from above swooping over the group along with Soteria before continuing to fly swiftly towards the nearby water.

Guards rushed from the docked ships, all hoping to stop the clear perpetrators of the Dungeon's destruction, but a wall of clear barriers rose up to line the path to the water as Soteria defended the group. A faint flash of light caught Wicke's eye. "So much for not giving away our identities," she muttered. The Reliable crashing into the water ahead of them. Damian landed first, immediately rushing forwards to prepare the sails along with Morgause. With a heavy thud, Soteria landed, surrounding the ship with protective barriers as Morgana flew about throwing down spells at the Guild soldiers. "Get going!" she yelled. Wicke didn't need to be told twice. "Hold on!" she yelled, guiding the winds into the sails and propelling the ship forwards. "Where to?" Damian questioned. Wicke didn't know. "The Capital!" Morgause answered. "We need some supplies, and my sister is buying!"

"I didn't agree to that!" Morgana protested from above. "Anyway, Wicke, what did you learn in there? Anything worthwhile or was all that just for some old tome?" she questioned, flying alongside the ship until they were certain they had moved out of range of the Guild's cannons. "The Anvil of Agron is in the south. And my sisters didn't make it to the end of the Dungeon," Wicke answered. "Oh, well I could have told you that," Morgana answered. Wicke slowly looked towards her with an emotionless expression. "Sorry, didn't realise that was what you were after. Your sisters are in the Ancient World, somewhere in the place called the Scourge, but we don't know where. Jayce didn't find them when he was there."

Seize the Seas Tales: First Act of War

Marisha met Bjorn's lost expression, her hand gently touching his cheek. "It's too dangerous," he told her softly. "I don't want you to go." She shook her head. "There's no choice, it has to be done. I've worked so hard to make her better. I can't give up on her now, not when she could be such a powerful weapon against the Sovereign. I need to speak to my mother, to Holli and Myra, I need to destabilise the Guild – to take it away from Scáthach, and I can't do that here. I love you Bjorn, but you need to sort yourself out. I can't magically fix things, I can't bring back our boys, but we can damn sure avenge them. Astris and Arthuria need you. Jayce... he needs you too."

She stepped away and departed their room, leaving him behind in the dark as she strode quickly and confidently up to the main deck. "Are you sure about this?" Astris questioned, meeting her by the Gambit. Marisha nodded, giving Astris a quick hug. "Jayce is counting on us to have all our cards ready for when he returns. This is the best thing I can do for us, for the world. I'm going to pull my mother out of the Guild, and use the Syndicate to hurt it as badly as I can. Call for me when you need me, I'll be there." Astris nodded appreciatively, stepping back as Marisha clambered into the cockpit and the flyer was lowered down onto the ocean water. "Give them hell!" Astris called down. Marisha nodded, engaging the engines and launching the flyer forwards and up into the air.

Chapter 232: Guilt

Xarga looked out at the setting sun from one of the few comfortable benches he had found on Final Bastion. The orange glow was soft and warm, and nestling comfortably into the ocean on the horizon. He was alone, apart from Adeline – his personally assigned bodyguard. She stood leaning in the shadows nearby, her Killers' veil disguising her face as always. Even without seeing her he knew what expression covered her hidden face: pain. She knew as well as he did that he didn't have much longer left, perhaps only half a year, maybe a few months more. To be the bodyguard to a dying man was not an easy task.

A soft magical swirl shimmered somewhere nearby, Adeline immediately tensing as she prepared for battle, but with a simple gesture Xarga stood her down, his gaze still outwards on the horizon. "I'm glad it's you," Xarga said softly, as Jayce nervously stepped towards the giant legend. "I was worried I wouldn't ever see you again," the old man stated, inviting Jayce to sit down next to him. Jayce faltered before doing so. "I..." Jayce began, his body trembling. "I know why you're here, my boy, and I'm glad it's me."

Jayce shook his head, his eyes watering as Xarga's large hand gripped his shoulder. "Once I heard you were taken, I figured she would make you prove yourself. I was worried that your mother, or your father, would be her target." "I refused, I said I would take myself out before that," Jayce answered. Xarga sat in silence for a few moments. "I... understand," he stated, a tiny hint of hurt in his voice as it dawned on him the same thought wasn't extended towards him. "You made the right choice, Jayce."

Xarga turned and looked at him, a genuine smile of reassurance on his face. "You've grown far greater than I could have ever imagined, I'm proud of you." Tears dripped down Jayce's face. "I will always be proud of you, as any grandfather should be." Jayce looked down, his body trembling as he shook his head. "I can't do it," he said quietly. Xarga stood up with a groan, stepping forwards before turning and looking towards Adeline. "You may leave," he told her. She shook her head, refusing to look away. "No," she said quietly, her own tears falling.

Xarga shook his head and looked down at Jayce. "Do you have a plan?" he asked. Jayce nodded. "And does this moment matter to it?" Xarga asked. Jayce nodded again. A smile crossed Xarga's face, and he spread his arm and stump wide. "Then make it count, for the future I wouldn't have seen anyway and the future you will create for your own descendants." Jayce stood up and stepped into the embrace, the arm grasping his body tightly.

A soft gasp escaped Xarga as Jayce drove Sola into his ribs, cutting deep and precisely through his heart before swiftly retracting the blade. Xarga fell limp onto Jayce and slowly he lowered him to the floor, Adeline rushing forwards to help. They both knelt over the Captain of the Old Dogs. "Tell them it was me," Jayce told her. "I was never not going to. Get out of here before I cut you down," she threatened, closing Xarga's eyes. Jayce stepped back, looking back at the family member he had just murdered before conjuring a portal with Luna and stepping through. "It's done," he told Scáthach, his vision tinted red as he looked up at her with disgust and loathing. "Good. Sleep well, there is much to do." A pair of Null Legionnaires stepped forwards, gesturing for Jayce to follow.

Alarms rang out across Final Bastion, and in any other situation Alara would be rushing around finding out what had happened and giving orders, but instead she found herself sealed within Cassandra's office – the pair of them expecting the worst. The world seemed to turn grey as a Lieutenant came in to the room and explained what had happened. His words faded away, falling silently on both Cassandra's and Alara's ears as the sole words shut out anything else: Jayce had murdered Old Dog Xarga. "What?" Alara questioned first, Fleet Admiral Exarga's face pale with shock. "It appears to have been targeted, Commodore. Old Dog Xarga was assassinated."

Alara dismissed the Lieutenant with a simple gesture before slowly turning to face Cassandra. "But why?" Cassandra asked quietly, shutting her eyes to hold back tears. Alara had an answer but she wasn't quite brave enough to say it out loud. A knock drew their attention to the door and both Adeline and Philip Exarga entered. "Explain," commanded Fleet Admiral Exarga coldly. Adeline simply looked at the floor, but she raised her head when Philip placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "It was a test of proof," Admiral Exarga confirmed. Both Alara and Cassandra looked at him with waning belief. "Why didn't you intervene, get Xarga to safety?" Cassandra questioned.

"He stood me down. I think... Evandril knew what Betrayer Exarga was there to do."

Betrayer Exarga was not a title Alara, Cassandra or Philip liked to hear, all three of them physically recoiling at its naming. "Give me every detail," Cassandra ordered. Slowly the other Admirals entered the room, all equally looking for answers and sharing in their own grief. "So what then?" eventually questioned Silas Vanathur. "We just let this go and trust in whatever plan your son has?" The eyes in the room shifted to Cassandra. "No," answered Philip. "This was the Sovereign's punishment for Barca Khalid and is also a provocation in order to open us up. This was to show that we are vulnerable, and that we are still under her, and also to give a warning that she could target any one of us. Jayce will have changed his target specifically because he was

aware of Xarga's illness. Otherwise..." Philip stated, looking directly at Alara. "Jayce would have killed one of your parents."

The words rang cold across the room but the point was made. "This will have bought Jayce some leeway and grace to do whatever it is that he is planning. We shouldn't count on him to achieve it." Philip looked towards Cassandra. "Fleet Admiral Xarga's death needs to be publicised, and also the name of its perpetrator. It cannot be hidden. It won't protect him." She sighed and nodded. "We will hold a funeral here, and then his body shall be sent north for a more official funeral at home. Send word home."

Jayce's room was far more comfortable than he would have liked. He had been expecting a bed of nails, rather than quilted pillows and an ultrasoft duvet. He would have preferred it after what he had done. Sleep avoided him, his mind too busy and also surprisingly lonely without Paimon, and eventually he gave up on it, stepping outside of his room and back out into the Sovereign's mansion. The Null Legionnaires standing guard along the colossal corridor all looked towards him, silently warning him not to cause trouble. "Am I permitted to wander?" Jayce questioned aloud. "You are in command, sir," came a response from the nearest soldier.

The mansion took a long time to simply navigate. It had three floors, each of them roughly ten metres in height. Lengthways it was around a hundred metres and only a third less in depth. All across the giant building were long corridors connecting into each other like an endless labyrinth. An innumerable number of Null Legion stood guard like statues. The bottom floor was filled with colossal ballrooms, all connecting into each other before finally concluding with the Sovereign's throne room. The rooms made no sense: each of them contained four pairs of colossal wooden doors that automatically closed behind him and somewhat randomly leading towards another room. On his travels Jayce encountered one room containing a colossal black metal vault door - unsurprisingly it was locked. It was only after entering the same room for the fourth time that Jayce noticed the doors were actually portals and that there was probably a deliberate pathway through.

The Sovereign's throne room held three sets of doors, two opposing doors leading back to the ballrooms, with a forwards door opposing the throne that led forwards towards an entrance hall. This metal door didn't have the same enchantments; it wasn't a portal but Jayce got the feeling that if it was sealed, it would remain sealed regardless of how much force was used against it. The entrance hall held the main entrance into the mansion, a huge pair of ornate green doors. A corridor cut through the entranceway, leading onwards towards several doors connecting to the ballrooms before flicking around the western side like a sideways 't'.

A pair of staircases led upwards, either side of the throne room main doors, but Jayce followed the corridor around instead, eventually setting his gaze on a lone set of stairs leading down. A pair of guards surprisingly stopped him from going further. The middle floor held a colossal library, as well as a large kitchen, forge, armoury, sparring room, and communal baths. Legionnaires were utilising it somewhat casually, paying him little attention. The top floor held innumerable bedrooms, most of them structured like barracks for the army stationed on the island, with a few spare rooms designated for the Betrayers and likely key Null Legion Commanders.

After his long walk it was dawn, the sun slowly rising across the island. Jayce returned to his room, awaiting instruction. But nothing came. He was left alone, and eventually he departed it once more, this time making his way precisely and purposefully towards the throne room. Scáthach sat waiting for him. "I didn't call for you," she stated smugly, laying across her throne whilst snacking on some green grapes. "You said there is much to do, I was expecting to be summoned."

"Oh there is, but not just yet. I am glad to see you've taken an interest in everything, I hope your tour was fruitful?" she questioned, uselessly blowing a few strands of her dark orange hair out of her eyes. "This place is... a fortress in disguise," he stated, trying not to show too much enthusiasm for the genuinely impressive structure. "Oh yeah. Practically unconquerable if I want it to be, and that's without thought towards your comrades who could be summoned with a simple request at a moment's notice."

"Comrades?"

"The other Betrayers," Scáthach clarified. Jayce didn't like it one bit, but he had no defence. "Right. And where are they? Where's Vexx?" Jayce questioned. Scáthach sat up, leaning forwards and setting down her grapes on her throne's armrest. "A good question. He's asked to not see you, and since he's your senior, I thought I would honour his request. You know, loyalty and all. He's probably out with Elaine somewhere, fighting or drinking. Who knows."

Jayce did his best not to react but from her smug grin he knew he had given away more than he should have. "You know, he once told me that you were his Captain, before you two parted on less than kind terms. I've heard his side, I'm curious as to yours?" she goaded, leaning back and crossing her arms and legs. "That's none of your business." She raised a singular eyebrow and Jayce felt a cold shiver cross his body. Jayce looked down and away. "I let him down," he answered. "I didn't see what he was going through and when he needed me..." "You turned away from him," she completed. "Hmph, close enough to what he said, if a little the wrong way round."

"What?"

"And Elaine? Morgana and Arthuria are both her sisters, correct?" she probed. Jayce felt compelled to answer, Xarga's corpse scarred into his mind, and the likely possibility she could dispatch him to create another but of a different person he was close to. "Yes," he said begrudgingly. Scáthach nodded, looking up at the ceiling high above her. "Elaine was quite resistant to talking about them and even more resistant to me trying to reunite her with them, quite a story behind it all I'm sure. Broken families are hard to control, and she's a real mess. Would you like me to bring them back together?"

"No," Jayce stated firmly.

"Not the answer I'd have expected but fine. Leave Vexx and Elaine alone, for me, they have enough on their minds as is without you interfering. You're free to go. I'll call you back when you're needed. They're doing a funeral for Xarga in an hour or so. You should probably go and watch but I wouldn't get too close if I was you – the Republic might have some reservations about your involvement." "How will you contact me?" She touched her collarbone and Jayce felt for his necklace. It was gone, replaced with a cord attached to a metal medallion of a skull embedded with a sword. "See you soon. And stay away from your crew."

"Death of the Republic Hero."

"Betrayal Exarga."

"Traitor to his Blood: Ex-Xarga."

The reaction around the world was one of complete and utter shock. For days it was all anyone would talk about, the newspapers printing the same story over and over again. Why did he do it? The same questions rolled across the world, Jayce's own allies swiftly beginning to wonder the same thing. "Can we still trust him?" Somme Ankor asked, looking towards Kitty as they stood on a beach looking out towards the Frontier. "I don't know," she answered softly.

"We must do something," Tim Kane told Mirabelle Delyth, the newspaper floating in the air in front of him as he sat in his throne room with her straddled across his lap, her arms across his neck. "What can we possibly do?" she questioned, her eyes sharing his worry. "There must be something?" he returned. "We could send a tribute to Pirate Lord Bjorn? Our sympathies, a token of our continued friendship," Mirabelle suggested. Tim let out a long sigh. Eventually nodding. "I just hope he and his crew are able to survive without Jayce."

"Pirate Lord Bjorn?" Bjorn questioned, looking at the newspaper in front of him. "It should be your name," he stated, looking over towards Astris, "not mine." She shook her head. "No. You were First Mate of this crew. You are currently the longest running

active member of the Rising Aces and as such it is you who is Captain. And with Jayce's title being... upgraded to Betrayer, you are the best person to take his place. So, Pirate Lord Bjorn, since Jayce is... compromised, what are your orders?" Bjorn shook his head. He didn't know, it felt like they were balancing on a knife's edge and a wrong move would send them tumbling into the abyss. "What should we do?" he questioned back to her. "First Mate," he added. She smiled. "It's time to get Morgana back, and then we're going to prepare for war."

Alara stood over the coffin of Xarga, tears streaming down her face as she took her moment to say goodbye. Eyes lay upon her. Those that knew of her connection to Jayce couldn't help but partially blame her, those that didn't knew instead that Xarga's death was punishment for the death of Khalid. Either way, the consequence was on her. "I'm sorry," she whimpered, shaking her head as she turned away from the man who had supported her from the beginning, the man that very much had been a grandparent to her as well as Jayce.

Jayce wanted to approach, he wanted to stand beside the coffin and say his final physical goodbyes. He had tried to find Xarga in the underworld but the stubborn old man had left for a new life with little thought. Instead he was forced to sit crouched on a rooftop, doing his best to hide his presence. He listened to the speech his mother gave, a story of how he had raised her and so many others to power. He listened to the stories of his father and the care and kindness that Xarga had given him. He listened to Yashiro's stories of valour and heroism. Silas and Victoire stood silently to the side, unwilling or unable to stand up to the podium, Jayce didn't know. They looked as he remembered, but Alara's words on them painted them in a very different light in his eyes. The coffin was closed and it vanished alongside a mage as it made its journey north, back to the Republic. "Goodbye," Jayce muttered, using Sola to teleport away.

For weeks Jayce was left to his own accord, and during that time he set out with a few different purposes. He kept out of the light, sticking to the shadows of obscurity as he relied on his crew to make the preparations he needed. Periodically he would return to the mansion, Scáthach would make a passing comment or threat, and he in turn would question the whereabouts of Vexx, Elaine, and Tanare – his questions going unanswered. Equally, with each visit he would map out the mansion just a little bit more, until the only places unvisited were the Betrayer's and the Sovereign's personal quarters and the stairs leading down.

Rain fell heavily upon his head as he trudged through the mud of an island not too far from Belluabella. It rattled against his thick cloak, the darkness of the night broken only by the light of several hanging lanterns and the periodic flash of lightning. Laughter broke through the rain, a heavy orange glow emerging through the

windows of the tavern he was approaching. An accordion was playing inside, briefly being smothered by the thunder. Jayce's eyes glanced up towards the sign above: 'Last Pint' was the name of tavern, the sign showing a prisoner heading to the gallows with a tankard in hand. Jayce shook his head, stepping forwards onto the cobblestones and pushing open the heavy wooden door. The wet floorboard creaked under his feet, a few brief glances from the drunken patrons inside passing his way, but Jayce ignored them just as they eventually did him.

He passed by the bar, gesturing quietly to one of the kegs and placing down a pearl for it. A copper tankard was given to him and he sauntered away, not waiting for the change as he approached a gambler's den towards the back. His eyes glanced across the packs of cards, piles of pearl and coral, and the few varieties of games being played across the five tables. A large figure sat to the side under a similar cloak to his, his pile of coin by far the largest, but only consisting of small denominations.

Jayce approached his empty table and sat down opposite him. A fur-covered left arm emerged from the cloak, the white and black fur marked with a faint orange glow. The hood lifted up, a pair of glowing orange and red eyes staring directly at Jayce with surprise and confusion. "Captain?" questioned Wam in gentle disbelief. "Not quite anymore," Jayce returned, placing a singular pearl onto the table that was roughly of equal value to Wam's entire pile. "I heard, didn't really believe it until now, but given you're in a hellhole like this talking to me... well, what can I say?"

"It's good to see you alive, Wam," Jayce said honestly. The cloak pulled back a little, the right-side of Wam's badger head was badly scarred and he was missing his right hand and forearm. "You mean what's left of me?" Jayce looked down as Wam dealt out the cards. "I don't blame you Captain. Really, I don't. We made our choice, did what we needed to. I'm sorry we didn't come back to you in one piece, or... any pieces at all."

Jayce shook his head, meeting Wam's gaze. "Your brothers... they're waiting for you in the Underworld, and told me to tell you not to hurry to meet them, and to have some damn good stories for them when you do." Wam chuckled, pushing all of his money without even looking at his hand. Jayce met it with his own, glancing at his hand briefly: a six and a three of spades. "Stupid fools, even when dead." He flipped over a ten of spades, an ace of diamonds and a nine of spades.

Jayce flipped over his cards, showing that he was one off a flush. Wam did the same, his cards being a jack of clubs and an eight of hearts. He then flipped over the next card, a seven of diamonds. "So, I guess that you didn't decide to find me without a reason?" Wam questioned, his straight better than Jayce's nothing with a single card left to play. "Am I going back to the ship?" he asked. Jayce shook his head. "No, I need

you to do something else," he stated, reaching towards the stack of cards and flipping over the card on top: an ace of spades.

"You and Asmodeus are going north and joining Wicke," he stated, reaching into his bottomless bag and pulling out a newspaper showing an image of Wicke, Damian and few others that they didn't recognise, all running away through snow from a collapsing Dungeon. Wam slid his pile of money towards Jayce, but Jayce placed his singular golden pearl into Wam's pile. "I owe you far more than that," Jayce clarified. "Help them, and we'll deal with Xerxes." Wam took the money, sliding it into his coin pouch before extending his hand to Jayce. With a flash of red lightning they vanished.

Seize the Seas Tales: Homeward Bound

Morgana was glad to be free of the snow at last; the journey north aboard the bathtub of splinters and rust known as the Reliable was nothing compared to the Stacked Hand, and it had not escaped the Guild without injury - but the Capital would soon, eventually, be in sight once again and she was looking forward to it, but not as much as Morgause was. Every day she spoke of somewhere different she wanted to go with Morgana, now that they were reunited. "There's a pancake shop that-"

"Morgana?" came Astris' voice through her communicator, Morgana lunging for it immediately and jolting to her feet. "Astris? Yes, I'm here," Morgana stated almost desperately into it, whilst holding up a hand to stop Morgause from interrupting. "It's time to come home, make your way to the Old World immediately. See you soon." Morgana stood frozen until her hands slowly lowered. "What's wrong?" Morgause questioned, Wicke glancing over to them. "I, um, I've been called back to the Stacked Hand. I'm sorry, but I need to leave."

"What? No. We're going to the Capital together. We're going shopping and..." Morgause trailed off. Wicke let out a sigh and nodded. "It was nice having you whilst we could. The next Dungeon will be even harder, especially since the Guild know who we are now. Damn..." Wicke shook her head and folded her arms. "You've seen what I've seen," Morgana stated to her. "I'm needed, there's a lot going on. I am sorry. Good luck, genuinely. I'll leave you some of my funds and supplies."

Wicke nodded appreciatively, turning to walk away. "Take me with you," Morgause pleaded. "I want nothing more than to stay with you, little sister, but I can't. I want us to be a family again, and we will be, but I am terrified but what I'm returning to. And I am terrified that we are going to lose. I couldn't in a million years risk my dear baby sister against the enemy I'm going back to. Besides, Wicke and the others need you," Morgana stated, placing her hand on Morgause's cheek. "Beat the Dungeons, we'll beat the Sovereign, and then we'll go and be a family again. I promise," Morgana told her. Morgause shook her head as Morgana fumbled around in her bottomless bag

before handing her some money and a few spare potions. “Good luck, see you soon.” Soteria let out a roar and pushed off into the air, Morgana following closely behind on her broomstick.

“Godsdammit!” Morgause yelled after her, stamping her foot and pacing back and forth. “Relax, you’ll see her again – I’m certain of it. It sounds like they’ve got a bigger challenge than we do, so we just need to do our part,” Wicke reassured. “Uh, guys,” came Damian’s voice from behind the ship’s wheel. “About bigger problems...” His voice trailed off, the shadow of a huge ship smothering the Reliable.

Chapter 233: Weaknesses

Alara span around aimlessly on her chair, her mind and body bored and frustrated from weeks of observation. There had only been a few assassination attempts, and, if anything, Alara had a sneaking suspicion they had occurred without the Sovereign's knowledge. Each one had been swiftly dispatched, a frustrating factor that had prevented Alara from learning their purpose. Were they probes, testing her defences and the defences around her? Or were they simply zealots of the Sovereign seeking revenge? It didn't really matter. There were only two categories of people who would be able to harm her. The Betrayers or the Sovereign, and so far they had left her alone.

"Sit up properly, you're not a child," scolded Cassandra Exarga, letting out a stretch as she finally looked up from her stacks of files organised chaotically across her colossal desk. Alara almost refused, saving her insubordination to a simple eyeroll as she straightened up. "It's not like anyone is going to see," Alara mumbled. "Doesn't matter, it's bad for your back, bad for your state of mind, and we also have a guest on their way." Alara ceased slouching, looking at Cassandra with confusion. "Didn't I tell you?" Cassandra questioned. "Oops." Alara glared at her, a faint smirk crossing Cassandra's lips as she stood up. "Come."

Alara was escorted to the main harbour, her eyes widening as she noticed a steady fleet of gold and blue ships sailing towards Final Bastion, the fleet all bearing the flags, banners and markings of the Brunxchume Navy. "You could have warned me," Alara muttered, glancing around at substantial welcoming party around her. The largest ship of the fleet, a beautiful vessel with four decks full of cannons, steadily pulled ahead of the fleet, eventually coming to a rest before Alara.

"Fleet Admiral," greeted Fleet Admiral Abdul Malik, extending a hand towards Cassandra as he came to a stop in front of Cassandra and Alara, a small squad of visored golden soldiers stood in escort, along with a familiar face behind them. Alara nodded to Irall, dressed in slightly more glorious attire than his previous outfit as Captain – no doubt due to a significant promotion. "Fleet Admiral," Cassandra returned shaking the hand firmly before turning and gesturing towards Final Bastion. "Please walk with me," she offered. He nodded but not before deliberately and distinctively approaching Alara. "Commodore Vanathur," Malik said loudly, bowing his head slightly in reverence. Several flashes of light crossed Alara's face, the small retinue of journalists and photographers ensuring to get every reaction from Alara as she was personally greeted. "Fleet Admiral Malik, it is good to see you again," Alara returned, trying not to give too much of a reaction as she stood at attention. A faint smile crossed Malik's face as he stood up tall once again, this time nodding to her before turning back to Fleet Admiral Exarga. "I am glad to see your Marine Hero is

well!" Malik proclaimed, before stepping closer to Cassandra and walking alongside her.

There was a somewhat formal yet brief tour of the Final Bastion and how it had grown and transitioned under the Republic, eventually finalising within a large meeting room. Fleet Admiral Malik sat on one side of the table with a soft retinue of officials and experienced Officers within his Navy, with Cassandra, Alara – personally requested, much to her ire – and the other Admirals on the other side. "Let us not beat about the bush, as they say," Malik began, clasping his hands and looking towards Cassandra. "My people wish to join your Republic, what is required for that to occur?"

Cassandra opened her mouth but an advisor of Malik's interrupted. "I do apologise, Fleet Admiral, but is there no one of a more... senior position? No non-military officials that we could speak to?" she questioned. Alara could feel the tension in room multiply. "It is not meant to offend," Fleet Admiral Malik inserted, sensing his people had offended Cassandra, and likely all of the other Admirals in the room. "Within my Navy, position often comes with experience, so it is... unusual to see such a high-ranking roster of relatively young people. Commodore Vanathur and I previously discussed this, but I am curious on your perspective on the qualities of leadership?"

Alara glanced towards Cassandra. "Our Republic currently operates under the control of the Navy, so I apologise but we do not really have any civilian officials to bring to the table, especially not in such a militaristic time such as now," Philip answered. "As to how I am qualified to lead," Cassandra directly challenged, "we recently went through a purge of a lot of... rot within our Navy. I, alongside others," she stated, gesturing to the Admirals around her, "led that charge. In the New World, actions earn recognition, not time or length of service, and you can see the results of that mantra."

Alara felt Cassandra's firm hand on her shoulder. The officials on the other side of the table didn't appear to like that answer, but Malik nodded, cutting their mutters off with a simple gesture. "Then I hope we can find a balance between the two in our communion, in the same way that I am aware that your role, Fleet Admiral, is one half of a greater whole?" he probed, seeking to clarify the rumours he had heard. "Indeed, Fleet Admiral Truth governs the New World, whilst I am in charge of our expedition into the Old World. I would be welcome to learn from an experienced Admiral such as yourself and I have no doubt you and your people have much you can offer on how to rule these seas."

"We are far from ruling these days, but the notion is appreciated and acknowledged. On the note of your two halves, I am presuming that any integration would solely be within your fleet and not the greater Republic?" "That is correct, but once the

Sovereign is defeated then we would be more than willing to discuss full membership." The advisors really did not like hearing that. "You honestly believe the Warhorse can be defeated?" questioned an advisor to Admiral Malik's left. "Warhorse?" questioned Admiral Yashiro.

"Their name for the Sovereign," Alara answered. "She rode in from afar, her mane fiery and eyes fierce. Untempered and unstable, the mighty beast trampled all in her path. Through the unbroken gates she galloped, through the walls of their deepest sanctum she rode – into the heart of their world, into the hearts of their people. And she tore it out for the world to see," Alara recited. Malik smiled warmly, his eyes lighting up slightly from her remembrance of his words. "The Warhorse, the Sea Sovereign, the titles are all the same," he stated. "But I ask: do you truly believe she is beatable?"

"Yes," Alara answered, turning red as the whole room looked at her. "The foolishness of youth," stated an advisor, but Admiral Malik held up a hand to silence them. "The boldness to dream is a young person's power," Malik stated, looking at the younger people on the other side of the table. "But the experience of age helps guide it to reality. You have killed one Betrayer, but another more... brutal replacement has taken his place. Can he be killed too?"

Jayce let out a sigh as he stepped through his swirling red portal, appearing back once again in the Sovereign's throne room. Almost immediately a Null Legionnaire approached him, an expectant hand waiting as always. Jayce glowered at the mask, taking off his gloves and dropping them to the floor with a wet and sickening slap. He then reached into his bottomless bag, pulling out a sparkling gemstone and handing it to the soldier. "Well done," came the Sovereign's high-pitched and piercing voice from her throne.

Jayce turned towards her, following her singular gesture to approach. His boots slippery on the stone floor. He reached up and unclasped his cloak, letting it fall quickly to the floor in a wet heap. Scáthach's grin infuriated him. It tore him apart at how she had been using him the last few weeks: a consequence for him reaching out to Wam, but he knew if it wasn't him going on her missions then it would be someone else. "Another kingdom to your Empire, Sovereign," Jayce stated sarcastically, wiping the blood that wasn't his from his face.

"Careful now, my cleaners may end up assassinating you at this rate," she jeered, gesturing past Jayce to the blood-soaked garments he had discarded and the trail of bloody footsteps he was leaving behind. "If only..." Jayce muttered. Scáthach pouted. "Oh you poor baby. You need to remember this as much for your own good as it is the world's... mine." Jayce rolled his eyes and turned away. She descended upon him

in an instant, resting both hands on his shoulder and nestling her head into his bloody neck whilst using Focus to lay on the air behind him like a haunting ghost or spectre. "Your lady is stirring up trouble again," she whispered, the words piercing Jayce's body like a blade made of ice.

"Oh relax, I'm not going to do anything over a simple burgeoning alliance. But she does deserve a personal visit. Anything you wish for me to tell her?" Scáthach goaded. Jayce pulled away from her. "If you-" Scáthach's cold eyes tore through him in an instant, her threat very real. "Please don't harm her," he pleaded, kneeling. "We'll see," Scáthach stated, drawing a large sword from a rift in the air before cutting a portal before her and stepping through.

With Scáthach gone, Jayce didn't hesitate. Alara was in danger, but he couldn't do anything to stop it – and if Scáthach did decide to kill her than he needed to ensure that he acted now. Jayce commanded Sola into a large copy of an ornated curved golden sword, swiping through the air in a similar fashion to Scáthach but instead vanishing in a bolt of red lightning. He landed firmly in front of a pair of Null Legionnaires, both stood guard in front of a set of stairs leading down, further within the huge mansion. "Hey, you can't-"

They dropped with a firm and precise blast of panic, unable to stand against him. The bodies tumbled backwards down the stairs and Jayce hurried past them. The stairs twisted as Jayce followed them deeper and deeper, the pristine white fading into a worn and cracked grey as the walls and rock got older and older. Eventually they levelled out, opening up into a large square of interlinked corridors, each corridor lined with rows of dark metal bars. It was a prison, nearly as big as the mansion above it and most likely far older than it.

There were no guards, they weren't needed. Most of the cells were empty, or contained the faint remains of a corpse long decayed. "What are you hiding?" Jayce questioned aloud, slowly walking along the quadrant. There was silence for the most part, a faint wind rolling through and a gentle humming. He frowned as he turned inwards to the centre of the prison, following the humming. The cells there were newer, the insides more modern with nicer interiors, but also with strange contraptions mounted to the walls and ceiling near the entrance. They looked almost spider-like, with large webbing of thin metal wire blocking the path towards the main cell bars, all met with a large metal door and a droppable hatch to send things inside.

Jayce passed one cell; several of the metal wires were stained with dried blood. and a rotten mess of bones and hair lay strewn across the stone floor. He gagged, pushing forwards quickly in pursuit of the unusual and eerily familiar humming. It grew louder and louder, Jayce accidentally walking past the cell it was coming from, only

to take two slow steps back as he looked inside through the open hatch as a figure hunched over on the floor against the far wall. A large and preposterous hat obscured almost his entire body, a huge white feather dangling off it.

"More torture, oh wonderful," said the man inside sarcastically, ceasing his humming and not even looking up. "Your games are cruel, Scáthach, by my count everyone other than me and him are dead. And from that defiant scream a few... I don't know... days, weeks, months – whichever – ago I'm the only one left. Isn't that right, you stubborn bitch?" Dick Valentine questioned, looking up from underneath his stupid hat directly at Jayce. Jayce stared at him in horror, completely frozen and unable to even breath. "You're not that ugly cow. Who in the abyss are you?" Valentine questioned.

"Dick?" Jayce questioned in disbelief. Ex-Pirate Lord Captain Valentine was almost unrecognisable. His silver goatee was buried amongst a patchy and long wiry beard, his hair had grown out, long enough to fall down past his visible collarbone. His brown eyes were dull as if the spirit behind them had died. His body was frail, bony and decrepit. He wore nothing but a vest, his red hat and a not-so-clean set of - what might have once been - white underwear with hearts on it. "Richard to you," Valentine stated, standing up with a groan.

There was nothing standing between him and the cell door, the hatch of which had been left open and was more than large enough for even Jayce to crawl inside of, but as the old Pirate Lord stood up and stepped forwards a soft metallic chitter let out a warning from above, a red light marking out a line to not cross. Jayce glanced up, the same spider-like device he had seen earlier was inside the cell, except this one proudly displayed glowing magical runes, showing that it was active. "Dick... it's Jayce."

Valentine chuckled, shaking his head. "Ah, of course. I'm going insane. It took long enough." Valentine shook his head and paced back and forth. "You know, it took longer than I thought for you to show, but I thought I would have seen the meek little boy I found stubbornly trying to cross the ocean all that time ago. You look, quite frankly, my imaginary friend like you've been through hell and back. The boy I know wouldn't have ended up like that. No, he's a proud sailor following the rules, making Mummy and Daddy proud."

"No, I'm--"

"Fuck off you hallucination! Screw you witch! I'm not falling for your taunts and trickery again! First Sara... my crew... now even the boy! Do one!" he yelled, causing Jayce to flinch. "Captain," Jayce said softly. "Sara's dead." Valentine faltered, spinning on his heel and facing Jayce. "Hallucinations don't say those sorts of things. They try

to keep their tricks safe, like a demented magician: a pigeon in a pocket for another day. I know she's dead... Tanare told me last time he was allowed to visit."

The eyes darkened before a faint flicker of life re-emerged inside them. "No..." Valentine realised stepped forwards, to just in front of the red line. "Jayce? It can't be! What the hell have you been doing? Please tell me you didn't follow me and become a bloody pirate? How are you here? Why are you here? Has she got you too, turned you against your Captain like she did Tanare to me?" he rattled off in disbelief. "Tanare turned against you?" Jayce questioned in similar shock, shaking his head. "Well, to an extent. It was that or we all died. She offered my life for his service and the moron took it. Why are you here?"

"It's a long story..." Valentine gestured around him. "Once you left we ended up going to the Capital, but on the way we found wreckage of a fleet and a survivor – a Mage named Wicke. I tried to help her, and Alara joined the Marines. I ended up getting a crew, exploring a Dungeon to the north, and then becoming a Pirate Lord under the sponsor of Kitty Deliver. We continued travelling and I wiped out the Church. Scáthach then invaded so I came here seeking an old crewmate that had joined her: Vexx, as well as the sibling of a crewmate, and also to finish off Strigon once and for all. I have another Vampire Lord that was created to rival him on my crew but she broke free. I became a Pirate Lord once again in the Old World but rushed off to save Alara who was trying to rescue her parents from the Sovereign. Scáthach didn't like that so she sent her Dragon after us, but our teleportation spell went awry so I was sent to the Scourge. I met an ancient necromancer there and stayed with her for a while before finding an ancient forge which sent me back north, and I met up with my crew; Alara killed a Betrayer, and then came and stayed on my ship. Scáthach tracked us down, realised we're together and used that to get me to join her. I've been trying to figure out what she has on the Betrayers to keep them in line so I could break them free. She's left the mansion so I came to the one spot I couldn't go and that's how I found you."

"Damn."

"There's a lot more and I skipped a lot of it, but you get the point and I need to get you out of here. Hang on."

"Woah, don't do anything. This thing is calibrated to detect fluctuations in mana. If either of us use Focus to the extent we need to get me out of here then this thing goes off and I'm dead. Anything crosses the line and I'm dead. Scáthach is the only one who knows how to disable this thing. She killed its creator so no one could make any more. The door will only open with the right key and Scáthach keeps it on her in her personal vault." Jayce looked at the hatch and shrugged, reaching forwards to crawl

inside. "No don't!" Valentine yelled and Jayce faltered. "It will close behind you and you'll be trapped in here with me. Except it'll work both ways and one of us will die if we trigger the machine. Will... he tried to get me out. Just... just go. Don't worry about me, I'll be fine. Scáthach needs me as a prisoner. It's keeping Tanare in check and it's not like there's anyone... to..." he trailed off as he looked at Jayce, the light in his eyes growing as a small smile spread across his face.

"I don't like that look, Captain. Don't do anything reckless, I'll find a way to get the key and get you out," Jayce begged. Valentine took off his hat and brushed the feather. "You love Alara, don't you?" Valentine questioned. Jayce looked at him with confusion. "That's got nothing to do with..." Jayce trailed off. "Yes," he answered firmly. "Sara was my Alara, but the world got in our way. I got in our way. Don't do the same as me. Finish this and get out. There is always someone else who will pick up the fight. It doesn't have to be yours."

"Dick... please don't."

"Sorry Jayce. Tell Tanare that he was my brother, and that I'm sorry I got myself and all of his friends killed. We should have run like he told me to. I love you my boy, and I'm damn proud of who you've become!"

"Dick, no!"

Valentine's hat hit Jayce square in the face with enough force to knock him over to the floor, a sickening slicing sound followed along with the thuds of countless pieces. Jayce didn't have to look. He could smell the blood and gore in the air and feel the sudden absence of the man who had been his hero for years. "Godsdammit!" Jayce yelled, extending Sola and Luna out into a greatsword and cleaving the cell open. He looked at the mess in front of him, shaking his head as fury tore itself through him. The blade ignited and sent a wave of fire at the remains, ensuring that nothing remained to be left to rot. Jayce stayed and ensured it was done before he ran through the prison, ensuring there was no one else. There wasn't and only then did he let out the scream that had been building up inside him as he dropped to his knees and howled over Valentine's death.

The walls shook around him as his emotions were released, the bars bending and warping, the stone cracking and crumbling. But as he regained himself a hollow feeling drained him from the inside out as he put Valentine's hat onto his head. "You'll die for this Scáthach. Screw your games, it's my turn now!"

Alara stared at Scáthach with a mixture of fear and worry. The Sovereign wasn't particularly tall or possessed an overwhelming figure, but there was no one that was as capable of bringing out fear as she was. But Cassandra wasn't afraid. "Stay behind

me,” she commanded to Alara, her greataxes held in each hand. “You’ll have to go through me before you touch her.” Scáthach tutted, shaking her head. “I did so once before. Who’s to say I won’t be able to again?” Scáthach questioned. “Last time you caught us at the end of a war. I’ve had nothing but time to train and wait for you,” Cassandra growled, throwing her axe at an empty space of her office. There was a grunt as Scáthach caught the blade in her fingers, drawing a few droplets of blood and causing her to slide backwards just under a metre. But the sight of surprise on Scáthach’s face met the grin on Cassandra’s. “You will not lay a finger on her!” Fleet Admiral Exarga roared, summoning her axe back to her hand.

The door to the office burst open and Alara’s father burst inside with Admiral Yashiro. “Witch!” Silas roared, a pistol in one hand and a sabre in the other as he rushed at Scáthach. She kicked him hard in the chest, sending him backwards across the floor. “Fine, I’ll be seeing you soon – I’m sure,” Scáthach stated, ensuring that she showed off the healed wound on her hand before she disappeared in a portal of flame. Cassandra dropped to her knees, her body shaking. “Cassandra!” Alara cried, kneeling next to her and looking her over for wounds that weren’t there. A soft smile met her instead. “We held her off. We held off the Sovereign!”

Seize the Seas Tales: Return to Strength

Bjorn hugged himself as he looked out towards Belluabella far on the horizon. He knew what awaited him: either his death or Xerxes’. It was the only way it could or would end. But what followed was up in the air. By right, if Xerxes was killed by him, then the title of Therian King would be his. Bjorn scoffed. “Pirate Lord, Therian King... utterly stupid.” He shook his head and turned away, but something on the warm wind caught his ears and he turned and looked upwards, a pair of shadows descending from the skies towards the Stacked Hand: a Witch and a Dragon.

“She’s back! Morgana’s back!” yelled Zeta from the main deck, several crew members darting out from below deck and within the living quarters. She faltered above the main deck, hovering on her broom as she scanned the faces of her crew for their current feelings on her, but to Morgana’s distinct surprise, she saw only relief and joy. “Get down here!” commanded Arthuria, pointing a firm finger to the deck. Morgana obeyed her older sister, landing gently and dismounting before flinching as Arthuria grabbed her in a firm hug. “Welcome home,” she said softly into Morgana’s ear. Morgana buried herself into Arthuria’s golden hair. “I saw her. I saw our sister,” she whispered. Arthuria nodded. “We’ll talk about all. But for now there’s something we all need to do.”

“Isn’t that right, Captain?” Arthuria questioned, turning and looking up towards Bjorn by the helm. But he turned as well, looking further upwards to the figure

crouched on the roof of the Captain's quarters. "Well?" Jayce questioned, looking down at Bjorn and adjusting the ridiculous hat on his head. "What's the plan Captain?"

Chapter 234: Heavy is the Crown

Jayce sat in his usual seat within the living quarters of the Stacked Hand, alone, with the eyes of almost his entire crew upon him. His new hat sat on Marisha's empty seat, her absence noticeable from the mess that the kitchen had become without its queen. The many eyes met him with judgement, all equally curious as to just how compromised he had become in the two months of his absence. They had all heard of Xarga's death, they had all seen his massacres across the Old and New World as he brought rebellions to heel, and he as sat there holding the famous hat of Pirate Lord Dick Valentine, they all knew how he had likely obtained it.

"Valentine was kept a prisoner beneath the Sovereign's mansion. He was the lease that she used on Tanare. And I'm guessing the others had similar situations," Jayce told them. "He was kept in a death trap, and he took his own life in order to free Tanare after seeing me. This hat will either get Tanare on our side, or turn him permanently against us." Arthuria and Bjorn glanced at each other. Bjorn shook his head but Arthuria stepped forwards. "Once this is over, people will be coming for you after what you did for her," she warned. "There won't be a happy ending." Jayce nodded, looking down at his hands, a few flecks on blood still present beneath his nails. "That was always the case," he returned, looking up at her. "Tanare has been kept within Belluabella, keeping Xerxes to heel and preventing him from making another attack against the Republic. This is the best chance to turn Tanare--"

"And kill Xerxes," Bjorn concluded. Jayce glanced towards him and nodded, but Bjorn looked away, stepping forwards. "We're going to need allies. We'll make landfall and we'll approach the Lords, we'll do what we need to in order to obtain their support. No doubt there will be some resistance, so we may need to offer bribes, positions of power. Whatever is required we will do. We will strike tomorrow, and we'll take out Xerxes and his War Hounds, whilst Jayce handles Tanare. Any questions?" Bjorn asked. There were none.

The room slowly filtered out, eventually leaving only a few behind: Caelie, Ordo, Astris, Thalia, Mai Lu, Jeanne, Tempest and Morgana. Jayce looked at them, waiting for their questions. "You did what you had to," Ordo stated first. The words digging deep and surgically cutting right into Jayce's heart. "Xarga and Valentine are both dead because of me..." Jayce returned. Caelie placed a gentle hand on his head, before pulling him into a hug.

"There's no one on this ship with clean hands," Astris stated. "Least of all within this room. Marisha would agree that you did what you had to. The others will in time. For what it's worth, you're still my Captain," Astris told him. He gave her a weak smile. "Our Captain," Thalia reassured. Jayce nodded to her, she nodded back and then left

the room. "This is going to get rough, I have to warn you all. There's no telling how a confrontation with Xerxes will go, or Tanare, and even if we kill Xerxes and turn Tanare then there will be a huge power vacuum that we will have to find a way to fill. Least of all the consequence of potentially freeing a Betrayer."

"It wouldn't be the first time we get in somewhere, fuck it up, and then piss off," Ordo stated with a chuckle. Jayce tried not to smile, shaking his head instead. "Let see what allies we can scrounge up first," Ordo quickly added. "If there's no one to help us then we're probably not going to be able to take on Xerxes anyway." Jayce nodded in simple agreement; he had ideas, some semblance of a strategy, but there wasn't a plan that could, or would, functionally work. "Some things never change."

The eyes throughout Lord Solan's great hall were almost entirely locked upon Jayce as he and Bjorn were led to sit at the sun bear therian's colossal table. They were glances and stares of fear and unnerve, but Bjorn couldn't care less – his eyes instead looked throughout the hall in search of familiar faces: survivors of his tribe that had been taken in by the great Lord. To his relief there were a few, blending in amongst the other bear therians, but they bore no mutual expressions, only longing looks of despair, grief and shame.

"Bjorn!" roared Lord Solan with a large and booming chuckle, getting to his feet and gesturing for him to sit nearby. "You are here, I do not believe it. I had feared that you would never return," he stated, sitting as Jayce and Bjorn did, the rest of the huge table empty other than various charts and maps. Lord Solan's eyes faintly glanced towards Jayce, a nervous gulp following. "Lord Exarga... should I be worried?" he asked coyly.

"No, we're here on personal business and as of this moment I'm representing myself," Jayce answered, figuring that his current status was better hidden at least for the moment. "Lord Solan, thank you for taking in my people. I owe you," Bjorn interrupted, physically leaning forwards to block out Jayce. Solan shook his head. "No, I'm only sorry I couldn't save more, but Bjorn – I must confess – why did you come back? Your presence here is... tricky, and King Xerxes' patience is thin. I am afraid that there is little I could offer to help you, much of my status, wealth and domain have been stripped from me and my head will be next to be taken. Just having you here--"

"I understand that," Bjorn answered, "so let me be upfront. We intend to invade the main castle, tomorrow. I intend to take Xerxes' head myself." The sun bear froze, his eyes shutting as he took in a long inhale before letting it out. "I truly wish I had not heard that, but now that I have, I am inclined to aid you. The consequence for not reporting this is death, and the consequence of hosting you is likely the same, so –"

since I have little future either way – I will fight with you. Who else have you recruited?”

“Just you.”

“Oh. Well, I suppose that is a promising start in this revolution. I will extend out some contacts and will distribute my forces. Do you have a battle plan?” Solan questioned. Bjorn glanced towards Jayce. “Well, do we?” he questioned. Jayce smiled, leaning forwards in his oversized chair. “We either win or we all die. Our people will open up the bridge to the castle for you, then your forces will reinforce us.”

“Move your furry fucking behinds!” yelled Lord Solan, holding a large double-bladed axe above his head as an explosion shattered a stone house along the main cobblestone road that he and several of his personal warriors were charging through. Pieces of stone and fragments of metal rattled across the blades of his weapon, a heavy roar drawing his attention upwards through the spreading clouds of dust and debris to numerous large flyers scraping across the tops of the city, their engines spewing out heat and black smoke and their guns spraying streams of orange metal. The war had begun, somewhat prematurely – Solan thought.

The flyers curved and arced through the skies, twisting and tumbling in hot pursuit as they hunted the first wave of the Rising Aces: a small woman tucked tightly into her broomstick and wrapped in a thin transparent shell. “Coming in hot!” she yelled into her communicator, diving down and hanging onto her broomstick as she pulled up at the last second, her back mere inches to the ground as she flew upside down along a main road towards the central channel leading into Belluabella. She heard a crash behind her, a flyer failing to avoid the ground and erupting in a large blast of fire, but the hot bullets flying past her as she twisted back into an upright position indicated she was far from alone in the skies. Morgana’s eyes focused in on the metal gates lining the main channel: they were all closed and the Stacked Hand was nowhere in sight. “Lined up,” she warned.

Her shimmering shield flickered as bullets began to impact her, the gunners of Xerxes’ air force finally locking onto her as she flew straight across the top of the channel, completely unaware that the gun towers lining the channel were not joining them in shooting her down – their insides stained red and silent. “Now.” Eyes widened as a huge, dark and electric blue form rose up from behind one of the metal walls; Taranis pulled into the air in front of Morgana, her broomstick narrowly twisting to scrape past his huge body as sparks of lightning flashed off him. His mouth revved, opening wide as his spine illuminated and he unleashed a storm of lightning that ignited, overloaded, and detonated the squadron in his path. “First air wave clear,” Morgana

stated, peeling off into the skies with Taranis, and the camouflaged Soteria alongside her.

Something in Solan caused him to freeze, even with his axe mid-swing towards a loyalist's skull. "Hmph," he uttered, instead snatching outwards with his spare hand to the hyena's neck as a brilliant beam of shadow cleaved straight through the channel leading into the city, a heavy metallic whine - followed by a much larger sequential crunching sound - rang out into the air. Solan threw the hyena upwards, dropping down to a knee as a shockwave immediately followed, catching the foe in the air and reducing him to shreds. "The channel is clear," Bjorn stated. "We're in the city."

Jayce stood on the bow of his ship, the Stacked Hand sailing through the shattered harbour and torn open metal walls as it headed straight towards the large castle within the middle of Belluabella's central lake. There was fighting in all directions, Lord Solan's forces and allies swiftly moving to seize the ruins of military targets as Morgana, Falconer and the Dragons targeted them from above, whilst drawing the attention of the airborne therians. Jayce glanced back towards Bjorn, his eyes cold and locked solely on Xerxes' castle. "Some help wouldn't go amiss," Morgana stated through her communicator, flying over the top of the Stacked Hand with a flock of winged therians in fast pursuit. Jayce turned and looked back towards Astris and Arthuria, both crouched and ready. "Go!" he commanded, the pair of them taking to the air, their weapons already marked with blood from clearing the channel's defences.

Jayce glanced to the side, fires and battles spreading across the city as Lord Solan encountered more loyalists rushing to defend Thunderclaw Fortress and its teleportation circles connecting to the Therian King's castle. "Ordo, Jeanne, Zeta, Mai Lu reinforce Lord Solan." They nodded, leaping off into the city to follow Jayce's command. Jayce then turned and faced Bjorn, their roster depleted but far from empty. "Ready?" Jayce questioned. Bjorn nodded plainly, a swirling blue portal appearing at the front of the Stacked Hand.

Xerxes roared in fury as he stood in the castle's main viewpoint: a domed chamber with an open entranceway built from two large pillars that connected to a colossal extension of stairs cutting down and straight through the castle to the shore. It was open air and he could see his city on fire and Jayce Exarga's ship sailing through it. "Do something!" he growled, his waiting defensive army and his remaining War Hounds lining the long stairs in front of him. A chuckle tormented his ears, the black lion turning sharply to face Tanare as he stood leaning against one of the pillars. "This isn't my fight," he stated plainly. "You have orders to-"

"I have orders to stop you from causing any more devastation. This time the devastation is being caused to you, but that doesn't make it my problem," Tanare warned. "You bastard! You will aid me, or so help me-" Tanare stepped forwards towards the Therian King. His hands remained in his pockets, his orange eyes boring into Xerxes' gold. "Fear? From a King?" Tanare questioned plainly. "Are you more afraid of them, or of me? Your city is burning but you haven't extended the bridge – why is that I wonder?" Xerxes turned back to his city. A blue portal swirled into existence right at the bottom of the stairs leading up to him; a polar bear therian stepped through.

The countless mounted guns, armed guards, and Mages all unleashed their prepared arsenals directly towards Bjorn, Jayce, Thalia, Tempest and RK. The giant boulder let out a loud grumble as they tucked behind him, using his large mass and Tempest's shields as a living siege tower as he began to move forwards. "This is the plan?" Thalia questioned in both bemusement and disbelief. Bjorn glanced towards Jayce with an expression of cold fury and subtle curiosity. "No," Jayce stated, the stone beneath their feet beginning to glowing iridescently. "This is!" he declared as Caelie activated the bridge connecting the castle to the main island.

A loud screech drew their eyes upwards, chanting filling the air as Mare flew above them. "Tempest!" Jayce commanded, the djinn immediately snapping out a quick counterspell and floating upwards to engage the War Hound. The guns continued to pepper RK, the rokken letting out a sad rumble as fragments began to break off him. "Those guns will tear him apart!" warned Bjorn. Jayce looked towards Thalia, who grinned before breaking into a chant and darting around RK. A heavy boom of thunder followed as she began to leap from weapon emplacement to weapon emplacement.

A loud trumpet sounded as heavy footsteps stomped down the stairs towards them. "RK, he's yours!" Jayce commanded, the rokken letting out a war grumble and charging into Pheldor the elephant War Hound, the two colossal creatures releasing loud booming shockwaves with each heavy impact. "There should be two more!" Bjorn warned as he broke into a dash and began the long charge up the stairs, the guns and guards around them faltering as Jayce unleashed blast after blast of concentrated Panic their way. "Bjorn, hold on!" Jayce called after him, dashing towards guards attempting to aim at Bjorn as he charged with little thought to his own safety.

A loud snarl reached Bjorn's ears as the crocodile War Hound dashed towards him from above; axe met axe – the crocodile knocking Bjorn's left axe aside. "Move!" Bjorn roared, dropping his other weapon and picking up the crocodile before throwing him at Jayce. "Watch it!" Jayce yelled his way as the War Hound hit the ground hard and tumbled past him. "Bjorn!" he cried, watching his crewmate pick up a fallen axe and

continue his suicide march forwards as a golden eagle descended towards him from the skies. "Godsdammit!" Jayce yelled, darting into the air and slamming into the eagle therian, the pair of them tumbling down the stairs in the wrong direction. Bjorn continued forwards alone.

Tanare raised an eyebrow as the large white bear entered the viewing room with an expression of utter wrath. "Bjorn, was it?" Tanare questioned, standing alone in the room. "If you stand in my way-" Bjorn growled, but Tanare held up his hands. "He's in the throne room, he's all yours, but it's not you he's waiting for. I doubt you're even on his mind. You should turn back." Bjorn roared at Tanare, storming past him towards a pair of golden doors. Tanare shook his head. "Stubborn fool."

His face then hardened as Jayce staggered into the room covered in blood and feathers. "This was stupid of you," Tanare stated immediately. "She will punish you for this, and Alara will be the one to suffer. Trust me on that, Jayce." Jayce shook his head, wiping the blood from his face and then his hands. "No, no she won't. Alara is protected. Scáthach has already tried and failed, and she has never been more vulnerable than she is now. The tide is turning--"

Tanare burst into a bellowing laughter, laughing so hard and for so long that he hugged his sides in pain and tears streamed from his orange eyes. "I never took you as a moron Jayce, perhaps I misjudged you. That woman is not human, not mortal, and she is anything but vulnerable. She will worm her way inside your head sooner rather than later, and when she does sink her claws into your mind you won't know what's real until she corrupts everything you knew. She will find a weakness--"

"Like Valentine?" Jayce interrupted. Tanare flinched, his face slowly twisting into a snarl. "That's how she got you, isn't it? Through him? She offered his life, and used you to take down him and his crew?" Tanare's silence said far more than any answer ever could. "What have you done?" Tanare asked almost silently but with far more threat than anything Jayce had ever seen before. Jayce looked down, slowly reaching into his bottomless bag and withdrawing a large, feathered, red hat. Jayce tossed it to Tanare who caught it like it was made of glass. "He's dead, he's freed you!"

"You bastard!" Tanare yelled, tackling Jayce to the floor before he could even react and then gripping his hands around Jayce's throat. "You killed him!" Tanare roared, raising a fist and throwing it hard into Jayce's face. Jayce's focus met the blow, reducing its impact, but he still felt it, especially as another came almost immediately. Jayce raised his hands to defend his face, but Tanare used his elbows and then knees to pin him to the floor, his fists hammering relentlessly on Jayce's face and body. "Tanare! Tanare, listen!" Jayce cried, using his legs to knock him loose before rolling free and springing backwards.

Tanare pounced at him, his claws erupting into blue flames and leaving large gashes in the stone floor as he slashed at Jayce with an intent to kill. "He made the choice! Not me!" Jayce attempted, but Tanare just snarled. A claw raked Jayce's chest, the flesh cauterizing as it was opened – the wound agonisingly painful. "Fuck you! He's gone, Tanare, gone! She killed him, not me, not you!" "Liar!"

"Tanare!" A heavy blow rocked Jayce's head, his vision blurring as he staggered before a heavy kick sent him sliding across the floor into a pillar. Tanare was once again upon him before Jayce could stand up, another blow following immediately and filling Jayce's mouth with the taste of his own blood. "Tanare!" Jayce grunted, doubling over before Tanare locked his hands and slammed it down upon Jayce's back. A stomp followed before a knee pressed down on Jayce's cracked ribs, another fist following after another and another. "He said-"

The fists stopped as Jayce's vision darkened, Jayce's throat tightening as Tanare gripped it and pulled him slightly upwards. "-You were his brother." A blow sent Jayce's head into the floor, his vision dark, spotty and red, a claw extending across his neck. "You were... right..."

"He said... you were right, and that... he was sorry." The weight retracted off Jayce's chest as Tanare stood up, a soft sobbing slowly burning into a tortuous wail and then a roar as Tanare broke open a stone pillar with his claws. "You killed him!" he cried, as Jayce lay dazed and battered on the floor. Jayce didn't answer for a while, but eventually a wheeze escaped him. "I... did," he confessed. "I gave him hope. He wanted you to be free."

Tanare shook his head, pacing back and forth as his eyes glanced from Jayce's bloody body to the red feathered hat. "Why did you go there? Why couldn't you just leave things alone and stay away like I warned you?" Tanare yelled. "Because... because you were my hero, Tanare. You, Dick, all the other Valentinos. Everything I am, everything I have become... was because of you." Tanare looked at the bloody kid on the floor, shaking his head before letting out a groan as he looked up at the ceiling. "You don't idolise Pirates, Jayce." Jayce let out a wheezing chuckle. "Bit late now." Tanare shook his head, his eyes glancing towards the golden doors to the throne room. "Your friend is in there, do I need to rescue him?" Tanare questioned. Jayce gave a broken smile, shaking his head. "He'll be fine."

Bjorn slowly crept into the throne room, scanning the corners of opulent room. Only one person was inside, the black lion therian, Xerxes sat on his black and platinum throne, his face twisting from distinct fear to confusion. "You are not Betrayer Exarga," Xerxes said somewhat dismissively, standing up from his throne and breathing a sigh of relief. "And you think that will save you?" Bjorn growled,

approaching the centre of the room with his axe in hand. "You, Bjorn, are not him. I do not have time to deal with you so use that axe wisely and kill yourself."

"I'm getting fed up of being compared to him. And you have every last second of your remaining life to deal with me," Bjorn stated, tossing aside the axe and raising his fists. Xerxes chuckled, shaking his head. "You seem to misunderstand me. You are not really a Pirate Lord. You are nothing compared to me, and the only reason I haven't killed you before now was because of your crew. Because of your Captain."

Ice slowly spread across the golden doors behind Bjorn, sealing the room shut. "That's not happening today," Bjorn stated, ice spreading across his hands to form jagged gauntlets. Xerxes flexed his fingers, his claws glistening in the light as he leant forwards in preparation to leap at Bjorn. "So be it."

Seize the Seas Tales: Wanted Dead, Mostly Just Dead

Wicke stared up at the large ship that had seemingly appeared from nowhere. It bore bold red colours, the markings showing symbology of a kraken. "Move us out of it's way!" she cried out, Morgause desperately turning the Reliable's wheel. With little space to spare the two ships skirted past each other, but, as Wicke rushed to the stern of the Reliable to yell obscenities at the large ship that had almost crashed into them, she faltered. Her eyes locked onto a mob of soldiers dressed in red armour, all stood with their rifles and cannons aimed down towards the Reliable. "That's them! Sink them!" came a command, the crew and ship opening fire.

Morgause angled the Reliable to sail in the opposite direction of the mercenary ship, hoping somewhat desperately to put some distance between it and them. "Who the hell are they?" Morgause questioned towards Wicke as she chanted and channelled the wind into the sails. "I don't know, I don't recognise them, but there's no way they're going be able to catch us on their current approach and with this wind." The front of the Reliable broke apart, water quickly gushing onto the planks as a grey-haired man landed on the wood with a crunch. "I wouldn't be so certain," stated Raido Krast, his eyes glowing blue and red, and a pair of thin swords in his hands.

Chapter 235: Blood for Blood

Xerxes struck first, and he struck hard, tearing four sharp claws upwards through Bjorn's shirt and the body armour underneath, drawing blood. Bjorn shattered the ice on his left fist, catching the other strike and throwing a mean right hook deep into Xerxes' face. The pair of them staggered backwards from each other before immediately rushing forwards at each other. Frozen mist flowed off Bjorn's icy body whilst invisible flames of Focus wreathed Xerxes' body.

Bjorn took a firm blow from Xerxes', accepting the claws in exchange for a firm grip on Xerxes' left arm, which Bjorn immediately wrenched, twisted and snapped – piercing bone out through Xerxes' flesh. The lion therian roared in anguish, closing his right fist and delivering a critical uppercut to Bjorn's jaw. Blood filled his mouth as they parted once again, Xerxes' fur melting away in a soft green glow to reveal a human arm – that almost immediately vanished as the now healed therian arm returned.

"This crusade of yours is foolish," Xerxes grunted, as Bjorn spat blood onto the floor and wiped his mouth. "A hypocrite too?" Bjorn returned. "Your arrogance and stupidity knows no bounds. The Empire is gone, the Blood Wars finished! Had you realised that then our kind wouldn't need to continue suffering. Suffering that you have unleashed upon us!" Bjorn roared, charging forwards and slamming an ice-encased fist into Xerxes' chest.

The lion leapt upwards, driving his knee towards Bjorn's head, but Bjorn grabbed him, slamming him down hard before lifting up his own huge leg and stomping down. The lion rolled to the side, the ground cracking where his head had been. "Suffering? Our people are stronger than they have ever been before. I have brought in more tribes from the Old and New World than any King before!" "For what end? There is no war other than one you're making. The Blood Wars are over!"

"Not for me!" Xerxes ducked under Bjorn's heavy swings, his claws attempting to rake through the ice armour Bjorn kept building across his body. Instead Xerxes formed fists, throwing heavy impact after heavy impact, the blows shattering the ice and rippling Bjorn's flesh. His body screamed in agony, agony that instead funnelled into his rage. Bjorn grabbed the lion, lifting him up and smashing him down hard onto his knee.

Xerxes groaned in pain, the fur across his back vanishing before reappearing as he once again transformed in order to heal himself. "This war will not end until I slaughter all who took away my life!" he roared, pouncing forwards away from Bjorn before leaping back at him and raking his claws across Bjorn's left cheek. "Crach is

dead - you killed him! You could have had your father! I could have had mine, but you took him from me too! This crusade is hurting us more than anyone else."

"It is all I have!" Xerxes screamed, the pair of them locked into a flurry of swipes, slashes, fists and kicks. "You have your daughter, Thalia!" Bjorn countered, lifting his head back and slamming it hard into Xerxes' face. The lion staggered backwards, his nose broken and left eye damaged. For a moment the lion's head disappeared, replaced instead by the face of a man with an expression Bjorn had seen all-too-commonly within his own mirror. The mane returned along with a snarl and Xerxes tackled Bjorn, knocking him to the floor before tearing into him with a savage rampage of slashes. Bjorn blocked with his arms, ignoring the pain and blood to instead slam a firm elbow into Xerxes' jaw, knocking him off him.

Bjorn flicked away the large volume of blood on his arms and hands as he stood up, ice encasing his wounds to temporarily seal them closed. Xerxes was on the floor, leaning on his elbow and panting as he regained his breath. "She would still accept you," Bjorn offered, the grizzled image of the man he could become in front of him. "The child?" Xerxes questioned with a chuckle, shaking his head and getting back up. "She's nothing more than a possession I gave away, a broken toy that the stubborn old fool attempted to replace me with. Crach, Magnus, all of the other old beasts from the past – they all hung on far longer than nature ever would have allowed. The old die and the young replace them – that is the rule of the wild, the rule of the beasts that we are!"

"Yet more young have died than old! The Blood Wars harmed far more children like yourself, like me, than any of the elders. Your war killed my boys! They were innocent, and could have been so much more!" Bjorn cried, his hands down by his side as he implored Xerxes to think, to throw away his old grudges. But the lion laughed, each cold and cruel chuckle rumbling around the throne room. "Then they must have been weak. Have more; women are plentiful and I will happily find you the best if you join me? Men like us should have our pick and only the strongest that we sire should even be recognised. Join me, Bjorn, let's kill Exarga together."

Bjorn stepped forwards toward the extended hand. His eyes slowly looked down at it and the desperate lion in front of him stalling for his body to recover. "You're not a therian. You're barely even a man. There's no saving you." Bjorn struck fast and hard, a firm blow straight to Xerxes' throat before a heavy blow to his knees. The lion coughed and gasped but countered with a series of fast and wild slashes aiming for Bjorn's neck. Bjorn felt his body pause for a moment, refusing to listen to him as blood loss and exhaustion began to overwhelm him. There was no telling how long they had been fighting for but he could still hear battles occurring across the island.

Xerxes' seemed to realise the same thing, he was no longer transforming parts of his body to repair himself and his eyes glanced towards the axe that Bjorn had discarded when he had entered the room. "You're waning, weakening. You will die, Xerxes. But will you die a therian or as just a man," Bjorn goaded, stepping forwards. Xerxes lunged for the axe but Bjorn grabbed his tail and yanked him backwards, his claws leaving deep scratches in the floor. Xerxes pushed himself up, turning on Bjorn in desperation and biting hard into his shoulder.

Bjorn let out a scream of pain before gritting his teeth and growling as he grabbed Xerxes' arms and pinned them to his side. Xerxes continued to bite so Bjorn pulled his head back and then slammed it into the lion with as much force as he could muster. Xerxes lifted his legs up and pressed against Bjorn, breaking free in a somersault before diving towards Bjorn with both claws ready and his mouth wide open as he roared.

Bjorn stomped, a large icicle piercing upwards into Xerxes' stomach, slowing him just enough for Bjorn to throw the heaviest punch of his life into the lion's open lower jaw. Flesh tore and bone shattered, Xerxes' lower jaw flying free. The ice crumbled beneath him as he fell to his knees, his tongue flapping loose and mouth spurting blood. His golden eyes were mixed with blood and rage as he looked up at Bjorn whilst on death's door.

A guttural growl escaped the Therian King as he made one final lunge and thrust his clawed hand into Bjorn's side. Bjorn held him in place as he felt Xerxes' desperately push his hand deeper and deeper into his wound, and instinctively, with little else left, Bjorn bit down, hard onto Xerxes' throat. He crunched through skin, sinew and muscle until he felt cartilage, before he pulled back and spit out the flesh and blood in his mouth. Xerxes hung on in the last moments of his life, questioning if he could survive as a man, but Bjorn finished it without mercy – pushing his hand into the wound and ripping upwards.

Xerxes' severed head was heavy in his hand, the headless corpse flopping to the floor by his feet with its arm still outstretched into Bjorn's side. With a pained grunt, Bjorn pulled it free with his spare arm, immediately hugging the spurting wound as he raised up the severed head of Xerxes and looked into his eyes. They were full of rage, a snarl held even in death. Bjorn let it drop, reaching for his bottomless bag for a healing potion before applying it to the wound – a nasty scar replaced the hole but there were dozens of less grievous wounds still on him. With a steady grunt of pain, Bjorn glanced towards the therian throne. It sat empty, calling to him, but he turned away, picking up Xerxes' head and departing the throne room.

The golden doors opened and Tanare immediately turned towards it, taking his eyes off the beaten and bloody form of Jayce on the floor. Where he had been expecting a black lion, instead he found a white and red polar bear striding through with a bloody head in his right hand. Bjorn paused as he looked at Tanare, a large red and feathered hat on his head and the body of Jayce on the floor. "King," Tanare greeted with a simple nod, but the severed head landed at his feet and Bjorn shook his head.

"I want nothing to do with this," Bjorn stated, gesturing around him. "Any of this," he added, gesturing towards Jayce. Tanare nodded, looking down at Xerxes' jawless head. "Bjorn..." came Jayce's weak voice, but the polar bear therian ignored him, instead maintaining his gaze on Tanare. "I'm sure he deserved it," Bjorn stated, "but he is my Captain, and unfortunately he's normally good at reading people. Jayce was desperate to get you back, and it seems in some way he has. I killed Xerxes for my sons, not for the throne. You know as well as I that these people need a leader, a King, and someone needs to take Xerxes' place as Pirate Lord and King. I don't want it, I'm guessing you don't either?"

"Not particularly," Tanare stated, "but I don't have a choice. It's what my Captain would have wanted for me." Bjorn nodded and stepped towards Jayce before somewhat roughly picking him up and slinging him over his shoulder. "The Sovereign won't like any of this and I'm needed by my crew to prevent Jayce from replacing her. Can I trust you to lead these people better than the two that came before? To protect them, and not drag them into meaningless acts of revenge?" Bjorn asked. Tanare shrugged and Bjorn couldn't help but admire the honesty. "I don't know who or what I am anymore. I don't have anyone left." "You have him," Bjorn stated, tilting his head towards Jayce. "And, with a push, me. Go, the people won't care who, as long there is a story they will follow you as King."

Tanare picked up the severed head and, with a sigh, stepped forwards towards the broken pillars marking the entrance to the viewing chamber. He stopped as he smelt fresh air, the bright light blinding him for a moment before giving way to two armies fighting one another on the long road of stairs leading down before him. With little care he threw the head forwards. It bounced, and kept bouncing, before eventually rolling down the stairs. With each group it passed they froze and looked up towards him, eyes wide in surprise and shock. The head kept rolling, leaving marks of blood and fur and eventually bone behind before it came to a final stop in a mushy pile. All eyes looked up towards Tanare. "Kneel," he commanded as Therian King.

"What happened to him?" Yuthura questioned in mild panic, as Bjorn dropped Jayce like a bloody sack of potatoes onto the Stacked Hand's deck. He himself then slumped over onto a sunbed, holding his freshly scarred side as the final drops of adrenaline

left his system. "He deserved it," Bjorn made sure to add before passing out. Yuthura scoffed, shaking her head at the pair of them before getting to work.

The Rising Aces didn't stick around. Tanare watched as the crew fell back to their ship, their role in the war over and the majority of Xerxes' loyalists having already surrendered. A few pockets of resistance were still present but Tanare held little concern over them. Instead he sat in his deliberately emptied throne room, looking down at the headless corpse of Xerxes as he waited. A burning portal tore open the air and a not-overtly-tall red-headed woman stepped through, her brown and purple glowing eyes locked directly onto Tanare.

"Care to explain this mess?" Scáthach asked plainly, her voice surprisingly low and brimming with anger. Tanare stood up from his throne, stepping forwards but leaving a deliberate distance between them. "I don't answer to you, not anymore," he growled. She tilted her head, her lips pursing before spreading into a smirk as she shook her head and stepped towards him. "So you heard," she stated, glancing up to Valentine's hat as it sat on Tanare's head. Her eyes then glanced towards the blood covering his body and Xerxes' corpse. "I did," he returned, taking off the hat and setting it down on the throne behind him.

"But it wasn't me who killed Xerxes. This isn't even my blood," he growled, the hairs across his body glowing before erupting into an orange flame, that then turned blue as it boiled away Jayce's blood. Scáthach faltered as he took a flaming step forwards, scorch marks on the ground beneath him. Xerxes' body erupted into flame as the heat was channelled towards Scáthach, but she bathed within it, her eyes cold and still locked onto Tanare. "I'm not afraid of you, Sovereign," he growled. The golden doors opened and Lord Solan stepped through, along with Mare – her right eye covered in an eyepatch. "King Tanare," Mare stated, her wounds from Tempest noticeable but a determination to prove herself visible in her remaining eye, "Belluabella is with you."

"So is this war then?" Scáthach questioned to Tanare. He shook his head. "No, but I'm no longer yours. I'm not a Betrayer anymore." Scáthach let out a loud and exaggerated sigh. "Good help is so hard to find these days," she stated, shaking her head and swiping through the air with a sword to form a portal. "Good luck, King. It's nice to see you finally doing something for yourself," she said, her voice laced with malice as she stepped through the portal and departed. Tanare extinguished his flames and turned back to his throne before putting his hat back on. "Does that mean we are safe from the Sovereign?" Lord Solan questioned, stepping forwards with a little glance to the charred remains of Xerxes. "No. That was a warning to pick a side and to think on our alliances. A war is coming, one way or another. We need to decide whether to fight with her, or against her."

Jayce let out a groan as he cracked his neck. His body was sore and bruised, but his bones and teeth were intact at the least. Bjorn stood waiting at the end of the infirmary bed, his arms folded and several new scars across his body. "Took you long enough," he stated. "Did you really need to let Tanare beat you that badly?" "Probably not, but I deserved it regardless," Jayce admitted, his mind wandering to all the people he had hurt for the Sovereign.

Bjorn turned away but paused at the doorway. "Fair enough... I can't forgive you for what happened, but... thanks for helping me put them to rest," he said quietly. "I know..." Jayce returned, before faltering as he thought about sharing Wam's status to Bjorn, but ultimately he shook his head. "Come on then, we have work to do," Bjorn stated, stepping forwards and leaving the infirmary. Jayce dressed quickly and followed after him.

"A message from King Tanare," Astris stated, handing Jayce a small note as he joined the rest of his crew in the living quarters. King Tanare was a title that was certainly going to take time for Jayce to get used to, but he gave the note a quick read before repeating it aloud. "My people want to say thank you, but we both know this wasn't for them. I hope Bjorn's vengeance was what he needed. The Sovereign visited, so watch your back and be ready. When the time comes to fight, myself and my people will only join you if the winning side looks like it's going to be yours. As of this current moment, that is not the case."

"Well that's... rough," Zeta stated to the group. "What can we do to possibly change his feelings? If the Therians aren't willing to side with us then we don't stand a chance against the Sovereign, her Betrayers, and her Null Legion." Jayce glanced towards Ordo, who nodded in simple approval. "We're going on the hunt," Jayce declared. "We've killed a Pirate Lord, next on the list is not one, but two Betrayers."

Zeta shook her head. "No, not them. Please not them," she begged, but Jayce glanced towards Mai Lu and nodded to her. "We're taking down Strigon, and Alberta Armin, the Cannibal Lord," she stated to the crew. A mixture of voices emerged, some expressing concerns about the consequences and the forces that Strigon possessed, whilst others were concerned with Scáthach's inevitable reaction if they succeeded, but Ordo stepped forwards. "We swore to aid the people under the rule of the Vampires and the Cannibals, regardless of the Sovereign. If we're not willing to help those people then no one will be. Would you rather face them now when they're alone or whilst they are defending the Sovereign? If we can take them both out then we have a definitive advantage against Scáthach and her forces. I am going, who else will?" Ordo questioned to the crew.

Astris stepped forwards immediately, Mai Lu begrudgingly stood up. Thalia cracked her knuckles and pointed at Bjorn. "You stole a kill from me, I call dibs on Alberta," she levied. Bjorn chuckled, nodding in agreement and stepping forwards. One by one the others all stood or acknowledged their next step, until only Zeta remained opposed. "The people will need their Blue Bard, and there will be no greater time to get your music known on the global stage," Jayce encouraged. She swore loudly before standing up with a stomp. "Fine. Let's kill some monsters."

Seize the Seas Tales: Unreliable

"Abandon ship!" Wicke yelled, as the Reliable began to sink - and sink fast. Neither Damian nor Morgause listened, or were able to listen, as the others desperately grabbed anything they could before shoving it into their bottomless bags. They both stood locked in combat against the grey-haired man with two swords, who had carved a deep hole into their ship. He swung and thrust his twin rapiers, gracefully stepping atop the surface of the ocean as Morgause and Damian steadily lost more and more of their footing. His reach with his blades kept Damian at more than an arm's reach, and, with each simple thrust or deflection against Morgause's greatsword, he inevitably sent her toppling into the water.

"Wicke, this is a problem!" Damian yelled out, managing to grab hold of one of the blades only for it to burst into a firm blue flame that swiftly heated up his metal gauntlet to an excruciating degree. "He's not the only problem!" Wicke yelled back, her eyes towards the mercenary ship turning back towards their sinking vessel. "Wicke, get us out of here!" cried Sabine, swimming quickly towards Morgause as she bled quickly from several holes. Wicke began to chant, desperately backing up as water continued to move up along the main deck towards her. "Oh, I think not," stated the man with glowing eyes, dashing forwards towards Wicke, only for Damian to tackle him over the edge of the ship, the pair of them splashing into the ocean. Enki grabbed his ankle, swimming quickly down before yelling out in pain as a blade pierced his shoulder. With the man nearly twenty metres under the water, Enki propelled himself back up to his crew as they gathered together around Morgause. "Go!" he yelled, the group disappearing in a purple flash.

Chapter 236: The Demon Hunter

Wicke almost immediately regretted her teleportation destination of choice. There were a few minutes of fast walking before they were immediately recognised and, the next thing she knew, more than a dozen Bounty Hunters were upon her and her friends. "Just how high is this bounty on us?" Sabine questioned, as they ran through the Capital towards the north-east harbour with numerous hunters shoving aside citizens.

Wicke snatched a new poster off an alleyway wall as they cut through to an adjacent street. "Yikes, that's a lot!" she yelled, throwing it away and slipping through a tight stack of crates. Morgause vaulted over it before Damian smashed through it, spilling straw all over himself. "What's the plan then?" Sabine questioned, slamming her shield into a Hunter that had tried to stop her and knocking her down. "Find a ship, take it, get out of here!" Wicke answered quickly, chanting to herself before soaring upwards into the air. She scanned the docks ahead before dropping back down, the wind slowing her descent. "There's a small red boat, it'll have to do. I think it had chains on it." Cinderlee reached into her jacket and retrieved a stoppered vial of some luminescent green liquid. "That sounds like my territory."

They burst out into the harbour, Bounty Hunters firing shots off at them from the rooftops whilst others charged after them with melee weapons drawn. Sabine used her body and shield to defend against the gunfire as much as she could, whilst Morgause and Damian fought on the backheel to keep the closest pursuers back. A loud clatter followed as the chains locking the boat to the harbour broke open. "Get moving!" Damian yelled, Enki, Cinderlee and Wicke leaping aboard and quickly preparing the boat to move. The small boat began to pull away, Enki tearing open the mooring lines rather than untying them. "Come on!" Wicke yelled, Damian, Sabine and Morgause surging towards the pulling away vessel before diving aboard.

"They're getting away!" came a voice from behind, but it and the other shouts quickly started to fade into the distance. Only as the Capital began to sink into the horizon did the tension present in all of them begin to fade. "What the hell was that?" Damian questioned, wincing in pain as Sabine pulled a bullet out of his arm before applying a healing potion. "I'm guessing that the Guild aren't particularly happy with our destruction of two of their Dungeons," Morgause stated, laying on the floor as she let Enki and Cinderlee tend to her wounds. "Just how high was that bounty?" Sabine questioned. Wicke's pale expression said more than enough. "Well it seems we've got a problem," Damian stated, meeting Wicke's gaze. "But we do have an inside woman."

"Happy to help," Marisha stated, through Wicke's communicator. "What's up?" "Well, I don't suppose you've seen the new bounty issued on me and my friends?" Wicke returned, watching Damian and the others as they flicked through a series of maps. "Not the area I'm with, but hang on – I should be able to find it without much problem." It was several minutes before Wicke heard Marisha's voice again. "Ah, oh dear..." she stated somewhat bluntly. "Yeah..."

"Well, with an amount like that I'm not surprised that you're having difficulty. It's almost as bad as Jayce's in his peak, and I know you remember what it was like then. I'll do some meddling and reduce it as best as I can, but if you're destroying Dungeons then this will only grow. You've almost halved magic stone production in the New World and they're suspecting that you have something to do with the lack of sales to the Republic as well. But I'm surprised, there shouldn't be many Bounty Hunters out there that would cause problems for someone of your calibre, least of all from what I've heard from Morgana about the rest of your group. Who have you encountered? Has the Oni returned to hunting? The Willow? The Ronin?"

"None of them, thank the Gods," Wicke responded, Damian glancing her way. "I thought not. The Willow has vanished, no one has seen her in over a year, she's probably disguised herself as someone ordinary and is coasting off her assassination funds. The Ronin is teaching swordplay in a school somewhere near the Capital and the Oni owns a farm in the Keeps with a few others of his kind." Wicke couldn't help but crack a smile at the thought of the three baddest Bounty Hunters reduced to living simple lives, but her smile quickly fell. "No, we've encountered a middle-aged, if not older man, his eyes are blue and red and he wields two rapiers. I think he has a Demon – his eyes looked like Mai Lu's."

"Raido Krast."

"What?" Wicke questioned, more surprised by the speed of the answer than the answer itself. "His name is Raido Krast. He's pretty famous in the Old World but he seems to have been hired by a mercenary group in the New World." "We did see a red ship with him," she stated. There was a brief pause. "Kraken markings? That would be the Red Wake, pretty tame group as mercenaries go, but they've got some serious funds on them. Depending on your funds you may be able to buy them out, but Raido... he's tricky – stubborn – if he's agreed to hunt you then there's little that will get in his way."

"What about his Demon? He coated his blades in blue flame," Wicke questioned, the others now looking directly towards her and listening for Marisha's response. "He's like a phoenix." The faces all fell. "Sorry, it's all I really have. I don't know if there's a

limit like with Kitty, or what the requirements are, so just watch out." "Okay... thanks Marisha, stay safe," Wicke stated. A scoff followed from the other side. "Little Flame, you watch out. Trap him, pull out his Demon by giving it little choice and he should be easier to handle. Much love to you, stay safe." "Will do, and to you." Wicke looked at the crew assembled before them in the small cargo boat they had stolen. "Let's focus on getting east. There's no way he can follow us."

"Oh you have to be kidding me!" Wicke yelled, as a familiar red and black ship loomed on the horizon. "Wicke, get us out of here!" Damian called out. "I'll do my best!" she returned, stepping down towards the main deck where a large ritual circle sat carved into the wood. A faint flicker of blue light seemed to be darting through the air towards them. "Incoming!" yelled Enki, the blue light coming from a pair of flaming wings attached to Raido Krast. Wicke finished her incantation and in a flash of purple lightning they vanished, before reappearing with a large splash not too far from the Frontier. "Well this is going to be a problem," Wicke stated.

After resupplying at Last Drop utilising a series of rough disguises and false names, the group resumed their journey east. "Shouldn't we just teleport and deal with the consequences afterwards?" Damian inevitably questioned, on their third day of straight sailing. "The circle I have in the East is on land, it wouldn't be a great move to drop our new boat there. I'm also curious to see if it was coincidence or if we are actually being tracked, and just how they are travelling so quickly if they are. All information will help, no information may get us trapped and then killed." Damian grumbled away but didn't argue.

The sailing was smooth for several weeks before the seemingly inevitable red colours of the Red Wake appeared on the horizon once again. "Now that can't be a coincidence!" Wicke declared, chanting quickly and teleporting the ship once again. This time they landed in the Keeps. "Why here?" Sabine questioned, looking at the nearby castle on the shores of a large island. "This is where we made a detour to on our way north. I figured setting down extra teleportation circles would be useful in an emergency, and well, here we are. Now we just wait, but I'm warning you now, this plan of mine isn't pretty."

It took a little longer than expected for Raido Krast, and the mercenaries he was working with, to find them, but there was no doubt amongst Damian and Wicke's group that this was the approach they needed to take. "The Demon must have some tracking properties," Morgause theorised, sitting on the edge of their boat in her armour but with her sword in its gauntlet form. "Perhaps, but it doesn't explain how they get around so quickly. They must have a mage onboard, or some kind of magic item to teleport with," Damian added, leaning in boredom against the ship's wheel. A

faint flash of blue took to the air ahead of the red ship. Both Morgause and Damian readied themselves. "Let's do this."

Wicke watched the Demon Lord from above as she rode her magic carpet just below the clouds. He did exactly as she had expected, charging straight towards Morgause and Damian aboard the Stalward before striking the vessel rather than the occupants. The pair dove into the water, abandoning ship almost immediately before being propelled forwards towards the nearby island of Orange Spear by a waiting Enki. Safely out of harm's way but with the Demonlord in pursuit, Wicke turned her attention to the enemy ship.

Wicke crept aboard under a mirage of enchantments. The various mages onboard were too focused on the island ahead of them, where Damian and the others were engaging Raido, to notice her and the rest of the crew were busy manning weapons and stations. Wicke headed below deck, almost giddy as she swiftly hunted for her target. A grin crossed her face as she found a large runic circle carved into the floor of the main hold. "Sorry folks," she muttered, beginning to chant.

Damian spotted the flash of purple on the horizon out of the corner of his eye as the Red Wake's ship teleported away with Wicke aboard it. "Fall back!" he yelled, himself, Enki and Morgause swiftly turning their backs on the Bounty Hunter and rushing forwards towards a nearby treeline. "There's no hiding from me, little thieves!" he called after them, breaking into a sprint and dashing into the woods. Morgause slowed her pace, allowing Damian and Enki to push ahead, using the trees to avoid the slashes of blue flame that flew her way. Trees toppled behind her as she kept his attention upon her before leaping over a large bolder.

Predictably, he bisected the large rock, stepping through the gap he had made only to yelp as the ground gave way and he dropped into a large pit. "A trap like this won't hold me!" he yelled up, getting back to his feet and looking upwards, only for an unbearable amount of a large viscous liquid to land upon him, sealing his arms to his sides. The walls then began to glow a bright crimson, multiple spell circles illuminating his wide eyes. "Move and we'll tear you to pieces, not even your Demon will help you survive that!" Damian threatened.

"Your ship is gone, Wicke teleported it away – you're alone!" Sabine added. Raido faltered, looking at the various spell circles around him with unease. A small clay doll landed by his feet, a large purple stone embedded in its chest. "One of these circles will allow the pair of you to break your pact," Morgause stated. "Do it and you will be shown mercy, no blood has been shed yet, and no blood has to be." Several tense moments passed before Raido let out a long sigh, the clay doll then melted away before reforming into a golden bird with fiery plumage. The glow in Raido's eyes fell

away, a firm pair of blue eyes looking up at the group that had trapped him. "I am beaten," he stated firmly. "I offer our surrender."

They left him stuck in the ooze for a few minutes until Wicke returned. "What did you do with them?" Sabine questioned to her, as Wicke peered into the hole at the stuck Raido and the Demon sat on his chest. "They're enjoying a nice vacation near the Frontier. I broke apart their teleportation circle so they may be there a while. What do we do with him?" she then asked the group, looking mainly towards Damian. "He's a mercenary right?" Enki questioned. The others all looked towards him. "We could employ him."

"I doubt you could afford me," came Raido's voice from the hole. Morgause presented her sword over the hole. "But perhaps we could come to some sort of arrangement," he quickly added. The eyes fell on Wicke, who simply shrugged. "Could you please get me out of this hole? It is rather difficult to negotiate when I'm trapped underground." Cinderlee stepped forwards, pouring an effervescent clear fluid that melted away the glue-like substance around Raido's body. Slowly he climbed out before kneeling in front of them with his hands up. The Demon slowly tried to edge away, but Raido grabbed his tail and pulled him back to his side. "You had to drag me down with you..." muttered the phoenix-like Demon.

"What do you know about us?" Damian asked, crouching in front of the Bounty Hunter. "Little other than that the Guild wishes for you dead after being involved with the destruction of their Dungeons," he answered honestly. Damian nodded. "Which of you was in charge of this plan?" Raido questioned, holding his finger up to interrupt Damian before he could answer. The eyes all fell on Wicke. "Beautiful, both in mind and body. Young lady, beauty such as yours is far and few between. Please," he stated, getting down on one knee and taking her hand. "Marry me?"

Damian's face flashed red with rage and Wicke yanked her hand back, her eyes wide in surprise. "I – uh – how old- no! Absolutely not!" she quickly replied. Raido let a sigh of disappointment before his hand was swiftly taken by Cinderlee. "A gentleman at last," she said coyly. He met her scarred face and almost radioactive eyes, he raised an eyebrow - as if questioning it for a moment – before a solid throat clear refocused his attention on Morgause. "What arrangement were you thinking of – excluding marriage?" she questioned.

Raido stood to his feet and brushed off his grey military fatigue trousers, his upper body covered with a black tank top and suspenders. His arms were thin but muscular, and covered in various scars. His blue eyes were dark, stormy and almost grey, and a thick brush-like moustache covered his upper lip. "Morax and I are seeking revenge upon the man who forced us together. This may surprise-" "You've died before and

come back, yeah-yeah, not our first time with Demons" Wicke interrupted. "Who and where can we find this guy?"

Raido looked down at his Demon, the bird shrugging to him. "Well, uh, I request that Morax be allowed to return to my body, on our terms. In exchange for helping me retrieve Morax's sibling from an old rival of mine, I will offer my swords and skills to your cause until you cease to have need of me. Do we have an accord?" he questioned, looking towards Wicke. She faltered, beginning to shake her head, but Damian stepped forwards and offered a hand to shake. "We accept," he interrupted, taking lead and command from Wicke. Raido shook Damian's hand, his eyes glancing briefly towards Wicke before locking firmly on Damian. "You are the leader, then?" Raido eased cautiously. Wicke opened her mouth, but decided against speaking. "Yes. Yes I am," Damian declared.

Tracking down Raido's rival was easier said than done, but after weeding out several batches of Bounty Hunters, he eventually made his move, falling for almost an identical trap that had sealed Raido's fate. "Ha-ha!" Raido boasted triumphantly from the top of the hole in the floor. "Raido!" cried Alan Corr, a rather frail-looking older man with glowing green and blue eyes. "I'll kill you all over again for this! You're a disgrace to the title of Bounty Hunter!"

"Go to hell old man! I'll never forgive you for making me marry that witch of a sister of yours!" Raido yelled down. "Now hand over Avnus and we'll let you live!" Damian and Wicke looked at each other in disbelief, shaking their heads that they had ever worried about either of the crazed old men in front of them. "Never, I'd rather die than give her up to the likes of you!" returned Alan. Damian swore under his breath, stepping forwards to the edge of the pit. "Avnus, my brother has your King on his ship. Abandon this guy and we'll take you to... uh-"

"Baal," Wicke answered. Damian looked back towards her and nodded appreciatively. "Yeah, Ball," he stated incorrectly. Wicke scowled and pushed him aside, tossing down the clay doll with a magic stone in it for the Demon to inhabit. "Your choice. We also have Belial, and supposedly he has Paimon, Byleth, Asmodeus..." The doll melted and reformed into a tiny vaguely woman-like form, with a lit candle that had melted over her pinkish, scaly skin. "Traitor!" yelled Alan as the tiny Demon clambered up the walls of the pit to freedom. "What do you want to do with him?" Damian questioned to Raido, the older man looking down at his long-term rival and ex-brother-in-law. "He'll be fine. Good luck catching me this time you old coot!" Raido gloated, turning away from the monologue of swear words emanating from the hole towards Damian. "Well, as promised, I swear my swords and skills to you, Damian Exarga." Damian beamed as Wicke glowered. "Welcome aboard, we've got a Dungeon with your name on it."

Seize the Seas Tales: Experimentation of Body and Soul

"Are you sure this is safe?" questioned Raido, the door to his temporary accommodation locked from the inside as he lay strapped to a table with two small Demons either side of him. "Most probably," Cinderlee answered, a loud banging coming from the door as Wicke yelled through it. "It's suicide, stop this now! Who knows what could happen! A body is meant for one soul, sharing already puts a strain on it, two will almost certainly kill you!" Raido looked at the crazy woman in front of him and then at the blocked door. "Perhaps we should-"

Raido screamed in agony as, in almost an instant, a large tattoo of a ritual circle was printed onto his skin. "One more," Cinderlee chided somewhat giddily. Chanting was audible through the door and Cinderlee swiftly repositioned the device on Raido's back. This time he only let out a loud pained whimper before the doorway shattered open and Wicke stormed in. "Quickly," Cinderlee warned the two Demons. "Don't do it!" Wicke warned, but the two Demons lunged for the two circles on Raido's back, the dolls melting away as they were absorbed by him. "Cinderlee you dangerous freak! You've killed him!" she yelled as Raido thrashed against his bindings in agony. "Wait a moment," she responded, with a definitive lucidity that was unusual for the crazed Alchemist.

Slowly the thrashing stopped, a soft dripping of blood falling from Raido's exposed face as he lay limp on the table, but eventually his glazed over eyes blinked, the blue mixed with a luminescent green in one eye and firm red in the other. "This is... weird," he said steadily. Cinderlee spread her arms wide and grinned. "Science!" she stated proudly as Wicke shook her head in disbelief. "That was a stupid solution to an unnecessary problem. Both Morgause and Damian were willing to act as hosts, their arguing will end eventually and this was not needed!"

Cinderlee released Raido from his bindings and cautiously he got to his feet. "How do you feel?" she questioned. He paused for a moment before flicking out his arm, a waxlike substance splattered onto the floor, quickly moulding into a miniature version of himself. "I feel great!" stated the copy. Raido's main body then grew flaming wings. "Wonderful," Wicke sighed. "Now there's multiple of him." She turned and walked out of the room, shaking her head. Slowly Cinderlee stepped forwards before picking up the child-sized version of Raido. "Look dear, our first child together," she said with a grin. Raido sighed as two voices argued inside his head over space. "So it is..."

Chapter 237: Following Footsteps

"That is... really fricking creepy," Sabine stated, watching the wax copies of their group approach the main gates of the wall surrounding the Myst's Dungeon. Raido knelt next to her, his hand slightly outstretched as he concentrated on using his Demon's power. Before the copy of Wicke could even let out a word, they were immediately gunned down – falling apart into wax chunks. A guard cautiously approached the pieces before they erupted into large pillars of blue flame. "It appears that we are not welcome," Raido stated matter-of-factly to Wicke. "So, it would seem..."

Their faces suddenly illuminated as a searchlight locked onto them, murdering their shadow in an instant and exposing them. "Time to go!" Morgause yelled, grabbing Wicke and Cinderlee by the scruffs of their clothes and leaping from the rooftop they were crouched upon. Sabine, Damian, Enki and Raido all dove after her as the spot they had been in erupted in gunfire and a howling alarm rang out across the city.

"They've been waiting for us!" Wicke yelled out, as the streets emptied before swiftly becoming repopulated by armed soldiers in gold and green, and numerous mercenaries clad in personal armour and colours. "Morgause!" she swiftly commanded. The Paladin stepped forwards with her greatsword in hand, as Sabine stood by her side with a large tower shield, blocking the gunfire as they pushed forwards together. Enki warped the space around them, conjuring temporary brick walls to seal off side-passageways and add cover for the vanguard and their followers.

Wicke chanted quickly, analysing their surroundings for any quick ambushes whilst Damian stood by her side as an immediate protector. Cinderlee tossed vial after vial over the conjured walls, green fire erupting outwards on the other sides as the glass shattered against their would-be-attackers. Raido guarded the rear, managing the wax copies of Sabine aiding Morgause's one-woman assault forwards through the tight alleyways as they made their way away from the Dungeon and towards the harbour.

Wicke finished her chant, the group retracting to her before they all teleported away in a bolt of purple lightning, landing back into their accommodation within the city. "Well, that was a disaster," Sabine stated, her eyes glancing towards Morgause as she wiped blood off her greatsword before landing on the few wounds she had taken on her own shoulder from scattered bullets – they popped out on their own as the wounds healed shut. "Did anyone see any markings? Anything to identify whose army that was? That was more than just a stationed garrison," Wicke prompted. The group shook their heads, only for a soft cough to draw their attention towards the window. "You might want to look at this," Raido said nervously.

They crowded around him, all peering up in a mixture of shock, horror, nervousness, and Cinderlee's giddy grin as a huge crimson airship hovered over the city of Kraken's Grave bearing the markings of the city's namesake. A huge voice boomed down from above, shaking the window in front of them. "I know you're down there, little rats! You cannot hide from me, not now – not after all you have done to interfere in my business!" came a deep rumbling growl, as searchlights lit up the city from above. "You have one hour to show yourselves, or I shall begin to burn down this city! And just to make certain you are aware that this is legitimate..."

A bay opened on the underbelly of the colossal airship and it began to rain explosive rockets down upon the harbour, painting the city in orange flame and shattering the window they had been stood by, as ships detonated one after another, their passengers and the dockworkers diving pointlessly into the waters to avoid certain and inevitable death. The explosions didn't stop for several minutes, leaving nothing behind but an eerie silence broken by screams and burning. No one dared say anything, they all stood frozen by the shattered window watching the city burn because of them, but eventually Cinderlee scratched her head and picked glass out of her hair. "Seems a bit dramatic, I could have blown up the harbour with a single bomb. Maybe he's hiring..."

Slowly the others looked at her, some shaking their heads, others just shutting their eyes and letting out a long exhale... except for Wicke and Damian, who both met each other's gaze and then Cinderlee's sadistic grin, as the flames reflected off her sickly green and bloody eyes. "Get to work then," Wicke commanded, cutting through Damian's hesitation. "It may take longer than an hour," Cinderlee stated, before giggling as she skipped away with excitement to her room and slammed the door shut.

"What have you just commanded?" Enki questioned cautiously, his hands over his head as he tried to block out the screams across the city. "This isn't my first war," Wicke stated, looking to Morgause for confirmation on her decision. "I don't know enough about the Kraken to negotiate with him, and quite honestly – if we were in his position, where we have wiped out probably half his income and influence within the Guild – I don't think I would negotiate. The best equivalent I can think of is if my grimoires were destroyed-"

"-Or if we were killed?" Sabine inserted, somewhat fearful of Wicke's answer. But Wicke nodded, giving a soft and genuine smile to her friend. "The Kraken governs trade of magic crystals and controls the Guild's influence within the Dungeons," Wicke informed. It wasn't new information, and Damian was more than aware of it, but it did remind him just how big of an enemy they had inevitably been pushing into a corner. This was bound to happen, and although there was nothing to stop them

from just leaving to target the southern Dungeon, he couldn't help but feel guilty – guilty of what influence he had had on the people of Kraken's Grave. This was their fault and, come the end of the day, the people were just collateral to the Kraken's message: mess with the Guild and there are consequences.

Wicke stood tapping her foot in thought, her mind working up plans and back-ups. It was far from Damian's specialty; he had never been good at thinking before acting and as anger bubbled within him, he didn't want to wait for whatever she was planning. "Raido, do you mind having a talk with me for a moment?" Damian questioned. Eyes glanced towards him before falling inevitably back on Wicke. "Of course," the older man stated, following Damian away from the group outside of their accommodation. Damian watched Raido's back as he stepped away from the corridor outside of their apartment and went back inside. A pair of feet went with him, but they weren't as heavy as Damian's, despite wearing his shoes. He turned and walked away. Jayce had told him to protect Wicke. This was the best way he could.

Damian didn't know what to think of the flyer that had landed in front of him; his arms were bound behind him – anti-magic chains of course – and the armoured guards around him had their weapons trained on him at all times. It had a large propeller above it, and spewed out dark smoke like most other flyers, but this one seemed more focused on going up and down rather than forwards. "Get in," commanded a Guild soldier almost a foot taller than him. Damian obliged, his eyes still on the burning harbour as the flyer took him up and into the belly of the Kraken's airship.

He was marched through metal corridors, passing more guards than he could count as he headed through rooms packed with crates of magic stones and weaponry. It seemed like the Kraken was stockpiling for something, preparing for something bad. Eventually Damian was pushed through a large pair of golden doors and he stumbled before falling to his knees on a large red carpet. He looked up with a growl at a large oak desk, a huge circular window behind it and a similarly round man looking down at him. His numerous necks were covered in gemstone-adorned jewellery, and various rings laden with magic stones covered his swollen fingers. His nails were manicured, his huge shirt pressed but with the sleeves rolled up – displaying black tentacle-like tattoos against his dark skin - and a gentle waft of some sweet scent flowed off him. He was clean-shaven, a huge ball of dark curly hair covering his head. A pair of red sunglasses covered his eyes, despite it being nighttime.

"Where are the rest of your friends?" he rumbled, his chair creaking as he sat forwards and locked his fingers. Damian tried to stand up, only for the butt of a halberd to knock him back down. "Busy," Damian lied, trying not to show off how much the impact had hurt. "They've left the city, heading for the south Dungeon." The Kraken

growled, his teeth bright and shiny – and made of a silver metal. His chair groaned as he stood up, and with a large and firm hand he grabbed the edge of his desk before sliding it aside in a swift movement that widened Damian's eyes. The Kraken grabbed Damian by the neck with his meaty hand, lifting him off the ground and dangling him in his grip: he was almost two feet taller than Damian, a real mountain of man.

"Then for what reason do you have any value to me?" questioned the Kraken. "I'm the only... one who can... call them back," Damian gasped, writhing in the Kraken's grip. "And for what reason would I want that? I've already spent the funds required for my fellow to be waiting for your friends. They're doomed one way or another, regardless of if it's by my hands or theirs. The issues that you and your group have caused to me ends tonight, one way or another!"

The grip lessened and Damian dropped to the floor, the various guards in the room stepping forwards once more to ensure that he had little chance of rebellion as the Kraken loosened his cuffs and rolled up his sleeves. "Wait!" Damian yelled out, holding up his hands as the Kraken picked up a studded metal pole. "I've come to bargain," Damian spoke quickly, his eyes counting the guards and their positions by him. "And what could I possibly want from you? You've decimated my operations, kid, this is beyond business now."

"Magic stones. You can make them without the Dungeon! Take these cuffs off me and I can show you!" Damian offered. The metal rod was pointed at his chin, the spiked tip gently pressing into his skin. "Explain," came a firm command. "We learnt that they are extractable from magicians, that it's a simple process that anyone can do to produce stones relevant to their capabilities. I'm hardly a Mage but even I can make them. No more Dungeons, no more expeditions," Damian answered, extending out his cuffed hands.

The Kraken nodded to his guards, stepping back and folding his arms as Damian rubbed his wrists. Slowly and cautiously, he formed a tiny stone in his palm before showing it off. A chuckle escaped the Kraken before broadening into a bellow. "Tell me how," he commanded to Damian, revelling moments later at the far larger stone in his own palm. "Preposterous... it's almost unbelievable that that is all it took. All this time... all this effort... for something so simple." "You don't need the Dungeons anymore," Damian said quickly, slowly standing up. "In exchange for the destruction of the previous two and the other two – this method is yours," Damian offered. "Let us go, we'll be in and out- "

Damian hit the floor hard as his jaw was smashed by the metal rod in the Kraken's grip. He spat tooth and blood onto the floor as his head span. "No, I don't think so," growled the Kraken coldly. Damian stayed down as the Kraken stepped towards him

and placed a heavy boot on his back before pressing him to the floor. "You've given me the means to print money, you think I'm so stupid as to let you leave with it. No, this clears a debt, but it doesn't ease my anger. Besides, you and your friends were never going to leave. Kraken's Grave is a seat of power that should have always been mine, but its name is disgusting – it needs changing, redefining."

He stepped back and approached his tossed aside desk, reaching into one of the drawers and pulling out a small device. "Captain, you may resume bombardment. Level this place and order for construction to commence once the rubble has settled." The Kraken then turned back towards Damian. "I would say I will make this quick for you, but I doubt I'll ever get the chance to kill another Exarga, and there isn't anyone in your family who hasn't had it coming. You and your retched blood have been long overdue a reckoning."

The entire ship lurched and then tilted to the side as a huge explosion rang out somewhere on the portside. "What the hell was that?" the Kraken questioned, as an alarm began to blare and the window indicated that the airship was drifting to the side. Damian didn't speak, he lunged for the nearest guard and grabbed their halberd, placing them in between him and the two riflemen in the room. Their bullets killed the guard and Damian immediately threw the glaive like a javelin at one of the riflemen. He slid under a pair of heavy slashes and tackled the last gunner, taking away the rifle and kicking the other rifle on the floor towards the doorway.

Another detonation rang out, the room tilting even further and sending the group tumbling across the floor as Damian jammed the spare rifle in between the handles. He hung off the door as the still-living guards and Kraken regained their footing and turned to him. "That was your one chance to leave, boy!" the Kraken growled. "You shouldn't have mentioned my family," Damian returned, his eyes cold and mouth bloody. He let go off the door.

Wicke strode through melted doorway after melted doorway, following the orange animalistic footsteps across the metal. She could only wonder what Damian had done. She and the others had only realised Damian and Raido's deception when one of the external propellers on the gigantic airship had exploded. His one-man assault seemed suicidal, but it seemed to have been working and utilising methods she only vaguely recognised. Either he had been paying far more attention to her magic during their time together or something else was going on altogether.

"What is that?" Morgause questioned, her voice trembling slightly as she pointed ahead to a figure walking through a closed metal door, a scream and gunshots followed from the other side a moment later. "That's not Damian!" Sabine answered, pointing to the orange glow coming off the lava-creature's fur. Wicke darted forwards,

leaping across a melted gap in the walkway they were heading down, the waters of the harbour far beneath her. "Wicke, this thing is going down!" Sabine called after her. Wicke turned and looked back at the group, Raido and Morgause leaping across to join her whilst the others hesitated. "Go, get out of here! We'll teleport out once we've found him!" she called back to them, the airship groaning and shaking around them. "Go! It's an order!" she added, turning away from them and running after the lava creature ahead of them.

Damian pulled out the rifle sealing the doors to the Kraken's office. It slipped out of his hands as he tried to hold it, the handles similarly slippery as blood that wasn't his slicked his fingers. With a groaned pain, the door flung open as the airship tilted once again. He desperately hung on, pulling himself through as the corpses behind him tumbled down into a corner before falling free through the shattered window along with the wooden desk, now accompanied with the Kraken impaled to it by a studded metal pole.

He froze as a scarred figure stood ahead of him in the darkness, his orange and black fur dripping magma and glowing against the darkness. His right hand and forearm looked liquid, held together in the faint shape of a limb. Scars covered the badger therian's head. Damian took a defensive stance, but a figure stepped out from behind the badger, her orange hair flowing around her, a hand on her large hat and her eyes muddled with relief and fear. "Damian," Wam stated, "Your brother sent me. Come on, we're getting you out of here." Damian's eyes rolled into the back of his head, his vision fading to darkness as he slumped to the floor.

It was a different day when Damian finally awoke. He knew that much from the daylight coming in through a cracked window in his room. The sounds of the people around him also told him that Kraken's Grave must have survived the crashing of the Kraken's airship. A pained groan escaped him as he peeled away his covers, his torso was covered in bandages, some stained with patches of blood. Cautiously his hand reached up to his jaw. He felt a firm but fresh scar, and his tongue prodded a hole where a tooth had been.

The door swung open and Cinderlee stepped through with a tray covered in various syringes, vials, fresh bandages and grizzly apparatus. "No!" Damian protested as she approached, attempting to sit up only for a bolt of pain to cross his torso causing him to double up in fresh agony. "Don't be a baby," Cinderlee told him, as Raido entered into the room and took the tray from her before pressing Damian firmly back into his bed. The pain eased up as the older man injected him with something. "That is all, Cinderlee," Raido told her. She flashed Damian a toothy grin before bowing to Raido and then skipping out of the room, kicking it shut behind her. "You were fortunate,"

Raido said firmly, cutting away Damian's old bandages before taking a look at the injuries.

"I don't feel fortunate," Damian returned, trying not to fidget as Raido dabbed the areas with a very cold, stinging liquid. "Without the aid of your brother you probably wouldn't have made it. We wouldn't have made it in time – that is for certain," Raido explained. Damian shut his eyes and focused on steadying his breathing. "What did I miss?" he eventually asked, opening his eyes and looking up at the ceiling.

"Wam had been waiting for us within Kraken's Grave for some time. He had been expecting us to not be so... hasty with our visit to the Dungeon so he was asleep when we set out. The bombardment woke him up. He made his way aboard in pursuit of you after witnessing you being taken to the airship. Your absence was noticed when Wam destroyed one of the airship's propellers, forcing it to begin pulling away from the city. We got aboard with Wicke's magic and we followed Wam's assault through the ship, they found you and got you out before the airship detonated over the ocean. That was a day and a half ago."

"Oh," Damian said softly. "How is everyone?" he asked, carefully sitting up as Raido finished tending to him. "Fine, other than Wicke. Wam has... news, that's not exactly pleasant to hear. But it's out of our hands. She's also furious with me, and more-so with you." Damian itched his head and looked away. "I would recommend rest, but I know better than to expect it from you. Cinderlee has some healing potions that we can probably afford to use up now, given we have an extra companion for this upcoming Dungeon crawl."

Damian dressed with Raido's help finding his crew waiting for him in the main room. "Damian!" Sabine stated immediately, getting to her feet and darting over to him before cautiously and awkwardly placing a hand on his shoulder. "I'm glad you're okay," she stated, holding back a hug as she glanced at his visible bandages. "Thanks," he told her, his eyes locked on Wicke as she sat turned away from him with her arms folded and a pout on her face. She let out an audible huff so he instead looked towards the unfamiliar man sat on their sofa.

Wam wore several scars in both his human and therian form, most notably on his face. His skin was very dark, with a few mottled burn marks across his arms and right cheek. Even in human form, his right forearm was made of magma. His curly hair had been braided backwards, and his eyes glowed orange and brown. He wore simple summer shorts, sandals and a black floral buttoned t-shirt. Even though Damian had met Wam before, his human form surprised him – and that was without the Demonlord powers or scars.

“Good to see you up and about,” Wam said genuinely, getting to his feet and towering over Damian. He extended the magma hand to shake before pulling it back and swapping arms. “Sorry, still getting used to it myself.” Damian cautiously shook the hand. “Thanks. Raido informed me that Jayce sent you?” “Aye, Cap’ did indeed, but... well, it’s all a bit of a mess down south. Nothing we can do for the moment though, so,” Wam stated, before turning and looking towards Wicke before approaching her and sitting down next to her. His muscled mass tipped her towards him as the sofa bent a little, her body resting against his. Immediately, she pushed back away from him, as he laughed, her face flashing red. “You can be mad at him later, boss, what’s the plan?” Wam questioned on a more serious note, remaining sat close to her but with his eyes towards Damian. Wicke glared at Wam before transferring the glare to Damian. “We all know the plan by this point.”

Seize the Seas Tales: Fall of Influence

Marisha shook her head gently as she flicked through the reports scattered across her desk: the death of Xerxes, Kraken’s murder, the Syndicate... Slowly but surely the influence of the Guild was waning. Already companies and organisations across the world were starting to ask for new contracts or were even preparing to request membership with the Guild’s latest rivals. Her hands slid over to a request for services: funding for assassination of Holli and Myra. A small smirk crossed Marisha’s face as she denied it. “Ladies,” she said to her personal communicator.

“The Red Quarter want you eliminated.” A few moments passed. “Understood, I’m on it, writing the dispatch now,” came Myra Yashiro’s response. “Funding authorised,” followed Holli’s voice. Marisha sat back in her chair, her eyes glancing towards her calendar on the wall. Wicke’s name filled a date not too far ahead. “Give us the push I know you can,” Marisha muttered to herself, only to immediately sit upright as a knock came from her office’s door and her mother stepped in. “Everything okay, Mar?” asked the Serpent. Marisha smiled. “Just perfect. I think I’m really settling in here.”

Chapter 238: Shattering Foundations

With the addition of two new hyper-lethal companions, it took far less time than Wicke had been expecting to clear the Mysts' Dungeon – but for once she decided it would be better to take their time at the end. “Is it normally like this?” Wam questioned, as he sat on the rooftop of an ancient dwelling with Morgause and Damian. “The city – yes. Wicke – no,” Damian answered, the bored trio watching Wicke wander throughout the city with a notebook. “What is she doing?” Wam asked. Damian shrugged but Morgause leant forwards to meet Wam's gaze.

“She's trying to figure out if there is a way to free the Wizard and the Demon in the control chamber without killing them both,” Morgause stated. Wam folded his arms, a small mouth appearing amongst his fur. “Could the chamber not just be broken apart and the pair inside forcibly extracted?” Asmodeus questioned, making an unnerving and rare appearance. “Gods, I hate it when you do that,” Morgause muttered. “No, this entire place functions off their life-force, channelling them as living batteries. Forcibly remove them and there's no chance they'll survive, or that we will get out in time before this place collapses.” “If you're done chattering away, I have jobs for you!” Wicke yelled up to them. The trio looked at each other. “Boss is calling,” Wam stated, he and Morgause standing up before dropping off the rooftop. “Hey, I'm the boss!” Damian called after them, letting out a sigh as Wicke pointed at him and then pointed down at the floor.

“Ready?” Wicke questioned to Cinderlee and Enki, the three of them spaced around the Dungeon control room with numerous arcane circles drawn onto the floor. “Anything we should look out for?” Wam questioned to Damian as Wicke approached the control panel. “Just be ready to leap through a portal, and be ready for whatever is out there waiting for us – I doubt the Guild is going to forgive me for killing the Kraken.” Wicke froze in place, her eyes held open as she gripped the terminal.

“I think I have the means to get you out of here, alive,” Wicke said quickly and firmly as she looked at an elderly silver-haired woman in white robes. The Archmages' brown eyes were sad and slightly disappointed but for reasons Wicke couldn't quite understand. “So, the time for the Dungeons to end has come, I can see in that amalgamation of a grimoire that you carry that you have already met my fellows. What is your name, dear?” asked the Archmage. “Wicke.”

“It is not possible by my knowledge to uncouple me or my partner from this system, I am too spent – we both are. I would advise against trying as it may make it so that I am unable to assist you or your companions in leaving this ancient tomb.” Wicke

opened her mouth to speak but the ancient Mage held up her hand to stop her, slowly approaching her instead so that they stood face-to-face. "Wicke, your purpose here is to rescue the past – my knowledge, my grimoire – so that you can take it back out and use it as is necessary. Let an old woman reminisce."

"My name is Selene, the Archmage of the skies. My fellows and I once governed this world, teaching magic to those worthy of it. We raised cities into the skies, built palaces far beneath the ocean, and put magical technology into the hands of all. But that invited challenge, it brought us great danger from a prehistoric age. The world is there to be reclaimed and redesigned by scholars such as yourself, not by warriors or merchants. Please take what I have dedicated my life to and find a purpose for it. Free the rest of my fellows from their bindings, grant them peace. That is all I ask of you."

Wicke stumbled backwards with a white grimoire in her hands, the glass tube in front of her shattered ending the life of the Mage and Demon inside. "No!" she cried, but a hand grabbed her shoulder and pulled her quickly through a swirling silver portal. She dropped to her knees as rain drummed across her face. "Fuck!" she screamed, punching the mud beneath her to little effect as the Dungeon disintegrated behind her, enveloping her and her group in a wave of dust. A familiar voice then cleared her throat.

"Throw down your weapons," stated Corina Liu, a sizeable army stationed in all directions around the ruins of the Dungeon. Wicke's eyes widened, her hands desperately lunging for the grimoire she had dropped which she then hugged tightly to her chest as Damian stepped in front of her. "Corina?" Damian questioned, slowly edging forwards in front of his group. "Gryphon is how I go by these days," Corina said firmly, Ottar stood behind her in a large green coat holding a shiny umbrella over her head. "Of course," Damian muttered under his breath.

"Wicke, dear, I am disappointed by your wanton destruction. These Dungeons are both historical legacies of my family and also rich resources for not just the Emp... Republic, but also the Guild. You've cost a lot of people far more than you could ever hope to pay back, but I know you – and you, Damian – so I have to believe that there is purpose to this. What have you found? What is that in your arms that you are cradling so desperately? Bring it here, show it to me," Corina Liu commanded.

"Boss," Wam said quietly, stepping up behind Damian but aiming his words to the whole group. "We're in an antimagic field," he warned. "She's got us good – I'm not sure-" A loud tutting came from Corina and she immediately wagged a finger. "I gave a command, do it or there shall be consequences. Come along Damian, I raised you better than this. I will not harm you as long as there is a reason to let you go. That is

as far as my personal touch will allow, the rest is just business – you know this better than anyone.”

A flash of the Kraken’s interrogation and death flowed into and out of Damian’s mind. “The Kraken said something similar, but his words were more personal than business – that’s why I killed him,” Damian said coldly, stepping forwards away from the others. The countless rifles all angled towards him and Ottar stepped forwards. “Don’t be foolish, kid,” he warned. Damian nodded, turning back and looking at Wicke. “You should give over what we found. It’s not mine to hand over, this is up to you,” he told her – knowing that he couldn’t sell what wasn’t his to give, and the last time he had tried, it had resulted in failure.

Wicke got to her feet, tucking the grimoire away and wiping the rain out of her eyes as she strode forwards past Damian stopping a metre in front of Corina. “I want to trade what we have, what we’ve learnt, in exchange for our lives and freedom. I need your word that these terms will stick and that it won’t become anything more than business,” Wicke said firmly, standing with her hands on her hips and meeting Corina’s cold eyes. “I am always happy to negotiate on business terms only, but understand that you will have to have something particularly special in order to make up for this.”

“The Kraken is dead, I’m sure that has already been confirmed, but I offer you his entire business. You don’t need the Dungeons anymore, and he was unable to see beyond them – that’s why Damian was forced to kill him. We know how to make magic stones, we also know how and where the Dungeons make their enchanted items, paired together and you have the means to eliminate any need for the Dungeons. I don’t care about them personally, but I care about the knowledge at the bottom – the chance to speak to the Mages of old and ask them a few questions,” Wicke laid out. Corina could barely hide a twitch of excitement, her eyes practically shone.

“I’m guessing you have no interest in the words of a few old Mages?” Wicke ascertained. “I’m sure there is value to it... but the effort involved seems... overzealous. The source of the magic items and the means to create magic stones however... that is worthy of negotiating for,” Corina stated firmly. “I’ll need a demonstration.” Wicke nodded, looking back at her defensive group all plotting their own means of escape. “In exchange for access to the Dungeons and the permission of their destruction, I will give the location of the Anvil of Agron. In exchange for our lives and freedom – I will show you how anyone can make magic stones. Do we have a deal?” Wicke questioned, extending a hand to shake. Corina looked down at Wicke’s muddy hand. Cautiously she shook it.

Rather curiously, Ottar stepped forwards and took out a silver disk from his pocket. He pressed a button on it and it began to hover before spinning so fast that it looked like a floating sphere. "The antimagic field is disrupted within two metres of the disk," he confirmed. Wicke's eyes widened, the disk suddenly more valuable than any of their lives. "Go on," Corina commanded. Wicke extended a hand out, forming a small magic stone in her grasp. Corina's eyes widened. "It's very simple. Anyone who can channel mana can do so. Visualise a concentration of your magic essence, squeeze it, compress it, and manifest it. The more precise your vision, the more precise your result," Wicke explained. A Mage stepped forwards from Corina's army, and within mere moments she could replicate Wicke's process. "My Gods," Corina muttered, a huge grin on her face. "And this Anvil, this Great Forge?" she immediately questioned, looking from Wicke to Ottar. "The Scourge, the south pole of this world. Jayce has already visited it and confirmed its existence."

"Very well, you've held up your side of the bargain so it is natural that I do the same. You may leave. Do not return to this place. The south Dungeon will be vacant by the time you arrive – it's a waste of resources now," Corina stated. Wicke didn't need to be told twice. She turned and tilted her head, the group breaking into a sprint as they departed the area. "The field is down," Wam confirmed once they were far enough away. "Gather up, we're heading to the Capital for a resupply and then taking on the last Dungeon," Wicke commanded. They did so, and after a quick chant they found themselves within their apartment in the Capital.

"That was close," Wam eventually stated, laying down on the floor and looking up at the ceiling as he recovered from the teleportation. "Too close," Morgause agreed. "There is also no chance that this Gryphon will keep her word is there?" she then asked. "Corina has no need for the Dungeon anymore, she won't waste resources there, not whilst she can concentrate on absorbing the Kraken's operations," Damian answered. "But we still have bounties on our heads." "Those bounties aren't going to be a problem," Wicke stated, "not for much longer."

Marisha grinned as she read the report on her desk: the collapse of another Dungeon, the knowledge of Jayce's Great Forge, and the method of making magic stones. All of them had been submitted by the new Gryphon in a bid for the Kraken's duties, and all of them conveniently also happened to have been publicised to the world by the Syndicate almost simultaneously. The value of magic stones had collapsed, and attempts to make it through the Scourge to this mysterious forge had also resulted in pointless casualties due to the local fauna, and supposedly some kind of undead army.

Magic stones had been the crutch of almost all of the Guild's business. Marisha had also been slowly weaning her mother of her more untasteful trades and practices, and conveniently all attempts to tackle the swiftly growing Syndicate had also failed due

to internal issues and also the surprise presence of ex-Bounty Hunters offering protection. And that wasn't even including the graceful protection of the Delivery Kats.

The door to Marisha's office opened, but this time there wasn't a knock or any sense of friendliness from the woman who walked in. "What have you done?" questioned the Serpent coldly. Marisha slowly stood up and walked around her desk – the time to leave had been coming anyway, the Rising Aces would need her in their fight against Strigon and Alberta, but she knew that now was her last chance to do what she had been working on for the last few years.

"It's over, mother," Marisha said gently. "The Guild is falling, and it won't stop falling without definitive leadership that can override the infighting. That's not you, that's not me, and it may not even be the Sovereign. I know that you gave her what she needed to conquer the Guild, to turn it under her control – I don't know why, I can have a guess, but I still don't think I understand this side of you: the Serpent. I don't want to, it's not the you that I care about."

"What have you done?"

"The Syndicate will continue to grow because it doesn't expect control, or a neutralised and central market. It doesn't need power, or status, or titles – it just wants people to trade and to respect the rules of commerce. It doesn't need Guildmasters, it doesn't need you, and it doesn't rely on the Sovereign to force control. I'm leaving this place; I have no doubt that others will have pieced together what I have done to mess with the Guild's attempts at hindering the Syndicate, to help Wicke in destroying the trade of magic stones."

"Come with me, not as the Serpent, but as you – the real you – my mother. There is no legacy, not anymore, the Serpent will retire – either crushed under the weight of the collapsing Guild, or by your choice. It's too late to stop this, but it's not too late for you. Please," Marisha pleaded. Her mother stood frozen, her eyes glancing to the array of documents across Marisha's desk before slowly falling back on Marisha's eyepatch and scars. "I-I can't," said her mother quietly.

"You can."

"I can't! Everything I am is this: the Serpent – the creature I had to become in order to carve out a piece of this world. This is who I am, what I've become, and all I have!"

"Then what am I?" Marisha challenged, stepping forwards towards her mother. "You... you..." the words caught in her mother's mouth; her voice laced with pain. "I know I was a tool; I know I was born to entrap my father, but is that all I am to you, mother?" Marisha questioned. "Am I just... an accessory to you?" "No, no – Marisha

you are far more than that. You're my child and all of this..." "It's not for me anymore," Marisha interrupted. "I'm never becoming the Serpent; I am never going to replace you. I can't – I have my crew, and we're taking the Guild and the Sovereign down."

"For years I resented you, hated you for treating me like a pet rather than your child, but I know why you did, and I don't blame you for that – I can't anymore. Not after being with you and spending time with you. I don't want to lose you, or for you to be caught up within the collapse of the Guild. So please, come with me – let's leave this place behind. You could retire of your own will before it all goes wrong, take whatever you can and disappear, and when the dust settles – we could be together: mother and daughter, not the Serpent and Marisha. Please."

The Serpent stepped back, turning away and shaking her head, but Marisha stepped towards her and placed her hands on her shoulders before resting her head into her mother's back. "Please, for once – choose me." Gently, a sigh escaped her mother. "Okay," she said quietly. "I'll do this for you. The Serpent will retire today." Marisha hugged her mother tightly, eventually receiving the hug back as her mother kissed her head. "I've heard the Frontier Archipelago has some nice beaches, maybe I could afford a villa on a quiet island somewhere, whilst I wait for you to finish what your Captain started."

Marisha looked out of the cockpit of the Gambit, her gaze landing on her mother watching her from afar. "Good luck," her mother mouthed. Marisha returned the phrase, engaging the thrusters and diving out of the hangar into open air. The controls fought against her for a moment as the aircraft adapted to the sudden changes in wind, but they quickly came to rest in her grip as she left the Guild's headquarters behind for the last time. "Don't do anything stupid, Mother," Marisha said quietly to herself, steering the Gambit east.

"We're in so much trouble," Sabine muttered, as she looked at her own bounty poster and the insane prices on her and the rest of her groups' heads. "Nah," Damian returned, proudly holding up his own poster before tucking it away in his bottomless bag. "This, this is nothing yet. Besides," he stated, unfurling the latest Syndicate newspaper, "I'd say we have some pretty strong backers." The front cover showed his face and Wicke's, both of them proudly shaking Myra and Holli's hands as they handed over the trade secret on how to forge magic stones.

"Heroes of the new age," Damian read aloud. "Damian Exarga and Wicke of the Rising Aces, along with aid from their crewmates, have discovered the long-lost secret to forging mana stones... These brave explorers are under threat from the Guild for bravely coming forward, both the Republic and the Syndicate have deemed these

assassination bounties as illegal and a threat to the betterment of humanity. Any Bounty Hunters who seek to claim the Guild's illegal bounties shall find themselves unwelcome within the New World, and with appropriate bounties on themselves. Sanctions have been placed upon the Guild, and operations within the New World have swiftly come to a close, leaving many confused and concerned for the future of commerce. The Syndicate and the Republic have arranged for talks to discuss the future of trade across the Old and New World."

"Sounds like Marisha and Jayce got what they wanted," Wicke stated, entering the room and kicking off her boots. "Do you think this was always his plan?" Damian questioned, as she sat down next to him. Wicke shrugged, glancing over towards the half-asleep Wam. "Most definitely," he mumbled, Morgause snoring loudly as she lay against his warm fur. "The Guild was a big worry for them both, and now that the Serpent has resigned there's a power vacuum that the remaining Guildmasters are fighting over. The Guild will eat itself with time," Wam confirmed, letting out a yawn and shutting his eyes.

"Then next comes the Sovereign," Wicke stated. Damian shook his head, the Guild was a tool of hers, but he doubted its collapse would weaken her so significantly. "There's still a way to go before Jayce and the others can deal with her." Wicke smiled softly as she looked at Damian and the others in their apartment. "You're wrong. By the time we clear this last Dungeon, I think it will all be over. And then we'll go find my sisters."

Seize the Seas Tales: Our Only Hope

Matteo held his head in his hands as he sat in his kitchen, the lights off apart from a lone flickering candle. His daughters, Orianna and Lucinia, were asleep safely in their beds – their windows and doors barred until dawn. The same was meant to be true of his own room, and any other night it would have been – pointless as it all was. Tears dripped down his scraggy beard, his nails cracked and torn and fingertips bloody. He held his ears, shutting out the screams of his wife Alina as the beasts had broken into their room. "Why?" he cried. "Why didn't you take me too?" he asked, the dark visage of the Vampire at his doorway etched into his mind. The glowing red eyes didn't answer as it took away its bride. It didn't care. It didn't care enough to even kill him. Matteo looked up, his eyes cold and heart broken. Slowly he reached for the candle, snuffing out its light. "Where are you Rising Aces?"

Chapter 239: Heroes to the Rescue

It felt good to have the crew back together, especially once the Gambit looped around the ship before docking with the Stacked Hand. "We've heard that the Guild's influence has all but fallen in the New World," Jayce said, hugging Marisha tightly as she walked into the living quarters. "Your doing?" he questioned. "Hardly – you can thank Wicke for that. Oh, and Myra and Holli of course," Marisha returned, embracing Bjorn and then leaning into him as she addressed the others in the room. "You should speak to Wicke, I'm sure she'd be happy to hear from you." Jayce thumbed his communicator but took his hand away. "We're in the wrong time zone, and they've got jobs to do – the same as us."

Jayce knew that the reveal of Wam's survival would distract his crew, he also knew it was inevitable given the ease of contact with their communicators. For the moment they needed to focus, and there was also the added worry that the Sovereign would turn her attention to Wicke and the others – a far easier method of inflicting mental duress on Jayce and the others than attempting to target the constantly guarded Alara. "Speaking of," Jayce stated, turning his attention to his crew.

"We arrive tomorrow at the coast of Arcastalum, and without question we're going to face our biggest challenge yet." Everyone focused their attention on him, apart from a few glances towards Astris. Jayce's own gaze lay upon her as she sat hunched forwards on a chair, her fingers interlinked and leg bouncing nervously. "We have four distinct targets – none of whom can be allowed to escape. Our targets fall into two camps: God and Betrayer."

A soft tension tightened in the air. "Equally, we have the Vampires and we have Cannibals – two distinctive groups with their own threats and dangers. Until we have more information, we are somewhat limited on how our assault will occur but thanks to the efforts of Zeta, Mai Lu, Taranis and Ordo from their time within Arcastalum we know vaguely what to expect." Jayce reached for the display board, pulling off its cover and displaying the information that Astris had put together. A neat divide sat between the two sides.

"Let's start with the Cannibals," Jayce stated, stepping back and sitting down. Ordo stepped forwards, cracking his neck and knuckles before disconnecting a pointing stick from the board and whipping the air with it. "Nasty fuckers, the name says enough about them," he immediately clarified. "They're a real mystery, but from what we do know is that they operate in a very similar manner to how the Vampires do. They have a God: the Grandfather. Some sort of monstrosity that has warped people like us into the monsters we see before us," he stated, gesturing to a photo of a hunchbacked boulder-like creature with a gaping maw and bulging eyes too big for

its round skull. "They were present in the New World, had a real nasty cabal that was exterminated some years ago. It's hard to tell whether this faction here is connected to them but the similarities in physical features and organisation appears too coincidental for my liking."

"We know nothing about the Grandfather, or its abilities, or how it connects to the other Cannibals. Unfortunately, they may be the more difficult faction to eradicate. There is no evidence that they operate in a hive-like manner, even if we take out the leaders it is unlikely that the others will fall. For this reason, we have to strike hard and fast and with extreme prejudice. Each pack of Cannibals is led by a Mage, they look more human but their grey pallid features are a give-away. Take out the leader first, the others are strong and fast but ultimately should pose no real issue to anyone here. Any bites – and I mean *any* bites, or scratches – are to be immediately reported for cleansing by either our Paladins or Yuthura. Samples have shown some nasty diseases and no one wants a bleach scrub, especially since our old Doc will make you clean out any abscesses with a toothbrush."

There were shared shudders from those foolish enough not to report wounds in the past. "At the peak of all of them is our main target: Betrayer Alberta Armin. There is nothing to say, no past experiences or information that is available on how she fights or who she is. By all accounts, she's a ghost – a mystery that the Sovereign dug up or freed from somewhere vile. She leaves nothing behind but torn clothing. If you encounter her and you are alone, you are to immediately retreat – regardless of circumstances. If there are civilians, or anything else that is relying on you, you are to abandon them and get help. You will die alone and with them. Am I clear?"

Not everyone agreed, but no one outwardly disagreed. They all knew the dangers of the Betrayers.

"Our first goal is to locate the Grandfather. We will link up with Matteo and his family, and get information on what we have missed. He said he would try to aid us, so he may have something that can point us in the right direction. There's no guarantee so we may need to capture some Cannibals for interrogation. Once the Grandfather is located, we will launch a timed assault to exterminate it, whilst another team handles Alberta." Ordo glanced towards Astris, who stood up and took his talking stick.

"Luckily for us, on the Vampire side you have a local expert," she began. A few chuckles crossed the room. "Unfortunately, we also know what that means. The Vampires operate on a bloodline structure. The True Vampire made Strigon, Strigon made the rest and as such he has ultimate control over them and the ability to destroy them on a whim by controlling his blood within them. Last time, the True Vampire destroyed the cells within me and nearly killed me... I don't know if it can do that

again. As Strigon panics, he will throw his Vampires at us with little care for them. He will sacrifice them to heal himself whilst he buys time for the True Vampire to escape. The more pressure we apply at the top, the easier it is for the bottom to be thinned out."

"This time Strigon has taken care to create a more defined structure to his forces. He has several Generals beneath him, all of whom are more independent than before and will not be push overs. We need to take them out first. Once the Generals are dead, we are going to target the True Vampire. At least half of us will be involved. It is theorised that if we kill the True Vampire, its death signal will kill off the rest. It is our main target and even if Strigon escapes – as long as it is dead then we will have permanently crippled the Sovereign's forces."

"If its death will kill off the other Vampires then what will happen to you?" Marisha questioned. Astris looked down. "I... I don't know. But it's irrelevant. With the number of Vampires only continuing to grow, if the Sovereign decides to let them leave then it will be chaos. The suffering needs to end, and if I go with it then I'm okay with that." Marisha shook her head and met Jayce's grey expression. "The squads will be these..."

The air was cold and slightly damp as Jayce dashed through the skies. The others in his crew were scattered amongst the Dragons, Morgana's broomstick, Wren and the Gambit, or similarly using their own Focus to leap through the air like he was. There was a quiet nervousness to them all as they stayed close together, utilising Soteria's barrier to conceal themselves from the ground below them. "Jayce," came Astris through his communicator. "Regardless of what happens..."

He didn't want to think about it. The chance of losing her was very real, the chance of losing any of them was very real. "I will do everything I can to ensure it doesn't come to it," Jayce returned to her, glancing to the side and locking eyes with her as she sat on Zhurong's giant back, leaning into one of his spikes. The moonlight lay upon her, her white and black hair cut into tomboyish side-tails. Her odd-coloured eyes lay in shadow, other than a faint red glow to them. "I know you will. You've already fought the world for me, and... I don't want to lose you too – you or Alara. I love you both, but don't sacrifice the future for me. Promise me you'll let me go if it comes to it." Jayce didn't answer, and she apparated in front of him in a splatter of red mist, her hands on his cheeks and lips placed firmly on his forehead. She vanished as he reached out to grab her and when he glanced back to Zhurong he found her sat turned away from him – her tears glinting in the moonlight as the wind snatched them away.

"Zhurong, Soteria and Taranis – you're to stay out of sight, and at a distance until you're called in," Jayce commanded, as the city of Nolograd came into sight. "And

why should I obey you?" growled Zhurong, pulling slightly ahead with an eager gleam to his eyes. "Because you'll get a far better chance to enjoy some prey if you're not on the receiving end of their air defences," Jayce returned. A sigh escaped the Dragon and he fell back into line.

Jayce analysed the city – Ordo and Mai Lu had given him some basic information but it was wholly different to see it in person. Nolograd was divided by a central river and split into three districts of ringed walls: the Royalcity – holding the dark palace, the Uppercity – containing the nicer buildings, and the Lowercity – the slums of the medieval city. His eyes glanced across the manned walls, the searchlights and cannons, and then up to the swarms of bats circling like dark clouds. "Let's assemble down there," Jayce commanded, pointing to a small clearing within a larger nearby forest.

"Falconer, stay on the ground far out of sight. Try to maintain an eye on the city and keep us informed of what you see. The Dragons and Tempest will stay with you, you will engage in defensive support where you deem necessary. The rest of us will enter Nolograd in three groups. Bjorn, I'll need you in human form for this – sorry. Each group will find accommodation – there should be plenty of abandoned buildings in the Lowercity. Nolograd looks like it should have contained several hundred-thousand people at its peak - it looks a lot emptier now. The team leaders will then make their way to Matteo's."

"Leader A is Bjorn – his team's role will be getting civilians out when the fighting starts, we need to minimise collateral or it will be used against us by either group. Leader B is Astris – you're on Vampire hunting duties, your team will be on Strigon and the True Vampire with me. Leader C is Ordo – find the Grandfather, kill it, and then exterminate Alberta Armin. We'll only get one real shot at this and the timing will be tight. If Strigon flees with the True Vampire then there's little chance we'll be able to get another chance at them. Caelie, you're up."

The crew organised themselves into their prearranged groups. Team A consisted of Bjorn, Jeanne, Falconer, Zeta, Red, Wren and the Dragons – with Bjorn, Jeanne and Zeta acting as a trio within the city, and Red waiting in the waters outside. Team B consisted of Astris, Morgana, Arthuria, Gaea and Caelie – with Caelie holding the Stacked Hand in its bottle, such that Gaea could remain in proximity to her, wherever they needed to be. Team C consisted of Ordo, Mai Lu, Thalia, Yuthura, RK and Marisha. Jayce was on his own – positioned to interfere wherever he felt he was needed, and also to give pressure where it was best suited. "Let's go," Jayce stated. Caelie opened up a pair of portals, her gaze locked far ahead towards an alleyway barely in sight. Bjorn and his partners stepped through. Caelie did the same twice

more before stepping through with Jayce as a trio with Gaea. He looked up as he stepped through, the skies dark and a gentle rain falling down upon his face.

Subterfuge had never been the name of the game, that had been agreed amongst the entire command crew of the Stacked Hand as they had planned out their assault. It would have been foolish to believe they could hide for long within the heart of Strigon and Armin's domains, so they hadn't truly bothered. Darkness covered the city, despite it being the middle of the day, but their greatest cover were the other people walking around. The grim-faced locals keeping their distance from everyone else out of uncertainty. The people sticking to their routines as they headed to shops past hanging corpses or impaled bodies, picked clean by crows or cannibals. Everyone avoided the shadows, so the Rising Aces did too.

All three groups found empty buildings plentiful, most bore past tragedies but there was no time to look too closely at the empty cots, bloodstained sheets or scratch marks on the floors and walls. Instead, they simply set up camp and checked their maps before sending out their leaders. Ordo arrived first with Mai Lu in tow, knocking firmly and quickly on the door that had once sheltered them some months before. There was no answer, so he knocked harder – cracking the wood. The door opened, a ghost of a man staring up at them in shock, closely followed by immediate relief that faded into a broken expression of grief. "Come in."

The sharp stench of booze wafted through the air as he led them into the kitchen, immediately picking up a variety of bottles and clearing them from the main table. "You're too late," Matteo said quietly, sitting down and hugging his head. "What?" Ordo questioned immediately, looking around for any signs of Matteo's wife or children. "Alina... she... You took too long, time was running out so she tried to negotiate, to--"

The door opened and Jayce, Bjorn and Astris stepped inside. A shuddering gasp escaped Matteo as he stood up and knocked aside the chair he was sat on, his finger pointing shakily at Astris. "Settle down," Ordo stated immediately, stepping in front of Astris and holding his hands up. "She's with us. She's a good one," he reassured, but Matteo shook his head. Footsteps descended the stairs quickly, Matteo's two children: Orianna and Lucinia rushing into the kitchen only to skid to a stop and scream as they saw Astris. Astris flinched as the children ran to their father, bursting into tears. "Don't take him! Papa don't go! Go away, monster!"

Astris looked down and turned to leave the room but Jayce grabbed her wrist, forcing her to stay and face the terrified family. "It's okay," she said as Jayce gently guided her forwards. "I'm- we're here to help you. To kill the monsters," she reassured gently, crouching down and locking eyes with the children. "Why do you have... that with

you?" Matteo questioned to Ordo and Mai Lu. Ordo shook his head. "This one is worse, trust me," he stated, slapping Mai Lu's back. She glared at him. "Probably true. Astris is one of us, you must treat her as such," Mai Lu commanded before stepping aside for Jayce.

The family in front of him all looked up at him with wide eyes as he extended a hand towards Matteo. "I'm sorry we're late, but we're here now and we're going to end this, once and for all. Matteo, was it?" Jayce questioned. "Orianna, Lucinia?" he then added, as he nodded before the girls did the same. "Tell us what happened." Matteo straightened up, his young daughters still hanging off him. Mai Lu gestured for them to come to her as she reached into her bottomless bag and pulled out various snacks. Their eyes widened and they darted to her side. A gentle smile emerged from their father but it quickly fell away.

"Alina knew time was running out. She... went to ask for more time and to... save our girls. She managed to escape and make it home, but he came for her himself. Strigon – the Demon." Mai Lu scoffed quietly, but only the Rising Aces caught it. Astris cautiously approached the children as Jayce nudged her. They hid behind the somewhat less scary woman with red and pink eyes but soon peered around her as Astris offered her own collections of sweet snacks. Food swiftly won them over, but Matteo's eyes could hardly leave her.

"I failed to protect her. She's been gone... three weeks." Jayce glanced towards Ordo, their expressions grim and not hopeful. "I..." Matteo burst into heavy sobs before falling to his knees. Ordo rushed forwards, and quickly glanced back to Mai Lu and Astris before tilting his head up. "Come along girls, let's go upstairs – I think I have some more sweets," Astris guided, the girls hesitant but swiftly willing as Mai Lu scooped up the younger Lucinia and carried her quickly away. Jayce nodded appreciatively before turning his attention to the man before him.

"Did you manage to find anything out about the Grandfather whilst I was gone?" Ordo questioned. Matteo rocked slightly on the floor, holding his ears and shuddering. "The-the Grandfather? Yes-yes!" he stated, his eyes widening as looked up at Bjorn, Jayce and Ordo. "I asked around and I managed to get a contact: a C-cannibal in disguise, masquerading as a man. I'm certain he is – there's no doubt." Jayce met Bjorn's cautious expression.

"Are you sure?" Ordo asked gently. Matteo nodded, standing up and rushing to grab his coat. "Could you give us an introduction?" Jayce questioned. "No!" snapped Matteo. "I-I mean, no. I need to be certain. There is a sewer drain connected to the river, not far from here. Meet me there at nightfall. These creatures

have been using the tunnels beneath the city – I’m sure of it. It’s a maze but I know a way of getting you a map.”

“Matteo, it’s too dangerous – we can’t ask you to do this for us,” Jayce stated. Matteo turned and looked at Jayce. “Mr Exarga... I’m no fool, and I can see the expressions you and your crewmates hold in relation to Alina. She’s lost... I know it. I will never find rest knowing that she has been turned or is currently food for that monster, please – find her – and put her to peace. I can’t do anything for her, but I can do this for you – for my girls. The Vampires will be lethargic during this time. You may stand the best chance of locating her within that castle. I will prepare the entrance to the tunnels for you and your group and I will wait for you come nightfall. Please, do this for me.” Jayce nodded, and Matteo departed without a further word.

Eventually Astris and Mai Lu descended the stairs, without the girls. “They’re asleep. I get the feeling they haven’t rested for quite some time. They had a lot of questions for me,” Astris said, sitting down and rubbing her face. Jayce raised an eyebrow. “Such as?” he questioned, leaning forwards across the sink and peering out through the cracks between the planks boarding up the window. “They asked if someone who turned could be turned back. And... they asked if their mother could end up like me.”

“Damn...” Ordo muttered, letting out a long sigh. “This is messy, Cap’. What’s the plan?” he asked, looking towards Jayce. Jayce turned and looked towards Astris. “We have our roles, they haven’t changed. Ordo – your group will go into the tunnels with Matteo. That thing must be down there somewhere. Astris and I will make our way to the Castle. We’ll try to find Matteo’s wife, maybe...” Jayce looked at Astris. “Maybe she can be saved – even if she has been turned.” Astris hugged herself.

“Just the two of you?” Bjorn questioned. Jayce nodded, scratching the back of his head. “The Cannibals need to go first, and the people need to be led out of the city – otherwise it will be a slaughter. We’ll put some pressure on Strigon to draw attention away from Ordo’s group. The rest of that group need to be ready for the hell of a battle that will follow. Make your way back to your groups, hopefully we’ll see each other on the other side.”

Getting in was the easy part, but the castle turned out to far larger than Jayce had initially perceived. Colossal corridors lined with red rugs and dark stone lay in dim lighting, broken up only by faint chandeliers creaking from chains on the high, gothic ceilings. Guards stood watch, mainly Null Legion – their eyes glowing red behind their gas masks, but Astris and Jayce found little issue darting along gargoyles watching over the hallways. “This is hopeless,” Astris whispered, the pair of them observing guards below them. “How are we possibly going to find her without drawing attention to ourselves? She’ll be in dungeons somewhere or maybe locked in

a guest room and this palace is massive.” Jayce couldn’t help but agree, one wrong turn or glance and they would immediately be spotted. “Maybe sneaking isn’t the right approach?” Jayce suggested. Astris looked at him with an expression of disapproval.

They dropped from the gargoyles with extreme prejudice, the pair of them splattering the guards beneath them before striking hard and fast with silver blades. The Null Legionnaires broke apart into the dust, leaving their uniforms behind. “Come on,” Astris stated, as Jayce pondered putting one on, grabbing his arm and pulling towards a pair of giant red and gold doors. They creaked as they opened, slamming shut behind with a heavy bang. “Shit,” Astris muttered, looking at a colossal and dark bat-like creature hanging upside down from the middle of the throne room ceiling. “Well, we’ve located the True Vampire,” Jayce stated, as the creature began to unfurl itself before locking its huge eyes upon them. “That you have,” came a low voice from the throne, some thirty metres ahead of them. Strigon glared at them, but bore a wide smile. A quartet of Vampires dressed in opulent clothes stood in pairs either side of him, the left-most of which was an ogre. “Now, I have to question: why did you come back to my kingdom – after I so graciously let your people leave last time?”

“Dammit!” Jayce uttered, reaching for his communicator as all five Vampires apparated in front of him with intent to kill.

Seize the Seas Tales: Little Faith

Mai Lu and Ordo glanced towards the clouds as they walked. It was still a while to sundown and until they were due to meet Matteo, but both of them felt unusually impatient. “It’s a trap, right?” Mai Lu eventually questioned. Ordo looked at her and raised an eyebrow. “His nails, and skin... he looked off,” she reinforced. “I didn’t notice. His wife’s been taken and it’s not exactly a safe environment for him or his kids. I doubt that he’s going to betray us – he’s not that kind of person.” Mai Lu walked on in silence. “You doubt him that much?” Ordo eventually pressed. “No, but... in order to get in with a group of creatures that are willing and wanting to eat you... you see my point?” she questioned. Ordo did, as much as he didn’t like that he did. “I hope that you’re wrong, but I doubt it. If he’s had to... indulge, maybe it’s not too late to save him. We can try, that’s the least we can do.”

Chapter 240: Kicking a God in the Teeth

Astris leapt backwards, drawing her pistols and immediately opening fire as Jayce merged Sola and Luna into a heavy tower shield. All five Vampires raked their claws against his shield before recoiling as they impacted silver, Jayce took this moment to charge forwards, slamming into Strigon and sending him stumbling backwards. Sola and Luna melted apart before reforming into a pair of silver longswords. A silver-haired Vampire General took an explosive silver bullet to the ankle, her leg detonating in an instant before her life was ended with a flourish from Jayce as he decapitated her. Her head sailed off her body before burning away into ash.

Jayce rolled to the side as the Ogre Vampire slashed downwards with its claws towards him, the impact hitting the floor and cracking the ground. It then burst apart into a swarm of bats, apparating next to Jayce and striking again before repeating the process half a dozen times over as Jayce continuing to dash and roll to avoid the colossal strikes. The other two Vampire Generals rushed towards Astris, the trio vanishing and reappearing across the colossal throne room in splashes of red mist and swarms of black bats as they tried to clear the distance between them and Astris whilst she tried to blow them apart with her hand cannons.

Strigon backed off, the True Vampire continuing to hang off the ceiling as it watched the combat between the Generals and Astris and Jayce. "You were given courtesy, Exarga!" Strigon yelled, watching the Ogre General hound Jayce across the room as it kept up a relentless assault and forced him onto his backfoot to avoid it. "That family your people befriended were spared, my bride-to-be given clemency for her betrayal of her own nation! And still you came back, ever-willing to throw the lives of those beneath us to your causes!"

"Astris, come back to us!" commanded the True Vampire, the creature's screeching and gargling voice piercing into Astris' head. A claw dug into her body armour, raking down the middle of her chest and drawing blood. Astris fired off a shot – the bullet impacting the Ogre in the rear of his shoulder before detonating. The pain and hole left behind in the General's flesh gave Jayce a chance to dart towards it. He twisted, slicing in a whirlwind of rapid strikes upwards across the large creature's legs, waist, and then arm, but missing the final blow on its head as it guarded its head, roaring in pain from his counter-attacks. "Switch!" Jayce yelled, leaping towards Astris' vague direction.

"You'll find no help here, not anymore!" Strigon gloated. "She's mine! My bride! My beauty!" Astris apparated next to Jayce, the two Generals on her following her but backing off as Jayce swung through where Astris was with a silver greatsword. She vaulted over it, twisting in the air and firing her pistols until they ran out of bullets

into the confused Ogre. Large holes decorated his body before the back of his head was blown out with a finishing shot. "And you!" Strigon growled, appearing in front of Astris in an instant – his red eyes staring wildly with fury into hers.

He swung, severing her flesh down the bone on her left arm as she blocked the impact before being sent flying into Jayce – the pair of them tumbling across the floor. Strigon stood ahead of them as they looked up towards him, his nails unnerving long and glinting with blood. Astris tried to stand, only to collapse back down as blood spurted from her stomach. The wounds would heal, but not immediately. With a room shaking crash, the True Vampire dropped to the ground, raising up to its full height behind Strigon as his two surviving Generals apparated next to him, both now wearing fanged metal helmets that exposed their mouths. Their clothes looked different, their waistcoats covering dark body armour and long coats likely hiding more armour underneath. They had taken the reprieve to gear up, and Jayce had no doubt this fight was not something he or Astris could win on their own. "Ammo count?" Jayce questioned, getting in front of Astris. "In abundance, but not on my body," she answered – the various ammo clips across her clothing now or almost empty. "Clear the way out, I'll follow and play defence."

Astris did not need a second command. She would die by Jayce; she would die by her Captain, and she was, and would always be, his soldier. Astris groaned as she rolled to her feet, keeping her injured arm to her stomach to keep the insides from falling out as the skin and muscle knitted back together. She tucked her other pistol into its holster, releasing a grenade from a concealed pocket in her coat and tossing it at the door. There was no timer, it detonated on impact - blowing open the door blocking their way. "End them! End them now!" screeched the True Vampire, flapping its wings and lifting into the air with several heavy waves of wind. Strigon and the two Vampires descended upon Jayce, but he transformed Sola into a small metal shield and Luna into a silver spear. With a flurry of rapid strikes and thrusts he held them back just long enough to catch the sound of gunfire behind him as Astris cleared the way out. He then let out a roar, unleashing a blast of concentrated Panic that dropped both Vampire Generals to their knees – their eyes rolling back and jaws slack. Strigon staggered, but rather than go for a strike, Jayce darted away – the True Vampire diving at him before crashing through what remained of the throne room doors.

"Exarga!" Strigon screamed, hounding after Jayce as they dashed through the remains of Astris' escape. "You destroyed everything I had! Took my home away from me!" Strigon cried after him, flying through the air with his black clothes turning into wings as he flew with his mouth snapping at Jayce's back. "Jayce!" Astris yelled, waiting for him on the other side of the main entrance with her gun aimed upwards, heavy rain pouring down upon her. "Next time, don't mess with the Marines!" Jayce returned,

dropping into a slide as his feet hit stone. Astris fired, breaking the chain holding up the portcullis and dropping it down just behind Jayce's head as he slid underneath it. Strigon slammed hard into it, bending the metal. "Kai!" he roared, apparating through it as he transformed into a cloud of bats that squirmed through the metal – but the impact had given Jayce and Astris a gap, one he couldn't make up as he helplessly watched them dart away into Nolograd.

"Ordo come in," Jayce attempted, as he and Astris got their breath back in an alleyway. Static came back. "That's a problem," Astris stated obviously. Jayce glanced towards her pained and wet face before matching her forced smile. He stepped towards her and gently pulled her head into his chest in a one-armed hug. "You fought well," he reassured her, before releasing her and looking at the rainclouds and setting sun. "They're blocking us somehow, and Strigon knew we were coming and who we were going to meet. This all stinks," she stated, grimacing as her final wounds closed. "That it does, but I don't think Matteo has betrayed us. He's got too much to lose to not help us. His wife is gone – Strigon practically boasted it to us. But he still has his kids and they have no future if this continues."

The air rumbled above them, Astris darting into Jayce and pressing him flat against the wall as a huge creature flew over them – following by an endless chorus of chirps, squeaks and trills as the colossal swarms of bats patrolling the skies dropped down and flew overhead. Jayce looked down as Astris pressed herself into him, her ear to his chest. He could feel her breathing as she pinned him, her own heart thumping against him. She eventually pulled back, turning away and drawing her pistols. "We need to get inside and hunker down; we'll have to find a way to alert the others that the plan has gone wrong. Falconer will know things have changed – that will show him," she stated, gesturing upwards to the True Vampire circling above the city. "It's up to you, Jayce – we know where Ordo and the others are going. What's our plan?" she asked. Jayce looked at the blood being washed off her by the rain and the determined expression on her face. "Let's regroup with our team. We'll go from there," he stated. She nodded. "Aye, Captain."

Bjorn's stomach churned inside him as he peered out of the window of the abandoned house he and his team were hiding in. The skies had opened up, but the darkness of the night had snuffed out what few pieces of daylight had slipped through the artificial cloud cover. Rain fell and it fell hard, the shadow broken briefly by the roars of thunder from the approaching storm. Screams pierced the early night as ghoulish Vampire Spawn tore apart boarded windows and barricaded doors, surging inside before dragging out the occupants into the streets. A more refined Vampire led each mob, walking like an executioner amongst the rows of civilians that had been torn

from their homes. "Exarga!" screamed the lead Vampire. "This is on you! You did this! Come out! Come out!"

Bjorn twitched as he watched, knowing there was nothing he could do – even if he and his team gave themselves up. The Vampire leader nodded, the Spawn diving upon the people like animals and tearing them apart. He knew this was occurring all over the city. The roof rumbled above them, the True Vampire flying low over them – its swarms trailing after it. "No sighting on any Cannibals yet," Zeta muttered, sitting on the floor with her face on her knees.

"No, they're here," Jeanne said with quiet fury, glancing through the cracks of a different window. The squad of Vampires had departed, leaving their kills behind, but emerging from sewer grates and dark alleyways hobbled the white-grey hunchback Cannibals to drag away the carcasses. Both Zeta and Jeanne turned to Bjorn, his entire body tensed and his teeth grinding inside his clenched jaw. His form flashed green and the bear emerged. "Ordo and the others have their job," he stated, glancing up to the swarm of bats surrounding the True Vampire. "We have ours."

Ordo looked at Mai Lu, his caution obvious but emotions concealed, as he and the rest of his team approached the sewer drain by the river. It had taken them longer than they would have liked, and hadn't been clean as they assassinated their way through the city and avoided the patrolling colossal bat, but they had made it and Matteo was nowhere to be seen. "We're late, but..." Marisha muttered, glancing nervously around. The grate rattled and then fell open, causing all of them to jump. "I was getting worried," Matteo said quietly, holding up a lantern as he stood slightly hunched over. "This way, quickly," he told them, turning and hurrying forwards. Ordo stepped in first, with Thalia close behind him. Marisha put the grate back behind them.

He led them through the sewers, the tunnel dark and filthy, but it wasn't long until he pointed to a more natural formation – a smaller side passageway that had been carved, or perhaps had already existed. "Stay close, and stay quiet – it's easy to get lost here," Matteo warned. Marisha faltered, but Mai Lu pulled her along – giving a silent glance that told her she felt the same way. Marisha reached for her communicator, attempting to make contact with the others once more. "Still nothing," she told Ordo. He simply nodded and kept marching forwards.

Marisha eyed the walls of the tunnel, fingernails and scratch marks lay mixed within the stone – either from prisoners attempting to resist their fates, or from Cannibals digging the route, she wasn't sure. But eventually the tunnel widened up into a low but open room, lit by torches made from human bones and oil-covered skulls. The

stench was immediate and unbearable. "Ugh," Marisha groaned, but she didn't have time to stop.

"The tunnels go deep, but rise back up. The Grandfather is far within," Matteo warned, the group passing by empty cells made of bones. "We'll have to cut across the ravines in order to avoid the main dens, but from there it should be a straight pass through the larder to the monster's home." Marisha stopped, the others also doing so once they realised she had. "How do you know all of this?" she questioned, looking towards Yuthura for another voice of reason. "I... I've done unspeakable things in order to get this information... I did what I had to for you, and for my girls. For Alina. Your Captain and Astris will get her back. They will be fine without me. Please, follow me – let us not waste this chance."

They darted through passageway after passageway, sometimes pausing to allow a group of the hunchbacked monsters to hobble past, sometimes letting Ordo and Thalia crush them in an instant with their large weapons. Matteo hobbled onwards, his hunch a bit more noticeable with each step, but Ordo did not falter – his gaze locked firmly ahead. "Oh gods," muttered Yuthura, as they entered a large open cavern, a crisscross of thin stone paths laden atop huge stalagmites marking their path onwards. "Over there leads to the larder," Matteo informed, pointing to a passageway on the other side of the large ravine lit by more human torches. Yuthura glanced towards Ordo. "I can carry you," he offered. She shook her head, instead prodding Mai Lu with her cane. "Fine," Mai Lu stated, slitting her wrist with her nails and creating a more stable path for them.

"Traitor!" gargled a voice from a passageway to the side. The creature then let out a loud warbling cry and almost immediately drums began to echo throughout the tunnels. "Run!" Matteo yelled, darting forwards onto Mai Lu's pathway with the others following after him. Ordo grabbed Yuthura and carried her, a swarm of the creatures bubbling out of the smaller passageways all around them and beginning to bound across the paths using their hands and feet.

Yuthura aimed her crossbow over Ordo's shoulder and impaled a Cannibal between the eyes. It screeched as it scrabbled for the syringe, before, in a rather gruesome display, its skin began to melt away – the others around it all recoiling in horror as its organs fell loose from its body. Mai Lu threw shard after shard of blood-crystal at the monsters, impaling multiple at a time before detonating them from within in chain reactions. Thalia surged ahead whilst Marisha impaled any of the monsters that drew close to the group as they continued forwards. Matteo landed next to Thalia, beckoning the others forwards as the swarm continued after them. "Hurry!" he cried. Mai Lu glanced backwards to see Cannibals using her path. "Oh no you don't!" she

yelled, the pathway shattering behind her and the creatures falling screeching into the void.

She leapt free of her path to stable ground. "Thalia!" Marisha quickly yelled. "Go back to the hell you came from!" Thalia yelled, slamming her anchor into the nearest stalagmite. It toppled, crashing into another which fell into another and another in a wave of dominoes. The pathways shattered and the swarm fell gargling down into the ravine. "Move!" Ordo commanded, putting Yuthura down and surging forwards into the nearest passageway.

They ran through kitchens laden with slabs and cuts of meat, before passing by racks hung with skinned and beheaded humans. It was gruesome and nauseating, but they charged forwards - Ordo slamming aside anything in his way with his greatclub. "Help me!" cried a voice, the entire group faltering in their charge. Marisha turned to the side and threw up, unable to hold it in any longer. A row of wooden racks stood mounted to the walls. People were impaled to them - their bodies cut open and buckets beneath them as they slowly drained of blood. There were pens nearby, a small gaggle of children inside - their eyes glazed over and mouths slightly open with empty troughs and water inside with them. "Doc," Marisha coughed, Yuthura immediately moving towards the children.

"No!" yelled Mai Lu, erecting a blood-crystal barrier in front of the pen. Yuthura turned towards her with a look more of curiosity than of anger. "We can't," Mai Lu stated immediately. "We can't just leave them!" Marisha countered, slowly approaching the last survivor on the bleeding racks. Thalia swung fast and hard with her anchor, severing the survivors head. "She's right. Jayce gave orders for this exact situation," Thalia stated. "He was dead already and we wouldn't have been able to get him out. And those... pets..."

"They're children!" Marisha protested. Yuthura looked at the pen of kids, Mai Lu breaking apart the wall for her to look more properly. "Food," mumbled a child, his mouth opening as closing as if expecting feeding as he looked up towards Yuthura. "There's no telling how long they've been here. And we cannot protect them," Mai Lu stated adamantly. Marisha couldn't look away from the chubby children. "Marisha... Yuthura... they're right," Ordo stated firmly, looking away. "Doc... can you...?" he asked quietly.

Marisha turned away, as Yuthura let out a soft exhale. "I'm sorry," she said quietly, before tossing a vial into the chamber. "Close it," she asked Mai Lu - who erected another barrier and sealed the quickly spreading gas in. It was over almost immediately a cold silence passing through the group, broken only by the crackling of the flame torches nearby. "We end this, for them," Thalia said towards Marisha, a

gentle and unusually caring hand landing on her shoulder. Marisha nodded, steeling herself as the group continued forwards.

They darted down a curved tunnel, the passageway opening up into a colossal chamber held up by five huge stone pillars. It was dark, the only light in the room stemming down from a huge metal grate above the chamber. A flash of lightning came from above – a steady flow of rain dropping down from above. Marisha tilted her head, the vague outline of a castle above them. “We’re underneath Strigon’s castle,” she stated, before lowering her attention back to the room they were in. “Where is it?” Mai Lu questioned; the room otherwise empty apart from a huge mound of grey rock in the middle. Matteo shuddered, slowly backing up towards the passageway they had come from, his finger raising up towards the giant bolder.

The mound slowly rocked forwards, before a long pair of arms and legs extended from it. “Gods above...” Ordo muttered, as the creature reared up – its bumpy spine taugth against its skin. It was at least five times Thalia’s height. “By me,” muttered Baal, emerging from within Mai Lu. The creature turned, its skin slimy and grey and taugth against its bony body. Its body was almost entirely mouth, its eyes bulbous and bloodshot – both of them looking around independently before settling on the group before it. Tufts of fur extended down from its chin and up from its protruding forehead, making it look almost mask-like. With a loud pop, its jaw unhinged releasing a vile stench of rotting flesh that could be smelt even from metres away. It then let out a warbling gargle that echoed throughout the countless passageways all around the chamber. “From behind!” Matteo cried, as more warbles came from the passageways as Cannibals came to aid their Grandfather.

There were no words, no goading or conversation – the monster bounded forwards before charging at the group. “RK!” Ordo yelled, tossing out the rokken. RK slammed into the far larger monster, knocking it aside into one of the stone pillars that promptly crumbled. “You handle that thing!” Marisha yelled, turning towards the tunnel they had come from as countless of the boulder-like monsters darted out into the Grandfather’s lair. “We’ve got the little fuckers!” she yelled, darting forwards with her spear as Baal threw spears of blood.

Matteo cowered next to Yuthura, but as one of the small Cannibals slipped past Marisha towards her, he immediately stabbed a small kitchen blade into its eye. It screeched in pain as it backed away before a dart of blood-crystal finished it off. “Stay close, your daughters need you still!” Yuthura told him, firing off a dart toward a tunnel. The dart exploded in a ball of fire, sending the Cannibals caught within into a screaming panic.

"Mages!" Marisha warned, a ball of black fire flying past her. Baal nodded, flicking droplets of Mai Lu's blood onto the array of corpses in front of him before they erupted into red slurry. "They don't know what magic truly is!" Baal cackled, rivers of sharp blood consuming the Cannibal Mages – their cries ending swiftly as they were cut open from the inside out. Marisha thrust her spear through a neat line of Cannibals, her gaze glancing back and up towards the palace above them and the seemingly invulnerable Grandfather tanking strike after strike from Ordo, RK and even Thalia. "It's having no effect!" Marisha yelled their way. Another pillar collapsed, a heavy chunk of rock sending the Grandfather staggering backwards clutching its head. "We've noticed!" Ordo yelled back.

"The pillars!" Marisha yelled. "Bring the castle down on it!" RK let out a grumbling cry as he was picked up and thrown – the moving mountain not used to being thrown around. "What about us?" Yuthura questioned, firing a dart into the Grandfather – only for it to bounce harmlessly off its hide, unable to pierce its skin. "We can get out through the dens!" Matteo yelled out. "Probably everything that was in there is now in here!"

"Do it!" Ordo yelled, summoning RK back into his orb – the rokken letting out an angry grumble. "Matteo!" he then yelled, as he and Thalia slammed their weapons into two of the nearest pillars. "This way!" Matteo yelled, he and Yuthura running forwards towards one of the side tunnels. The Grandfather faltered as a rock bounced off its head, he looked towards the final pillar – his eyes widening before he let out a warble that sounded distinctively like a cry for help. "Bring it down! It's calling for help!" Marisha yelled, as she and Baal dashed for the exit. Thalia threw her anchor, shattering the last pillar, before pulling it back to her hand and rushing to the exit. She and Ordo paused, shattering the skulls of the cannibals coming towards them as they looked up and watched as large cracks spread across the ceiling. The large grate fell down, the Grandfather letting out a screech as it splattered him to the floor. A black ooze flowed out of the cuts in its body, but the creature was still alive. It screeched, threatening to burst Thalia and Ordo's ears, but then the ceiling gave way – the entire castle above lurching and beginning to topple down into the vast cavern beneath it.

The monster screamed as Strigon's castle crumbled down on top of it, Thalia and Ordo not staying to get crushed with it as they raced through the tunnels after their group, cracks continuing to spread after them as the tunnels began to collapse too, squishing the Cannibals emerging from every hole and den in the walls. Dying warbles and screeches rang out around them as they ran, a wall of dust and debris lapping at their heels as they followed after Matteo and the others.

"There!" Matteo cried, another sewer grate ahead of them leading out towards a slope heading down towards the river. Marisha surged ahead of him and slammed her body

into it with full force. The others dashed out after her, moving swiftly to the side as Thalia and Ordo dove through – a huge blast of dust and debris following them as they rolled and slide down the slope. They lay at the bottom for a moment, catching their breath before bumping knuckles. “We did it?” Marisha questioned to them, as Mai Lu reemerged. Ordo let out a groan as he stood up, slowly clambering back up the slope to look into the collapsed tunnel. A pale hand stuck out from the rubble, twitching slightly. “Too close,” he muttered, turning to the others with a grin.

Seize the Seas Tales: Mother and Daughters – reunited

Fighting was audible across the city of Nolograd, broken up only briefly by the torrential rain and the booms of thunder, but Orianna and Lucinia lay tucked up in their bed – cradling each other in isolation. “Where’s Papa?” Lucinia asked her older sister. “He’ll... he’ll be home soon. He’s with Mai Lu, and Astris! Keeping them safe!” she told Lucinia. The younger girl held her sister tightly. “It’ll be okay. They’ll save us. Astris will save us, and Mama too.”

A flash of lightning illuminated the dark room through the cracks in the boarded windows. It illuminated a woman stood in the doorway of the girl’s bedroom. A woman dressed in blood-stained white, with two holes in her neck. Her pointed ears twitched slightly, her nails long and cracked, her fangs peering over her bottom lip. Her soulless red eyes lay on the girls beneath their sheets, their heartbeats thundering in her ears, and arteries glowing in her eyes.

Screams filled the air, but no one was there to hear them.

Chapter 241: Protecting the Innocent

Falconer knelt in the mud – rain dripping down his head, as he watched the city of Nolograd with the Dragons, Wren and Tempest waiting for his command. Already the plan seemed to have changed: the True Vampire was prowling the skies – the Dragons particularly eager to hunt it – and silence had fallen across the communicators. Jayce had trusted him; they all had trusted him – as they always did – to be their eyes, but he didn't know what he needed to be seeing.

A rumble echoed across the city, but not from the thunderstorm above it. Strigon's castle lurched and then broke apart, imploding as it was pulled into the ground as if falling into some large hole. "I would presume that to be a signal," Tempest uttered behind Falconer. Falconer glanced back, a soft grin spreading on his face. "I think you are correct." He stood up, his bow snapping outwards from his large wooden arm. "This should do," Tempest stated, handing him a large luminescent arrow. "Thank you." Falconer set the ballista-bolt sized arrow into his bow, pulling back with all his might as he took aim towards the centre of the city. "Dragons!" Falconer called out, letting the arrow fly. "Engage!"

Red looked up from the river as a glowing green line arched through the sky and towards the city. "About time!" he yelled beneath the water, darting forwards beneath the surface before leaping out of the river and throwing the backpack he had been given at the base of the city wall. "What's that?" yelled out a Null Legionnaire from atop the wall, a searchlight panning towards Red. In an act of mimicry, he put his hand to his fingers to his temple and nodded to the guards. "At the wall! It's-" A lightning-charged arrow struck the backpack, detonating the charges within in a colossal ball of fire. Red dove into the water, the flames rolling over him. He then turned his attention to the metal grates blocking the water before easily tearing them open and swimming into the city. "My turn."

A glowing green arrow flew over Ordo's head, the group grinning as their efforts were acknowledged. "Now's the hard part," Ordo stated turning to the others. "Doc, Marisha-" Matteo let out a scream of agony, dropping to his knees and holding his stomach. "Help me!" he cried, thrashing on the floor – his insides visibly moving as he lifted his shirt. "His touch, I can feel him!" Matteo screamed. "Kill me! Please!" No one moved, as he screamed and squirmed – their thoughts all uniform: he had helped them, and his kids were still waiting for him. "There must be something we can do!" Marisha cried. "Doc?" Yuthura looked at him with a mortified expression. "I-I... I don't know what I can do. This isn't... this isn't something I can fix."

"Please, I'm turning! Don't let me become one of them! Please!" Matteo begged. Ordo stepped forward, raised his greatclub and struck once. The thrashing stopped, and a

steady stream of Matteo's blood flowed down the slope towards the river. Ordo then stuck his weapon into the concrete before rubbing his face with both hands. "Fuck this!" he yelled into his hands, before lowering them and pointing up at the swarm of bats surrounding the True Vampire. "Fuck you!" His hairs stood on end and he turned, pointing his finger to a crouched animal sat on a broken street lantern hidden in the shadow of the night. "And fuck you!" he yelled at Alberta Armin, her jaw unhinged and unnaturally wide, her thin dripping strands of hair hanging down from her raw scalp and her eyes almost entirely pupil as she watched the group.

Everyone other than Yuthura and Marisha both froze in place, their eyes wide in terror as the Cannibal Betrayer stared down at them with utter hatred and ferocity. "What have you done?" came a high-pitched screech from the monster above them. "Go to hell!" Ordo yelled, grabbing his greatclub. In a flash of lightning she vanished, standing unnervingly tall behind Ordo. She was taller than all of them, her hunchback gone and her entire form stretched. Her skin was bluish-grey, pale, slimy – and almost see-through, her entire musculature taught against her skin and a dark spiderweb of veins across her gangly body. Her mouth gaped open ready to chomp cleanly into the back of Ordo's head, but Thalia swung fast and swung hard with her fist – sending the Betrayer flying across the river before crashing into the stone on the other side. "Wake up!" Thalia yelled. "Doc, Marisha – get out of here!" Marisha grabbed Yuthura and ran fast.

"You-you shouldn't have-have done that" came Alberta's screeching voice, as she peeled herself free from the broken stone, each word like metal on glass. Thalia grabbed her anchor, Ordo and Mai Lu took defensive stances. "We need to move," Mai Lu stated, a loud roar coming from above – before a colossal lightning-bolt-fuelled Dragon crashed straight through the swarm of bats above them, followed by bright streams of fire. "Agreed," stated Ordo, taking out RK's orb. Alberta dove towards them and Ordo slammed the orb down. She crashed straight into the RK, the trio taking the briefest moment to leap away – Thalia and Ordo using Focus and Mai Lu launching herself upwards aboard a pillar of blood-crystal. Alberta screamed, pushing off RK in pursuit of the meat after biting a chunk out of the rokken.

"Jayce, Matteo is dead!" Marisha yelled into her communicator, as she and Yuthura ran through the streets of the city, following the glowing green line in the sky towards Falconer and the exit. "The Grandfather is down!" she swiftly added. "I repeat, the Grandfather is down! Ordo and the others have engaged Alberta Armin. Once more, the Grandfather is down, Ordo has engaged the Cannibal Betrayer!"

Astris stared wide-eyed at Jayce. "Matteo is dead?" she questioned. "Strigon knows about the family!" she quickly remembered. "Is anyone with the girls?" "Go!" Jayce told her, cutting a bloody swath across the rooftops as Vampires and bats descended

upon him and his group. Astris dashed away into the night. "Bjorn, status?" Jayce questioned, as the rooftop he was stood on came alive with huge thorny branches and began to eviscerate the Vampire Spawn around him.

Bjorn snapped the Null Legionnaire in his grip across his knee. Body armour didn't matter – the Vampire inside died almost instantly, disintegrating into dust. "The path is nearly clear! We're leading the survivors out!" Bjorn returned into his communicator. "I take it the castle was your doing?" he questioned. A chuckle came back. "Nope, all Ordo's team. I have to assume it's why we have comms back." Bjorn didn't care who had restored communications, he was just glad to have them back. "Send Caelie and Gaea to us!" Bjorn requested. A few moments later a glowing portal appeared on a nearby rooftop. "Jeanne! Go!" he then commanded. "Sending the Elder, smite them, Captain! Send these bastards back to hell!"

"Orianna? Lucinia?" Astris questioned, slowly creeping into the home of the family that helped them – the front door ajar. "It's Astris! Come out, I'm getting you out of here!" she called out, both pistols in her hands as she edged forwards and cleared the kitchen. It was quiet, the noise outside overwhelming in comparison to the emptiness within. Astris approached the stairs, sharply turning and aiming her guns upwards as she slowly and steadily began to climb. Astris held her tongue, something was wrong. Very wrong.

The floorboards creaked as she slowly stepped onto the landing before gently nudged open Matteo's bedroom door. She stepped inside, scanning the corners and ceiling. It was empty other than a lone portrait laid out on the left side of the bed: it showed a painted image of Alina. Astris stepped out of the room, heading forwards past the bathroom towards the girls' bedroom. "Girls?" she questioned, pushing open the door. Her eyes landed on a blood splatter on the floor, before another on the walls. She pushed the door open fully, raising her pistols – her heart hammered in her chest as she spotted two figures on the floor: both of the girls.

"Gods, no," she muttered, stepping forwards only for someone to tackle her from behind. She went down, a woman in a bloody wedding dress on top of her. "Alina?" Astris realised, pushing back Alina's torso with her legs and holding back the woman's long nails by gripping her wrists. She snarled, snapping at Astris, her skin pale – eyes bright red. "Wake up! Snap out of it!" Astris yelled at her. "They're your girls! Your children! They need you; Matteo is gone! Don't make me do it!"

Astris' grip on Alina's wrist slipped, a clawed hand scratching Astris' face. Alina lunged, but Astris grabbed her pistol and fired – the woman erupting into dust. "Godsdammit!" Astris yelled, spitting dust and rolling to her feet. "Why?" she cried, gripping her scalp and pulling her hair. Astris looked at her hands, blood covered

them – blood from Alina. She looked at the girls – they both had bite marks on their necks, but neither of them bore any distinct injuries – their lips were slick with blood. Astris' eyes widened. "Fuck-fuck-fuck! She's turning them!" she realised, noticing that both girls were still breathing, but their heartbeats were unusually slow. "No-no-no!" she yelled, the girls turning pale and their ears turning pointy. Astris drew her pistol, pointing it at Orianna before freezing. Both their parents were gone – they had no one, and now they didn't even have their humanity, they would become mindless Spawn. Astris sat back on her knees, her mind racing. "I'm sorry," she told them, taking out her knife and cutting her arms before feeding them her blood.

The True Vampire screeched as it plummeted from the sky, its fur burning and body charred from several bolts of lightning. "Feast! Feast! Feast!" roared Zhurong, the crimson Dragon scooping up swarms of bats and Vampires into his mouth as he thrashed through the swarm desperately defending the True Vampire. "Stop being so reckless!" cried out Soteria, the smaller Dragon doing her best to protect her companions from the endless swarms. Taranis bellowed with laughter as he flew up into the storm above, channelling the lightning once again into his body before unleashing a fury of lightning bolts to his foes. "Idiots!" Soteria mumbled, a swarm coming towards her before getting caught in a large bubble of her shields. The bubble swiftly contracted, the countless bodies inside thrashing in a panic before bursting as they were crushed. The mass then fell down towards the city beneath.

A sickening squelch landed ahead of Ordo as he darted through the streets, avoiding the maw of Alberta Armin as she bit through everything in her way – whether fleeing civilian, lost Vampire, streetlamp or even surviving Cannibal. The battle felt too one-sided: she was immensely quick and even attempting to block her blows felt too dangerous with her willingness to scratch, kick and bite. They needed to slow her down, or to accept that this fight was going to hurt – and hurt bad. A bellowing laughter came from above, lightning bolts raining down on the ground around him. "Taranis!" Ordo yelled, leaping upwards and dashing through the air towards his Dragon with Alberta still on his heels.

The Dragon dove down as Ordo rose up. He slammed into Alberta, his contact causing every hair across her body to stand up. "I've never eaten Dragon!" Alberta cackled, biting, and biting hard, into the Dragon. He thrashed in the air, roaring in pain as he attempted to throw her off. "By the thunder of the heavens, bring down the strike of divinity upon my enemies!" Thalia chanted, dropping down from the clouds with a funnel of lightning coursing through her. She struck Alberta, knocking her loose from Taranis. "Nasty creature!" Taranis complained, flapping away from her and taking a somewhat defensive position behind Thalia and Ordo as they stood in the air using their Focus.

Ordo glanced down; the streets full of blood were flowing towards a singular house. "We hold her here, now!" Ordo told Thalia and Taranis. Thalia grinned. "I'm not going anywhere!" she roared, lightning sparking off her and Taranis. "I will shit you out, and turn your bones into a broth!" Alberta screamed, surging forwards. Blue-black scales rippled across Ordo's arms and legs, a pair of large wings emerging from his back as his eyes turned reptilian blue. "For Matteo!" he yelled.

"Exarga!" screamed Strigon, storming through the streets with a small army of Vampires dressed in opulent clothes either side of him. More and more Vampires seemed to emerging from seemingly nowhere, some wearing clothes he didn't recognise and bearing insignia that clearly belonged to other cities and maybe even nations. "He's bringing in everyone, from everywhere!" Jayce yelled out, Jeanne and the two sisters fighting around him. "This is our stand!" he declared, watching Soteria and Zhurong continue to harass the True Vampire above, whilst Thalia, Ordo and Taranis engaged with, what he guessed had to be, Alberta Armin.

A loud cry pierced the sky, a glowing arrow impaling the ground next to Strigon before erupting into huge spiky vines that grabbed the nearest Vampires and tore them apart. A figure slid next to Jayce, held aloft by his headtails. "This is a mighty battle that shall be told for generations!" laughed Red, a large silver trident in his hands. "Captain, it would be advisable not to stand in anything conductive," came Tempest's voice through his communicator. Jayce shook his head as Strigon charged at him with an untempered hatred. The world seemed to slow as his crew fought around him, desperate to bring an end to the monsters that had laid claim to this land for so long.

Jayce dashed forwards, channelling the flow of the world's mana through him. He struck hard and struck fast as he engaged Strigon, unleashing waves upon waves of his emotions into every strike of his two silver swords. Electricity danced across the streets as Tempest acted like a living plasma ball. Jeanne slammed her banner down, her golden light disintegrating every Vampire Spawn that came close whilst blinding all but Strigon and his Generals, both the two survivors and the ones that had been summoned from across Arcastalum. Arthuria drew Caliburn, a golden halo swirling above her helmet and a pair of divine angelic wings spreading out across her back. Like light itself she struck hard and fast, moving impossible fast as she took on Strigon's remaining Generals – cutting swathes of golden flame with her flaming sword and unleashing bright and intense bursts of radiance as she chanted rapidly and precisely. Red swam through the wet streets, engaging in close combat as if he fighting underwater. It seemed as if gravity itself didn't affect him as he twisted and manoeuvred through the air, striking with his tipped headtails in rapid strikes before delivering final blows with his trident.

In the midst of it all, Strigon and Jayce battled one another – the Vampire deflecting Jayce's silver swords with his nails, the claws regenerating just in time to defend against the following blow. Any Vampire that rushed forward to aid its master ended up eviscerated, caught within the maelstrom of the two Betrayers battling with pure intension to kill. Strigon roared, unleashing a detonation of blood as he yanked a General towards him before turning him into a living bomb that forced Jayce back.

Jayce groaned as he lay on the floor, but in an instant an arm scooped him up as Morgana flew by him. She force-fed him a healing potion before releasing him back down towards the streets as Strigon ran scared. "He's broken!" she yelled. "Get him, Captain!" Jayce shook himself off as he landed, a splattering of red mist appearing next to him as Astris apparated onto the battlefield, but - most curiously – two more splatterings of red mist followed her. "I'll explain later," she answered quickly, as Orianna and Lucinia both stood behind her – their ears pointy, and irises blood-red, each of them held a pistol in their hands. "Remember what I said," Astris told them, the girls immediately apparating away to a rooftop and beginning to provide supporting fire. Jayce met Astris' gaze, raising an eyebrow. "Later!" she protested. "We can't let Strigon and the True Vampire get away!"

She was certainly not wrong on that. "Change target! All Vampire killers, target the True Vampire!" Jayce commanded, all Rising Aces within the vicinity looking up to the giant bat with intention to kill. Astris took out her backup pistols and nodded to Jayce, before she, Jeanne, Arthuria and Jayce propelled themselves up into the air. "Leave me be, beast!" cried the True Vampire, as it wrestled with Zhurong in the sky, clawing his scales and biting into him – only to receive a heavy burst of flame to the face. The True Vampire screeched as it launched off Zhurong, sending him plummeting back down towards the ground. But its large, blank, red eyes widened as Astris floated in front of it, her pistols aimed towards its head with the Rising Aces beside her. "Bye!"

The creature dove, fleeing desperately in a panic, but Jayce dashed above it – combining Sola and Luna into a huge hammer. He leapt forwards, somersaulting downwards before slamming the weapon with all the Focus and strength he could muster into the True Vampire's wing. It screeched in agony, spiralling down before crashing through a house and landing in an open courtyard laden with impaled corpses. "To me! To your master!" cried out the True Vampire, wriggling to its feet and hobbling backwards as its wing began to regenerate. "Make it count!" Jayce yelled. "This is our moment!"

Strigon tackled Jayce, the pair of them tumbling across the courtyard and wrestling with one another before kicking free of each other. "You caused me so much pain! So much misery! Me and so many others!" Astris screamed, firing off bullets into the

monster in front of her as every remaining Vampire in the city descended upon the Rising Aces in an attempt to rescue their progenitor. "You stole my life from me!" she screamed, the giant bat screeching in agony.

"No!" Strigon cried, surging towards Astris only for Jayce to grab him from behind and pin him to the floor – throwing fist after fist into his maw. "Get off me!" Strigon screeched, kicking Jayce off and descending upon him. Jayce blocked the assault, yelling out in pain as his bracers were torn off and Strigon's nails tore into his skin. Jayce pushed back, bringing his hands together and commanding Sola and Luna. They launched forwards, forming into a silver spear through Strigon. "Argh!" he yelled, staggering backwards and pulling out the weapon, even as his palms sizzled.

"You took their mother, their father!" Astris cried, as she, Orianna and Lucinia fired at the True Vampire with their guns – the girls pulling the triggers even as their guns clicked empty. "You'll die, you'll perish if you kill me!" the True Vampire bargained. "I don't care! I've never cared! You killed me, you made me into this!" she cried, tears streaming down her face. The creature buckled, falling down onto its front and looking up at Astris through blood. "Take Strigon! Spare me!" it whimpered, as she stepped closer and reloaded.

"Astris!" Jayce yelled, pinning Strigon to the floor as he desperately clawed at the ground to drag himself forwards. "No!" Strigon screamed. "No!" Astris levelled her pistols at the True Vampires flat face. "I don't want to die," the True Vampire cried, and Astris thought. "Astris!" Jayce cried, releasing Strigon. She pulled the triggers, and Strigon fell apart into ash. Orianna and Lucinia slumped to the floor as Astris staggered backwards, her pistols falling free from her grip as her knees wobbled.

Thunder rumbled as Taranis slammed into Alberta and sent her towards Ordo. He was waiting and struck downwards sending the bloody and charred Cannibal Lord tumbling out of the sky towards the ground. "You'll never-urgh," Alberta grunted, a colossal spire of blood-crystal bursting out of a house and impaling her torso from behind. She hung there; her eyes wide in disbelief as she slowly tried to pull herself free. Thalia dropped from the sky trailing lightning with her anchor, slamming the weapon down as hard as she could through the Betrayer's skull. Her face exploded outwards – the corpse decapitated atop the spire. Ordo and Thalia then fell towards the ground, Taranis snatching Ordo whilst Morgana did the same for the Thalia before they hit the floor.

Jayce held Astris in his arms. "I feel cold," she mumbled, looking up at him. The left side of her head caving away as it crumbled to dust. "No-no-no!" Jayce cried, "Astris, don't go! Hold on! Doc! Yuthura!" he screamed, her hand on his face as she smiled up at him. "It's okay," she told him. He shook his head, leaning into her cold hand. "I...

I've wanted this, I think. I'm... free. It's over," she cried, tears falling out of her remaining eye. He held her as her skull slowly regenerated. "I..." she whispered. He leant closer, placing his forehead to hers as he held her. "I love you," she whispered, before kissing him. He initially pulled away – an immediate flash of both Zoya and Rosalynn bursting into mind before being pushed aside by Alara – but then he kissed back.

"Well, this is awkward," Arthuria stated, scratching her head as Jayce pulled back and both Astris realised that she was fine. Both of them flashed red and Astris immediately shoved Jayce away from her. "Uhm," he stammered, getting to his feet and wiping his mouth and eyes. "Well done team, we did it," he said immediately attempting to salvage the situation, Astris shakily approaching Orianna and Lucinia before holding them tightly to her chest. Her eyes glanced towards Jayce, the tips of her pointed ears burning red before swiftly looked away. All of those present looked at Jayce with a variety of judging eyes. "What are you gonna tell Alara?" Arthuria questioned, approaching Jayce and elbowing him gently in the ribs. There was a loud and audible crack and he dropped to his knees as he barely held in a scream. "Oops, sorry," Arthuria said immediately dropping down next to him. He looked towards her. "Woah, don't kiss me too!" she stated holding her hands up before grinning. "You're dead!" he told her with a grimace.

"Bjorn, tell the civilians that their city is free!" Ordo stated into his communicator, looking out towards the rising sun – no longer kept prisoner by the Vampires or the Cannibals. The cheers on the hills were audible even from the centre of the city. Ordo then turned his attention towards his Captain. Jayce glanced back towards him. "This was only the warmup," Ordo reminded him. "We still have the Sovereign and eight more Betrayers – if we exclude Tanare." Jayce looked down. "Way to kill the mood, old man," Morgana protested. He shook his head, groaning as he held his side. "Just telling the truth."

Seize the Seas Tales: A New Role

It took some time for the mess that was the city of Nolograd to be tidied up – the Rising Aces helped somewhat, but given the likely appearance of the Sea Sovereign they didn't stay long. Despite Jayce's best attempts to convince the crew otherwise, Bjorn laid down the law that the people of Arcastalum had suffered enough, and any treasures buried within Strigon's castle were theirs to salvage – not the Rising Aces. Dissappointed to have only made a loss on their venture – mostly Marisha's perspective – the crew gathered together aboard the Stacked Hand, setting it upon the river before teleporting away. But the matter of their departure raised one further question: Orianna and Lucinia – what to do with the two Vampire girls? Naturally, Astris brought them aboard.

"Are you sure about this?" Jayce questioned to her, as she settled the girls into a guest room of their own. "Person who I can't hear and won't look at," she answered, "what other option is there?" Jayce couldn't help but admit it – he wasn't sure an orphanage would take the girls and he doubted there were any relatives who would – even if they could be located. "Are you really going to pretend I don't exist?"

"Are you going to pretend that should have happened and wasn't just... the emotions of the moment? What would Alara say?" Astris questioned, turning to him. Jayce glanced at the girls: they both seemed out of it – as if there wasn't anything going on behind their eyes. "Is that... normal?" he questioned. Astris glared at him before turning away. "Avoiding the question..." she muttered. "Doc says that my control cells kept them alive – that their bodies hadn't really adapted yet so the bit that was destroyed when the True Vampire died was minimal. They're like Strigon's early Vampires – mainly drones, but if I keep feeding them my cells then they should regain their independence, like his Generals did."

"And your... death?"

"The last remainders of the True Vampire's cells kicking the bucket. The True Vampire destroyed most of them last time. All that's left is good old Vampire me. As far as I'm aware – I'm now the truest Vampire, last of my kind. A rare breed. How does it feel Exarga – you kissed one of the only Vampires left in the world?" she goaded. "Girls, sleep," Astris commanded – the two Vampires climbing into their double bed and shutting their eyes. "Gods that's creepy," Astris muttered, stepping towards Jayce and pushing him out of the door before closing it behind her. She looked up at him with a firm and challenging glare.

Jayce blushed and glanced away. "Have you spoken to her yet?" Astris questioned. Jayce cleared his throat and tried to walk away. Astris' hand hovered on his neck, her lips to his ears. He turned and faced her with wide eyes as she grinned at him. "She what?" Jayce questioned in disbelief. She began to walk away, glancing over her shoulder at him. "She said next time to ask, but cited something about an old deal you two had with Holli. You're a lucky man, Jayce Exarga. Our next kiss is permitted."

Jayce stood stunned as she walked away, his eyes glancing towards the door containing the two sleeping Vampire girls. "Does that make me a dad?" he questioned, only for Caelie to dropkick him from the nearby stairs. "Already are," she protested.

Chapter 242: The One Who Comes After

The winds swirled around Tim Kane as he looked up at a lone black tower on a tiny island near the edge of the Scourge. "Are you sure about this?" Mirabelle questioned, standing just behind him with her hands clasped around his wrist. Her golden hair whipped around her, her brown, almond-shaped eyes full of worry, glancing from Tim's face to the tower behind him with distinct fear. Tim nodded, grasping his new dark-blue grimoire. "I have to. Jayce is counting on me, he has to be preparing for a battle – he and Alara wouldn't have killed those Betrayers without reason, and we cannot win if Myrddin fights with the Sovereign. I'm the only one who can do this."

Mirabelle took a fearful step forward, forcing Tim to turn and face her. She placed her pale fingers onto his light-brown skin, slowly sliding her hands down to his dark goatee which she gently tugged to force him to lower his head. They locked lips, the moment brief but eternal in both their minds. She slid her hands up across the shaved sides of his head before grasping the small top-knot behind his head. "If you're going to go into battle," she stated, taking a quill out of her robes and sliding it into his hair. "Then know that I'm with you, everyone else at the Scholar's Fort is too – Archmage Timothy Kane. Do not die on me – or else I will be forced to explore Necromancy until I can bring you back to me. Am I clear?" "Of course, babe. You know me, you think I intend to let the greatest Wizard of this age beat me?" he returned with a grin. Mirabelle rolled her eyes, only for both of them to flinch and swiftly turn to face the tower as a boom of thunder erupted across the skies.

Myrddin stood on a balcony near the top of his tower. His skin was tanned and wrinkled, the grey hair on his head and chin long and flowing around him. He wore battle-robos, the ornate red and blue clothes covered in pieces of metal and glowing faintly against the black tower he stood in. A huge staff stood in one hand – the handle made of black metal topped with a large red crystal wrapped in the embrace of a visage of a gold dragon. "Go," Tim told Mirabelle. She fled faster than the wind as he stepped forwards towards the tower.

Myrddin remained in his tower, watching Tim as he approached. There was no entrance, no obvious way inside, and a moment before there hadn't even been a balcony. It was the Betrayer's domain: his bastion, and by all accounts even the strongest army wouldn't have been able to leave a scratch upon it. But the stone folded apart, opening up for Tim as Myrddin stepped back into his tower. With little reason not to – other than the ominous feeling that he would never see daylight again, a feeling he had only recently shrugged off after completing the Dungeon in Brunxchume – he stepped inside, the stone closing behind him.

The tower was far larger inside than it ever should have been. It was like he had entered into a colossal cavern – one large enough to hold a city – with the rooftop above him muddled with a starlike appearance that, only through Focus, could he recognise as a ceiling of countless colossal diamonds. Ahead of him in the twilight sat a white tower with a colossal staircase wrapped around it, leading upwards towards the ceiling far, far above him. The ground felt cold, a fog laying across the floor. Tim tapped his heels together, his body sparking with purple energy as he began to float – just enough to hover above the fog as he moved forwards towards the tower. He scanned his environment as he moved: buried beneath the fog was an endless minefield of arcane glyphs – traps for any who didn't watch their step.

As he made it halfway towards the tower, he noticed a faint patch of darkness crossing the twinkling above him. Something was up there, something that his Focus didn't help him to see or to sense. But it then came to him, crashing down to the ground where he had been as he darted to the side to avoid it. It was a two-headed Dragon, the body split straight down the middle into a left half that was a bold blue and the right that was a brilliant red. It seemed fused together, the patchy line through the middle not quite perfect, and covered in scarring.

"Fascinating," Tim stated, his eyes scanning the monster ahead of him for every detail. "My Grandfather would have loved you," he then added, reaching into his bottomless bag and retrieving a magic stone the size of his hand. Both heads snarled before a loud whining built up from the blue side as the red side inhaled a vast amount of air. The Dragon unleashed a large beam of fire and lightning towards him as he took off into the air. The Dragon flapped its wings out of sync and took off after him. Even uncoordinated, the colossal beast was hot on his heels, spewing lightning and fire in periodic bursts as he analysed his surroundings. The entire area he was within was designed on the off-chance an intruder managed to break in – it was a death maze for those on the ground and a warzone for any in the air. Tim glanced up as two more Dragons descended from above: one split into green and white, the other black and gold. He looked down at the rock in his hands. There were undoubtedly more beasts around, and Dragons had a natural resistance to most magic. "So be it," he muttered, stopping in the air and twisting to the side as the original Dragon flew at him.

"By the untold heavens and their descendants beneath them, risen from the oceans and divined by the fire and ice of the skies, twist and weave, collapse and expand, become the greatest storm – Maelstrom of the skies!" Tim chanted, the stone disintegrating in his hands and a swirl of dark storm clouds forming around him. A tornado erupted beneath him, sucking up the fog beneath before crackling with dark blue lightning. Tim hovered in the centre of it, the Dragons screeching as they were sucked in by the winds. The storm then flung them away – their bodies sparking with

lightning. The Dragons hit the ground hard, still sparking. A thin electric blue line swirled on the inside of the twister, growing larger and wider as the maelstrom of storm span faster and faster before discharging colossal arcs of lightning towards the injured Dragons. The lightning didn't end, the Dragons writhing as the electricity was channelled through them. Their scales popped off their flesh as they wailed in pain, their bodies charring and then igniting before they disintegrated to black ash. The storm ceased, and all three Dragons were dead, any others watching from the darkness all too hesitant to approach. A beam of white light descended down from the rooftop as a passageway was opened up for him. Tim didn't wait around.

He found himself in a far more comfortable abode. It was a library of sorts, with large walls mounted with countless books and a central fireplace with a bear-skin rug and two large comfortable chairs. Myrddin sat within one of them, stroking his beard as he watched Tim analyse the room. There were likely numerous concealed passageways within the bookshelves, as there was no indication of a bed of sorts, or any personal chambers. "Sit," commanded the Betrayer, gesturing to the chair in front of him. Tim simply nodded, hovering over to the chair before sitting into it.

"You have sought me out, you have found me, and now you have met me. For what purpose?" Myrddin questioned. A floating metal tray approached them laden with two mugs, a teapot, a small milk jug and a cup containing several sugar cubes. Tim helped himself, Myrddin's gaze upon him the entire time. "I'm here to either turn you against the Sovereign, or to kill you," Tim said matter-of-factly, sipping the mug. The old Wizard stared at him with cold blue eyes. "I have beaten armies, slaughtered Mages in their thousands, sunk fleets, tamed Dragons."

"I saw, although I wouldn't call those chimeras tamed as such. More... left loose in the garden and told to eat any intruders," Tim interrupted, resting the tea in his lap. The Wizard continued to stare at him. "And yet... you resorted to a tenth-tier spell to best them." Tim shrugged, looking around the room as he took in the tower. "Lady Scáthach is not best pleased at the moment with the demise and betrayal of her Betrayers. Those that have fallen, I assure you, were the weakest of us. So, I have to question to what end could you, boy, possibly perceive that you stand a chance against me?"

It was a fair question; one Tim didn't have a proper answer for. "Because it's what Jayce would do," he answered, giving the best answer he had. Myrddin continued to glare. "We don't have to fight," Tim told him. "There will be a battle soon, I'm almost certain of it – and I just need you to not be there." Myrddin shook his head and stood up with a groan. "Lady Scáthach will not be beaten, not by the likes of you and the other Pirate Lords. And if I fail her, then I'm good as dead anyway."

He extended his finger towards Tim and a bolt of green energy shot out of the fingertip. Tim only just avoided it, the chair he was sat upon turning grey before crumbling to dust. There hadn't been a chant, or any indication the old man was preparing a spell – it had just happened. Tim darted backwards as a ball of flame manifested itself in Myrddin's hand. The Betrayer threw it at him, the ball swiftly swelling in size as it flew through the air. "You will not leave this place," Myrddin declared, "not whilst I still draw breath!"

Tim drew his sword, his new spellbook hovering beside him as he darted around the room avoiding bolts of lightning, balls of fire and spears of ice. If he could let the Wizard wear himself down then finishing the fight would be simple. The only issue was that the library was lacking cover and a Mage who had cast spells for a lifetime would have far larger mana reserves than he could hope to outlast. Tim stood and swung his blade, cutting through a large spear of ice, before darting forwards towards the Betrayer.

The entire room then twisted, physically rotating onto its side and taking Tim's legs out from under him. Myrddin floated in the air, gripping his wrist with his hand and aiming an outstretched finger as Tim tumbled. Tim tapped his heels together, taking into the air as the green disintegration ray soared past his body and hit a bookshelf. The wood fell apart into dust, leaving a hole into another room behind it. Tim tapped his heels again and fell like a rock through the passageway.

"You cannot escape me in my own home, boy! You have no understanding of what can be done here!" Myrddin gloated. He wasn't wrong, in his own abode Myrddin had a definitive advantage. He also seemingly possessed the ability to silently chant, each spell sent had come at a definitive six-second interval – and that wasn't coincidental. It also meant his spells couldn't be countered unless with near perfect timing and a little bit of foresight to understand the level of spell coming.

Tim swore under his breath as he flew through the corridor he had fallen into, countless doors lay to his right, the stone wall to his left deliberately blank. The corridor seemed endless, and Myrddin was simply floated along behind him with both hands clasped behind his back and an expression of cold malice. "Screw it," Tim muttered, slamming into a door and entering the room beyond it. He came into a herb garden of sorts, the air filled with a fine mist and hanging rows of plants swinging vigorously as he bounced between them. "There is no escape!" boomed the Wizard's voice, the very ceiling above him warping into a stony visage of the Betrayer's face before its cheeks puffed and then spewed out fire.

Tim slid under a hanging row, pushing through a nearby door as the room erupted into flame. "I need a new plan. I can't run forever," he muttered to himself, as he

entered a walk-in closet filled with robes. "Think! What would Jayce do?" Tim's eyes widened: he was always going to be on the backfoot in Myrddin's domain, but all magic had rules. "Let the thunder roar, shake apart that which lays before me!" he chanted, shattered the floor beneath him and exposing several huge squares of black rock with ritual circles carved into them. His eyes scanned the circles, reading the arcane writing upon it. "Right, so... gotcha."

The stone ahead of him shifted apart, Myrddin floating through the new gap. Tim charged forwards, counting the seconds in his head. He thrust with his blade towards Myrddin's throat, but a shimmering shield caught the blade and sent him stumbling backwards. Myrddin was covered in various defensive magic items, as well as magic items that allowed him to control his tower. The ritual circles had shown that the stone acted as if part of a larger singular object – twisting and rotating together – and that meant there had to be an element of predictability to it. It wasn't infinite.

Tim struck again with his sword, the same shield striking up again to block the blow. "Persistent, aren't you!" stated Myrddin, holding up a palm – a vibrating, donut-shaped, ring of air facing Tim. Tim ducked underneath it, using his free hand to grab Myrddin's wrist as a heavy shockwave blasted past him. It was a one-in, one-out system, he had guessed, grateful to be correct: Myrddin couldn't actively send out spells and block blows. Tim grabbed the rings on Myrddin's hand and wrenched, the fingers straining before breaking. The old man roared in pain as Tim flew free, throwing the rings into his bottomless bag. "You want to play games, then let's play!" Myrddin roared.

Tim felt something invisible wrap around his waist, and almost immediately he was tossed into a nearby wall, cracking the stone. Through Focus he could see the telekinesis and the giant hand wrapped around him, but more significantly he could also see the flow of magic through Myrddin. It had changed, his body had ignited. An invisible flow of technicolour energy was pouring into his back before erupting out through his eyes, nose, mouth and extremities. Tim activated his emergency rune, teleporting to the other side of the room as a beam of golden energy melted the stone he had been pinned to. Almost immediately the broken fragments of stone were elevated, sharpened into large daggers and then flung at Tim. He rolled to the side in the small room. "Let chaos flow, disrupt--"

Tim grimaced as his spell was countered almost immediately. He flung his sword at Myrddin in response, the Wizard growling as it grazed him. "Bring about--" The spell was countered once more, a wall of wind slamming into him and sending him tumbling through a door. He rolled to his feet as three spears of ice impaled the floor where he had been. "Shit!" Tim swore, turning on his feet and dashing through a

doorway as a beam of golden light turned the stone behind him into liquid. "Take me to--"

Countered.

"See unto me a divine--"

Countered.

"Just go fu--"

A trio of large fireballs detonated behind him, the last of which sent him flying forwards into a new room. It was laboratory of sorts, with large tables covered in vials, pieces of machinery, and an unusual number of jars containing human parts – mainly belonging to men. A large bed lay upright, the beginnings of some sort of person strapped to it. They were half-finished, the flesh pale and grey with their internal organs absent. The features looked young, the body a late teen at most. "A flesh golem?" Tim questioned to himself as he fumbled inside his bottomless bag for the rings he had stolen. "Or a something else?"

Myrddin entered the room, stretching out his hands and unleashing purple lightning from his fingers. The tables ignited, the jars shattered and Tim threw himself underneath the countertops. He glanced at the rings, dropping them until only one remained – a golden ring with a large black stone embedded within it. "This ends here!" Myrddin declared as Tim popped back up from cover. A shaky finger was extended towards him and Tim threw the ring at the Wizard, the bolt of green energy disintegrating the ring. "What was that?" Myrddin questioned before the entire room began to move and shift, folding outwards in rapid movement. "No!" Myrddin yelled as his tower shifted and unravelled, folding outwards into a huge platform. "Fool, do you understand how long that took to make?"

Curiously there was no furniture, or anything to fill the various rooms – it had all vanished. It reminded Tim of the rooms on the Stacked Hand, and a curious question as to where everything had gone did cross his mind – but a swirling disk of wind almost took his head off. Tim took off into the open air, his eyes watching the flow of mana in and out of the old Wizard. "One way," Tim muttered, envisioning the flow of mana into his body in the same way.

His body burned from the inside out, a searing, agonising pain erupting from every pore, but he held on – resisting the pain and concentrating on pushing it out of him. Something changed, the pain ceased – replaced with a rushing feeling as if he were standing in a river. "Damn," he muttered, holding up his hand and conjuring a shield in front of him that dispersed the beam of energy sent at him. "Incredible," Myrddin muttered. "Had you not started this foolish assault you would have been a fine

apprentice!" he yelled out, only for his eyes to widen as the skies above swirled and warped in a manner he had never seen before.

Rain began to fall as the world rumbled and darkened, blue lightning crackling above. Myrddin desperately rushed forwards into the air. "Let the flow of mana cease!" he yelled, trying to counter the spell, only to recoil as his own counter was countered. The waves rose up into a colossal wall, folding together with a wall of clouds that created a mouth of lightning. Myrddin charged towards Tim as the largest spell he had ever seen moved towards him. His right hand glowed bright red, the glow fierce against the darkness of the storm, but as he reached to touch Tim's face, Tim thrust with his blade, piercing the Wizard's heart with his sword.

Myrddin froze in the air, his eyes wide and confused as he looked up at the storm and then at Tim before finally at the blade that had pierced him – his blood quickly spreading across his robes. "You... cheated," Myrddin gasped, before falling off the blade and tumbling down towards the ocean. He hit the water and didn't reappear above the waves. "It was fair," Tim stated, his storm vanishing without release. "Neither of us ran when we both could. Farewell, Archmage – I learnt much from you."

Seize the Seas Tales: Summons From Jayce Exarga

Word spread quickly of the demise of, not just two but, three Betrayers. The Guild did its best to keep the news off its front covers, but there was no hiding from the array of newspapers all being spread under the banner of the Syndicate, all of them raising similar questions about war between Jayce Exarga and the Sovereign. It was on everyone's mind, said on the streets and spoken about in every pub across both the Old and New World, but no one knew where the Rising Aces were and Tim Kane had sealed his magical fortress shut.

Tim sat in his throne room, his guards both mechanical and mortal. His body hurt from the battle with the Betrayer Myrddin, but his wounds hadn't been nearly as severe as they deserved to have been. The doors slammed opened, a young Mage dashing in along the long purple rug towards his throne. "My Lord! My Lord!" she cried, sliding to her knees only to faceplant as the rug stopped her movement. Tim's mechanical golems had stepped forwards and were brandishing their staves towards her, but they resumed their positions with a single gesture. "My Lord, a letter," she cried, holding up a sealed letter stamped with a skull bearing an eye socket in the shape of an ace of spades. "Finally," Tim stated.

"Boys, get ready to move!" yelled out Kitty Deliver, grinning wildly as she held Jayce's letter in her hands.

“King, are you sure about this?” questioned Mare, as she looked at Tanare. He looked at the old War Hound. “We both know what this means,” Tanare told her. “He deserves a chance to beg for help, he’s earned that much at the very least.” Tanare glanced out towards his city as Mare moved away to make preparations. “I don’t know, Dick, maybe Jayce can actually do what we never believed was possible.”

Ningyo nursed his wounds in an ocean cavern, several deep cuts in his carapace from his failed attempt at killing Ura Soruk. “I’ll go, but this better be worth it,” he stated to himself.

“This better not be a trap,” the Machinist told her lackeys.

“This may be the death of us both if we go,” stated Dragonlord Thákane to her Dragon Nanabolele. “Not going would be definitive,” returned the Dragon.

Chapter 243: Hall of the Pirate Lords

It had been a unanimous decision of the Rising Aces to flee from Arcastalum as quickly as they could; as such they had returned to the seas and had set their sights on Final Bastion whilst ensuring that there was plenty of time for any and all their guests to make it there themselves. "It does mean that Scáthach is probably going to be there waiting," Bjorn said to Jayce, as they sat on the sofas in the living quarters. "I doubt it," Jayce returned, glancing to Arthuria as she sat leaning away from him with a romance novel in her hands – the title of which raised eyebrows from both Bjorn and Jayce. "With all the Pirate Lords there – hopefully – and the Republic in their second strongest position, she won't want to risk it. Not when she needs to focus on maintaining control of what she's got."

The door to the living quarters opened and Orianna stepped in, silently walking into the kitchen and grabbing a bowl from the cupboard before taking some fruit out from fridge, a block of milk from the freezer and some oats from the pantry. She put the milk in a pan and began to warm it up, before taking a blood pouch from Astris' fridge and pouring it into a tankard. She then sat down and stared blankly at the wall. Zeta walked into the room, took one look at the Vampire girl, and then immediately turned around and left.

"Creepy as hell," Arthuria muttered, going back to her book. Jayce folded his arms. Both the new Vampire girls had taken some considerable getting used to. They only seemed to wake up when around Astris, otherwise they seemed to go about the ship on autopilot – going to eat or remaining in their rooms. "Orianna?" Jayce called out to her. She turned her head and looked at him. Both she and her sister looked similar to each other - dark hair, pale but slightly tanned-skin, pointed ears - but the older sister, Orianna, had slightly sharper features and hazel-red eyes compared to Lucinia's green-red eyes and rounder face. She blinked blankly, but then her eyes seemed to focus on him and she smiled.

"Captain Exarga?" she questioned, both Bjorn and Arthuria sitting up with wide eyes. "Are you okay?" Jayce asked her. She nodded, sipping her blood like it was juice before tending to her milk in the pan and pouring in the oats. "I'm okay." "Uh, good, plans for the day?" he asked more casually, standing up and approaching the table before sitting down. The teenager sat in Astris' spot and stirred her bowl. "Lady Astris said she was going to take me and Luci for some target practice. Apparently we weren't as useful as we could have been." "Uh huh, right. Well, just be careful and keep drinking." She nodded appreciatively and continued eating."

"Explain it to us fully," Jayce stated to Yuthura, as she stood in front of the crew after giving the girls an examination. "Vampirism is a blood disease that alters the cells of a human, albeit seemingly other species too. In exchange for regeneration and resistance against cellular decay, a byproduct that reacts destructively to ultraviolet radiation is produced. It also halts the production of antibodies – it's why Vampires need to suck blood and also why they are weak to sunlight," she explained once again, injecting Astris in the shoulder.

"So why did it take so long for the girls to...?" Zeta questioned, looking over at the two children swinging their legs as they sat on stools. "Vampire cells are similar to a hive-mind, they communicate. Until they have enough command cells within them, they are locked onto receiving commands from higher Vampires – in this case Astris. She has continuously been giving her blood, and the command cells have been assimilated. This is why the girls have woken up, as such."

"And what are you giving Astris and them now?" asked Marisha, as Yuthura injected both girls. "This should, with a bit of luck, allow them to start producing their own antibodies again, with a few more injections over the next few months." Jayce looked towards Astris as she rubbed her shoulder and stood up. "Which should mean I get to walk in the sunlight again," she stated with a big smile. "And that Lucinia and Orianna should be able to live their own free lives," Yuthura added.

"You've kept this project quiet," Jayce commented quietly to Yuthura. She turned and looked at him. "I'm always busy, Jayce – don't underestimate me." He nodded and stepped away, getting prodded in the back of the knee with her cane for good measure. "The girls will need educations," Jayce stated to his crew. "It's going to be everyone's duty – with only a few exceptions." He then turned to the girls. "I expect you to work hard, am I understood?" They both nodded vigorously.

As Jayce headed towards his quarters, he heard the heavy footsteps of Bjorn and the softer footsteps of Marisha behind him. He turned and looked at them, the pair of them locking their eyes on him with a pair of differing expressions. Bjorn looked almost awkward, and Marisha looked slightly angry. "Jayce," Bjorn said quietly. "You know, don't you?" he intercepted, turning and sitting down on the stairs leading up to his quarters. Bjorn and Marisha both glanced towards Falconer at the helm, before nodding to Jayce. "Why?" Marisha asked plainly.

"I was shown a future by Paimon, one where I informed you of Wam's survival. It was held against you, and the Sovereign used it to turn you. I was also shown one where I refused to let them go – we lost a lot more than them. That's not an excuse, the future is... foresight is messy and I've always hated using it precisely because of how much it affected Wicke, but... I'm sorry for hiding it from you. I wanted to keep

him safe, so that I could bring him home to you when we defeat the Sovereign," Jayce told them honestly.

Bjorn let out a sigh and sat next to Jayce. "For a while I blamed you, and in someways – knowing this – I still do, but I couldn't have stopped them for trying to do what they did. I'm just glad one of our idiots survived. I tried to contact him..." Bjorn half-asked. Jayce looked towards Marisha. She ran her fingers through her hair and looked out towards the ocean. "How did you find out?" Jayce asked. "The Syndicate basically flashed him on the cover of one of their newspapers a while back. I've only just managed to get around to reading through them again, and the idiot was staring right at me." Jayce chuckled. "He was out on his own so I sent him Wicke's way. I figured some time with the kids could do him good. It won't make up for Fenn or Ohno, but friends... friends are good."

Astris stepped out onto the main deck and caught Jayce's eye. She tilted her head and then descended the stairs below deck. Bjorn saw and looked directly at Jayce. "Speaking of friends, I'm getting fed up of the rumours I'm hearing from the crew. Explain it to me, or put it to rest for everyone else," he told Jayce, punching him in the shoulder as Jayce stood up. "It's... complicated. From what I hear she speaks to Alara more than I do." Bjorn scoffed as Marisha rubbed her forehead. "Enjoy that when we dock at Final Bastion," he stated towards Jayce as he descended the stairs. Jayce turned with a big grin. "Oh, you think I'm not looking forward to it?" he returned, before walking off in pursuit of Astris. Bjorn shook his head and looked at his wife. "Don't get any funny ideas. Think of another woman and I'll turn you into a rug."

Astris was waiting for him in her room. "My room is bigger," he told her as he shut the door behind him. She rolled her eyes and then gently guided him to her bed. "Why don't you just join me this evening?" he questioned, as she sat across him. "Because now is probably the only time I can get your full attention," she stated, pressing him down. "Talking is not exactly what's on my mind right now."

"Oh, who'd have guessed," she said sarcastically. "Then listen, it's about Vexx." Jayce flinched and Astris' eyes met his. "Dammit, Bjorn was right..." she muttered, getting off him and hugging her knees. "What was right? What did Bjorn say?" Jayce questioned, sitting up and looking at her with confusion. "You still intend to try and save him, don't you?" she asked plainly. Jayce nodded and she immediately shook her head and placed her hands to her temples. "You idiot!"

"He's... I have to try. I owe Vexx that much at least and I know he's good inside." "He's a killer, a literal assassin. And one of Corina Liu's finest murderers. There was one other Emperor's Fist assassin that was on par with him, and Vexx washed out. Do

you not understand how dangerous he is?" Astris questioned, standing up and crossing her room to retrieve a stack of documents that she immediately lay across her bed. "Where did you get these?" Jayce questioned, looking at countless images of corpses, and a photo of a younger Vexx with dark and hollow eyes. "Marisha picked them up from the Republic for me."

"Not everyone is savable, not everyone can be redeemed," Astris told him, sitting back down next to Jayce and resting a hand on his face. "I can't even say it's worth the risk for Elaine – we know too little about her, and what we've seen is that in terms of brutality and bloodthirstiness she's akin to Vexx. Strigon and Alberta killed for food – these two just kill. Not for position, not for power, not even for glory or reputation – they kill because they are good at it. Vexx because, other than this Oni guy, he was alone in an academy of assassins where they sent children into the Dungeon. As far as I'm aware, he's the only one that got out – and what did he do with it? He got drunk in the Arena and killed people for booze money."

"And Elaine... she's a sociopath taking out her familial anger on everything she can. She's not spoken to Arthuria in over a decade – and she's entirely aware of her. They're not the sisters you think they are, Morgana and Arthuria will die at her hands if you send them to try and redeem her," Astris stated firmly, with a twinge of panic in her voice. "And what should I do instead? Give up on them? Elaine is Arthuria's blood, the only connection she has left to her mother. And Vexx... I let him down, not the other way around. I..." Jayce's voice cracked. "I failed him, Astris. I failed Vexx. And if... and if I don't try, then I have failed myself. I never should have left him alone when he needed me most."

"Jayce... you can't blame yourself."

"But I do!" he yelled, standing up and towering over her as she remained sat down. Astris folded her legs and looked up at him as tears of anger and sadness filled his eyes. "I failed him! Every day I wake up knowing that I left him behind! That I gave up rather than fought for him! He was a brother to me! My best friend! And I took away the only stability he had – us! Do you know how it feels to know that you're the reason for every person he has killed since then? All the blood he has spilled in Scáthach's name is on my hands and I'm already drowning in it."

Astris reached up and took his hands, focusing his gaze down onto her. "It's not your fault. You do not have control over other people's decisions and lives. You do not have the power to solve everyone's problems and it is not your burden to bear alone. You have Alara, your parents, Bjorn, the crew... and you have me." "I can't abandon him again..." Astris stood on her bed, placing her arms around Jayce's head and pulling him into her chest. "I'm not asking you to. Just... be ready to fail, and live with it."

"Count your bullets," Astris stated, watching Lucinia aim down the shooting range whilst also glancing over towards Ordo and Orianna as he let her practice against him with a rapier in one hand and pistol in the other. "Use the pistol to trap me, you only have a limited number of shots but I'm forced to engage your blade. You can do it; I know you can," he encouraged. Jayce stepped into the training hall. "Guys!" he called out, the room pausing and looking towards him. "It's time."

Final Bastion had changed significantly since their last visit. The number of defences had increased vastly, with ocean walls limiting the approach of ships and large external harbours and piers offering vast space for the huge fleet present. Anti-air gun emplacements were ready for assaults by air and long-range guns were ready to bombard ships from afar. The civilian harbour was widely populated – with numerous ships bearing all manner of markings, but several stood out to Jayce. Ships flying a black flag with a white roundtable were laden with all manner of cargo, and heading almost continuously to and from the Frontier. "Syndicate ships," Marisha stated.

Jayce's eyes landed on a maroon airship hovering in the distance. It was on its own but a single ship was sailing from it towards Final Bastion. His eyes then spotted two familiar ships docked within the main harbour: the Great Seacat and the Heavyweight – Kitty Deliver's and Somme Ankor's ships. "Looks like some guests are here already!" Jayce called out to his crew. "Prepare to disembark, there's no telling how this will go!"

"Jayce!" Alara called out as he stepped foot onto the main pier. She ran forwards and dove into him, hugging him tightly as he span her around. The numerous eyes all around - a mixture of photographers, military and civilians - were all locked onto Jayce with suspicion, his actions in Final Bastion far from forgotten. "There better be time later to talk," she said quietly before stepping away. Jayce's eyes moved past her as she stepped towards Astris, landing on Fleet Admiral Exarga stood in a v-formation with Jayce's father on one side and Alara's father on the other.

"You've come back!" Cassandra stated loudly, as she stepped forwards towards Jayce. "And you've invited guests that by all accounts I should arrest. For what purpose Jayce Exarga? You kill two Betrayers of the Sea Sovereign and believe all should be well after what you did in her name?" she challenged. Jayce stepped forwards, Astris and Bjorn either side of him. "It was Old Dog Xarga's plan," Jayce stated openly. "It was the only way to get the Sovereign to trust me." "And what evidence do you have to back that up?" Fleet Admiral Exarga pressured for their audience. "My crew and I have killed Jure Strigon the Vampire and Alberta Armin the Cannibal. Arcastalum has been freed." A faint smile appeared at the corner of his mother's mouth. "A hall has been prepared for you, come."

Jayce was led through the city towards the main naval district near the upper centre of the city. A large hall had clearly been built somewhat recently, a place for the many meetings that occurred between the Navy and outsiders. Countless guards were stationed around it, as well as numerous groups of Pirates: Delivery Kats, Machinists, Engines, and plenty of therians. "Exarga! Bjorn!" called over a figure, waving a hand. "Lord Solan?" Jayce questioned as he approached. "Why are you here?"

"I've actually been in the city for some time now. King Tanare dispatched me to negotiate a treaty with the Republic and the Syndicate. In all honesty, I was slightly worried neither of you would show – it's good to see you both, and it was certainly wonderful to hear of the beatdown you gave those monsters. I will see you inside," he added, before walking inside the large hall. Jayce and Bjorn glanced at each other before looking towards Cassandra as she scratched her head. "He's quite a loud bear, isn't he? And the property damage he and his men cause once they've had a few drinks..." she stated before letting out a sigh.

"Anyway, you called this meeting – so I hope you have a plan. We'll be waiting for you when you're ready," she said quietly, before stepping away with her Admirals and Alara. Jayce then turned to his crew. "I..." he began before the words got caught in his throat. "Give them hell, Jayce!" Zeta called out, the others cheering. He shook his head as they departed to find seats in the viewing galleries, eventually leaving just Bjorn, Marisha and Astris behind. "Ready?" he questioned to them – his representatives of the Therians, the Republic and the Syndicate. They nodded, following him as he walked inside the huge main entrance.

The building itself immediately reminded Jayce of the Pirate Lord Hall that had once stood in Caedom, only it was much larger. It clearly held numerous meeting rooms scattered throughout the large building, but a huge central chamber stood behind a set of ornate double doors with black-uniformed Marines stood guard. They nodded to Jayce as he approached, their faces vaguely familiar, before opening the doors for him.

The meeting hall was huge, with several full rings of seating above the central meeting room. Jayce glanced up as he entered: the roof was a large glass ceiling, painting the long wooden table in the middle of the floor in light. A pair of large gold statues stood either side of the main doors, with a few other doors leading to smaller chambers lining the right side of the room and another exit partially concealed near the opposite side.

The long table held numerous faces Jayce recognised, with the edges of the floor containing various Lieutenants and Commanders belonging to each faction. The left side of the table held: Kitty Deliver, Tim Kane, Ningyo – the ocean crawler – and

Tanare. At the far head of the table sat the Syndicate's representatives. Jayce faltered as he lay eyes on the Ronin, the small goblin chewing on a piece of straw as he leant against a pillar behind Myra and Holli. He shrugged it off and instead looked towards the empty space in the middle of the right side of the table for him. He approached it and sat down between the Engine representative and the Machinist. Thákane also sat on the right side of the table, her Dragon stood behind her in the shadows. At the other head of the table was Fleet Admiral Exarga, with Yashiro, Philip and the two Vanathurs behind her. Alara sat at the table next to Cassandra. Bjorn, Astris and Marisha all stood behind Jayce, eyeing up the various Commanders. Somme gave Bjorn a nod across the table, whilst Mirabelle gave Jayce a small wave and big grin.

The room was deadly silent, even with several hundred people sat above the table. "Thank you for coming," Jayce began, leaning forwards towards the table and looking around at the various allies in the room. Not all faces looked friendly, least of all Alara's parents. Alara glanced up, spotting Wulf, Riley, the two Kais and Kask whispering to each other. They saw her looking and gave smiles of reassurance to her.

"I won't do you the disservice of pretending that we don't know why we are all here," Jayce stated. "Four Betrayers are dead at the hands of my crew, Pirate Lord Kane, and Commodore Vanathur. The Guild is falling apart as we speak and Scáthach is more vulnerable now than she may ever be again. This is our time to strike – our chance to seize back the seas from the Sovereign and to defeat her Empire."

"To what purpose?" questioned the Machinist. "I quite like my life under her, fly by her rules and there is little for me to worry about," she stated loudly, leaning back in her chair. Two cyborgs stood behind her, both equally as menacing behind their visored helmets. "The Sovereign's freedom will not last, and you know it," Kitty countered, crouching in her chair. "Her next step will be to punish us for the deaths of her Betrayers – you think she's going to leave you out of that?"

Kitty stood up and stepped onto the table, walking along until she was stood in front of Alara. "She'll want your head first," she stated, crouching in front of her but popping back up and turning on her heels to point a finger at Tim. "Then yours." Slowly the finger turned to Jayce. "Then she'll ask everyone who's survived to take yours." Kitty then turned back to the Machinist, her eyes glowing green. "And when you try to take his – I'll take yours."

"Kitty is right," Alara stated. "There is no future for the Pirate Lords, Scáthach only preserved the titles out of novelty. That novelty has worn off and once the power of it goes, do you think there will be anything left to protect you? Any of you?" she questioned, as Kitty returned back to her seat and dropped into her chair. "What remains will be for any and all to claim," stated the Engine leader, the eye in her

cyclops mask glowing red. "We can survive what is to come, can your Republic? Or your crews?" she questioned, looking towards Jayce.

"Scáthach told me herself what her goals were when I was forced to be a Betrayer," Jayce stated. "She seeks challenge, she seeks conflict – because without it she has no purpose. She wants this fight and we need to give it to her!" A steady silence crossed the room, broken up only by several murmurs from above. "Her spies are likely already in this room, she will know what is decided here – you know that, right?" stated Thákane. Jayce nodded, glancing up above to the mass of onlookers. There was guaranteed to be at least one spy amongst them, potentially even a Betrayer like Sétanta.

"What you're proposing sounds like suicide!" stated Thákane. "The Sovereign all but seized control of the Old World singlehandedly, and she swept in and took the New World too with little issue. Killing a Betrayer or two is one thing but... she's something else... something... inhuman. She'll grow bored, she'll abandon her toys and move on. I suggest we seek instead to outlast her within her rules. She won't be around forever."

"You're wrong," Jayce stated plainly, standing up. "Scáthach has pacted with a Demon – for those unfamiliar with them, it means that she will not die of natural causes. There is no outlasting her or waiting her out. Scáthach will live forever unless someone kills her, and that is exactly what she wants!" he stated, hesitating before letting out a short exhale. "The person who kills her... by Scáthach's own words... will inherit her title."

An uproar emerged across the room. "What the hell does that mean?" Kitty cut through. "The Guild, the territories, the Null Legion?" Tim questioned. A heavy fist wrapped on the table. "The Sovereign possesses all of the Pearl makers. All currency falls under the Sovereign," stated Tanare, a faint grin on his face as he stirred the pot. "The world..." the Machinist muttered, her eyes widening and grin spreading.

"Enough!" yelled Cassandra standing to her feet, her heavy chair scraping across the floor behind her. Silence fell and she glared at Jayce, knowing exactly what he had just started. "The title of Sea Sovereign is not something that can be passed around or taken!" she growled, but she faltered – as if doubting her own words. "Unfortunately..." Jayce stated. "It can." He looked towards Myra and Holli, who both nodded. Myra clicked her fingers and papers rained down from above – all displaying images of Scáthach with a crown on her head. "The Sovereign commissioned a crown, an item that is enchanted to be bestowed upon the greatest in the world," Holli stated. "That crown... whoever possesses it... is the Sea Sovereign by all rights of the Guild, the Syndicate..." Myra looked towards her mother and then

at Cassandra. "The Republic," Myra stated. Cassandra fell back into her seat with an expression of absolute defeat. "My gods... what has she done?" Cassandra questioned quietly.

"The Sovereign has contained freedom, and forged it into an item that is available for any to seize!" Jayce stated. "Whoever possesses that crown rules this world."

Seize the Seas Tales: Business

Myra and Holli looked at each other as the room once again fell into arguing. Marisha had sent them instructions well in advance, along with a variety of contingences depending on if Guildmasters had turned up or fighting broke out, but otherwise they had their own games to play. Jayce had been right on spies being present, but he would have never guessed that they would have been brought in under the cloak of the Syndicate. "All as expected," Holli muttered to Myra, glancing up to the reporters amongst the mix. "In some ways even better," Myra returned.

Chapter 244: Death or Unity

The arguing lasted for almost an hour, and Jayce simply sat there and waited – listening in on what drew his attention. Several others sat and observed: Kitty, Tim and Tanare – they had already agreed on Jayce’s proposal, they already knew what was at stake. Cassandra had sat almost frozen, slumped back into her throne-like chair, biting a nail, as she stared directly towards Jayce. His hook had been thrown out, but the consequence of it would be far greater than he could ever realise. He had restarted the age of piracy.

“Quiet!” Alara called out, getting to her feet. “Quiet everyone! Please settle down!” she cried out, trying to settle the room. Astris stepped forwards to stand behind Jayce. “Shut the hell up!” she yelled, taking out her gun and firing a shot into the floor. Silence fell and she looked towards Alara before nodding. “Thank you. What Pirate Lord Exarga has said... unfortunately makes sense. If the Sovereign falls, it is only right that someone will take her place. Whether Pirate,” she stated, gesturing towards Jayce. “Syndicate,” she added, gesturing towards Myra and Holli. “Or Republic,” Alara added, looking down towards Cassandra. “But all of that is wholly reliant on taking down Scáthach and her armies.”

“We can argue and fight amongst ourselves as much as we want but as long as she is still sat on her throne then we are arguing over nothing. I will stand with Jayce Exarga and his ideas – but the second the Sovereign is defeated, I am taking that crown for the Republic and restoring it to where it rightfully belongs: on the head of the people’s leader, the democratic leader of the Republic. I would hope that whoever is able to defeat her would do the same!” Alara declared. Jayce smiled gently as he nodded to her.

“I will also fight with Exarga!” Kitty stated, getting to her feet on her chair and looking upwards. “And my boys will too!” several cheers came from above as she raised a fist. Somme nodded to Jayce too as he stood behind Kitty. “Need it be stated?” Tim questioned, standing up. “I killed a Betrayer for you, but I warn you now – my friend – I’m taking that crown for me! The Scholar’s Fort will fight with you!”

Tanare stood up. “The Therians have allied with the Republic, but I will fight with you Exarga!” he stated, tipping his large hat to Jayce. Jayce then glanced forwards towards the Syndicate leaders. “Business is business, and war is profitable!” Holli stated. “I have several merchant fleets on standby and ready to offer all willing to fight – on either side – all the arms and ammo you could ever need!” Marisha smirked from behind Jayce, shaking her head slightly.

The doors to the chamber opened, a cold air passing instantly through the room as a set of heels clacked on the stone floor. A blonde woman strode in wearing a gold

leather jacket and black leather trousers. Her eyes were gold and reptilian and her mouth was filled with canines. Nanabolele immediately took a defensive stance, pulling Thákane out of her chair and behind her. "You!" snarled the Dragon.

Kaina looked across the room with an arrogant bemusement. "Don't mind me," she stated. "I've come of my own accord. I heard rumours of discussion of war, and I simply wanted a list of who I should expect?" Kaina stated. It was if she had physically murdered the enthusiasm in the room. The Betrayer stood proudly before walking towards Jayce. Almost immediately a trio of figures dropped down from above, two men and a woman. "Oh," Kaina said in gentle surprise. "Aren't you adorable."

Zhurong stood in the middle, his crimson hair spiky and pushed back. His features were sharp, body muscular, with scaly red talons as hands, and he stood of a similar height to Jayce. His eyebrows were jagged and black, with his eyes reptilian and bright red. He had pale skin that took on a slight cream colour. Taranis was far larger, closer to seven-feet in height and on appearance far more muscular. His hair was a dark blue, eyes the colour of lightning and black scales covered his hands. Soteria was the smallest of the trio, her skin pale like snow but covered in pearlescent scales. Her hair was a similar pearlescent colour, with white eyebrows and ice-blue eyes. "You will not touch him!" snarled Soteria. "No, I will not," confirmed Kaina, glancing across the room. Her smile faltered slightly and she sharply turned and left the room.

The chill persisted; the Dragon's presence having successfully interrupted the meeting at perhaps its most important moment. A Marine hurried into the room and whispered something to Cassandra. She nodded and he quickly departed, a few bloody footprints left behind in the process. "I will fight alone if I have to," Jayce stated, getting to his feet once again and looking towards those that had not agreed to fight. The Machinist swore loudly and scratched her head. "Fine, but the Betrayers are on you guys! My guys will aid with the Null Legion." "The same is to be said of us," stated the Engine leader. Ningyo nodded in agreement. Jayce lay his eyes towards Thákane. "We will fight, but we will flee if it doesn't look promising." Jayce sat down and looked at his army. It wasn't nothing, but considering what they were up against he couldn't help but wonder if it would be enough. "Then prepare for war."

Slowly but surely the hall emptied out until only Jayce's crew, the Admirals, Alara, Tim, Mirabelle, Kitty and Somme remained. "What a mess," Cassandra muttered, looking towards Jayce with a tired expression. "I'm sorry, better me than Scáthach saying it," Jayce told her sympathetically. Cassandra shook her head. "Better not said at all. If we succeed then there will be a very dangerous power vacuum."

"You've given Scáthach a lot of time to prepare her forces, aren't you worried she will strike first?" Kitty questioned, sitting on the edge of the table and looking at the group. "No, she will wait for us to come to her. This is exactly what she wants to happen. And a month gives everyone time to get in position," Jayce answered. She stood up and stepped towards him before resting her hand on his forearm. "I hope you know what you're doing. You led us through the last one, I hope you can this one too. I'll see you at the rendezvous." Kitty stepped away with Somme in tow.

Tim gave Jayce a curt nod before teleporting away with Mirabelle, leaving only the Rising Aces and the Navy behind. "What a mess, Jayce," Cassandra said more bluntly, looking towards her son before pulling him into a hug. "Sorry, I just can't seem to help myself." Cassandra released him before opening her arms wide for Caelie to run into them. "Oh, look at how much you've grown. A real young lady now!" she fussed, as Jayce hugged his father before both Alara's parents rounded on him. "There is much to discuss," Silas said firmly, looking from Jayce to his crew before faltering as he spotted Ordo. "But that will have to wait till later." Silas gave Jayce one last glare before departing with Admiral Yashiro.

Victoire Vanathur remained at the sides with her arms folded, but she disarmed almost immediately as Ordo approached her. "It is good to see you alive, Vivi," Ordo said to her frankly. Her mouth opened slightly as before she looked down and let out a nervous chuckle. "I... it's good to see you Instructor Ordo – I was not expecting you to still be alive, least of all as a... well, um, a..." she stammered, her face flashing slightly red as she struggled to look at him. "Still the nervous girl with too much to say and not the balls to say it," Ordo told her, placing a firm hand on her shoulder. "A Pirate is what I am, Vivi. Don't be afraid to say it."

Victoire took a deep breath and regained her composure before rounding on Ordo. "You idiot! You bumbling buffoon of a man! Scoundrel! Scallywag! Scum! Traitor to our oaths and all that has been sacrificed by me, by Silas, by all the brothers and sisters we've lost, and by all... by all... by the Old Dogs!" she admonished. "Done?" Ordo questioned, looking at her with a raised eyebrow. She swung with an open hand, slapping him loudly across the cheek. He rubbed his face, a firm mark across it. "Why? Just... why? Am I the only one who sees this all as insane?" she questioned in soft defeat. Ordo smiled sympathetically at her. "Come on, you young fool – let's have a chat, you and me. It's okay."

Both Jayce and Alara looked at the pair with mild confusion as they wandered off. Alara turned towards Jayce and raised an eyebrow. "I get the sneaking suspicion your mother hasn't quite adapted to everything that has happened," Jayce stated. "I haven't seen that side of her... but I guess the Ordo was a mentor of hers when she was my age – perhaps he can actually make her see what I've been trying to tell her these last

few months. Speaking of talking..." Jayce nodded, turning to his crew. "You have leave. We have time here, and there is much to discuss, so be on comms, but otherwise... prepare yourselves." Jayce then turned towards his mother. "Business first, or later?" he asked. She looked towards Caelie. "Later."

Jayce needed nothing more. Alara led him through the city towards her accommodation, but as they arrived, he quickly noticed someone waiting for them both. "How did you-?" Jayce questioned, as Astris stood leaning against the door. "I caught up with Wulf and Riley first, they told me where to go," she answered. Alara unlocked the door. "Sorry, you'll have to wait out here. I have a debt to pay," Astris stated, as she walked in and Alara followed, closing the door in Jayce's face as he stammered. He stood outside in stunned confusion, only for the door to open and a hand to drag him inside.

Dinner was brought to them, and the three of them sat lounging in their underwear around Alara's dinner table. There hadn't been much talking, and Jayce couldn't help but feel that he had been both extremely lucky that Alara had been so accepting, but also slightly perturbed that he now felt a third wheel as Astris comfortably sat smiling at the pair of them. "Can we talk now?" Jayce questioned. "I mean, you were the speechless one," Alara stated with a smile, as she picked up a piece of pizza and took a bite. Astris stuck her tongue out at Jayce, a new bitemark on his neck. "Um," he attempted, trying to regain control of his mind. "Just stop thinking about it," Alara advised, "enjoy the fact that you have two beautiful women willing to waste themselves on a Pirate like you." "Now that's unfair," Jayce protested. Both Alara and Astris raised their eyebrows, glanced at each other and then back at him. Immediately, it dawned on Jayce just how much danger he had put himself in.

"Your mother was right to voice worry about your announcement. The Empire struggled with Piracy and that was without dangling a singular prize in front of every wannabe in the world. Once news breaks out it's going to be a bloodbath," Alara stated. "Only if we do beat the Sovereign, and I'm still not certain on our odds," Jayce returned. Alara looked towards Astris who was too busy picking off food that had missed her mouth. "You think we'll lose?" Alara questioned, somewhat surprised. "I didn't truly believe we'd win against the Church and we had a lot of hidden advantages then, this time... It's hard to not believe we are outgunned."

"Logically, if we pair up the remaining eight Betrayers with the Pirate Lords, you and my crew. Then that leaves the Sovereign completely unopposed. Tim was right to take out Myrddin early, the Navy would have been sunk almost immediately," he explained. "There's also a lot we don't know about what we're up against." Alara gestured for him to go on. "Alice for example. I believe she's a Mage, but we've not seen her fight at all."

"The Betrayers will fall apart if we can take down Scáthach. They can be dealt with afterwards," Astris stated. Jayce wasn't certain. "Okay, fine, then think of it this way. Kaina – Dragon – we have three of our own to lock her down. The Destructive One will be limited due to its lava body. That djinn won't fight over water and we can use that against it. Ura Soruk - Ningyo and Red can fight her underwater. If Alice is a Mage, then Tim should be able to handle her, especially considering he killed Myrddin. Sétanta is a rogue element. And Vexx and Elaine we know about."

"Whatever plan you and your father come up with will work," Alara stated confidently. "We believe in you, so trust that you'll be able to create a victory out of this." Jayce was certain he could create a victory, but not one without serious losses. "Okay," he said quietly. Alara reached up to her ear and then turned away. "Right," she said quietly before looking back to Jayce. "You're wanted for a talk with the Admirals, and then dinner with my parents."

Alara looked towards Astris. "You joining us?" she asked with a coy smile. "Hell no, I'm treating this casually – keep me out of your family drama. I've got my own reports to submit then I'm getting drunk with my brother and sister, probably Riley, Wulf – Weapon doesn't drink – Kask," she stated, counting off names on her fingers and standing up to retrieve her clothes. Jayce and Alara glanced at each other. "The audacity," Alara said with a smile.

"How do I look?" Jayce eventually questioned, finally alone with Alara. He wore a simple black shirt and trousers, with blue cufflinks and leather shoes. "Dashing," Alara stated with a soft smile, wearing her Commodore uniform. Sola and Luna had blended into white tattoos concealed across Jayce's back. She ran her fingers through his hair. "I'm glad to see those blue eyes of yours again, I was worried Scáthach would keep you away from me forever." Jayce smiled, meeting her gaze and taking her hands. "Never again will anything keep me from you." "Don't speak so soon, you have my parents to handle first." He chuckled nervously, following her out the door.

The meeting room in Final Bastion's command centre was as functional as expected. The décor was minimal and it consisted of a main central table with two ways in and out of the room. A somewhat operational drinks cabinet sat to the side but Jayce got the feeling he wasn't going to be offered anything as he sat down opposite his mother and father, Alara's parents and Admiral Yashiro – the five highest ranked internal members of the Old World Navy. Bjorn came in and sat down next to Jayce. "I was worried I would be on my own," Jayce whispered to him as he sat. Bjorn smiled. "You'd have been fine without me."

"Admirals," Bjorn greeted graciously, nodding to Cassandra and then looking to the flanking Admirals. It was just the seven of them in the room, no guards, no observers.

"Captain Bjorn," Cassandra returned, giving him a soft smile before her expression hardened as she looked at Jayce. "We can be civil," he offered. "If it wasn't for better council you'd be across my knee with a belt in my hand," Cassandra warned.

The very visceral image of the sort of discipline Jayce had experienced in his youth flashed back into his mind in an instant. "Right, well, uh, I suppose that's somewhat fair," he returned, rubbing his freshly-shaved chin. "In my defence," he then attempted, only for his father to give a subtle shake of the head. "I have no defence," he corrected. "What follows after Scáthach's defeat will come regardless, this way it is channelled towards a purpose and prize – even if it isn't necessarily within the Republic's interest."

"We are here to discuss the incoming war and the strategy for it," reminded Bjorn. "We should do so, so that we can all make the preparations we need." "Bjorn is correct," stated Admiral Yashiro, before looking towards Philip. "Phil." Philip Exarga sat forwards in his seat and adjusted his glasses. "The information we possess on the Sovereign's armies is... limited, but not inconsequential. This will be an invasion with the Sovereign acting in defence. Our psychologists have concurred with Jayce's description of her goals, she is seeking defeat, seeking a final battle, and unfortunately this will be it. She will bring in everything, regardless of the impact the removal of her forces from various territories will result in. Every Betrayer will fight, every member of her Null Legion, and of course her herself. So, how will we approach that?"

"Well, I was hoping you guys could handle the Null Legion, you must have, what, three hundred ships here in the Old World with the additions of Tanare's therians and Brunxchume's Navy? With the five of you fighting-" Jayce answered. "We will not be engaging," Silas said firmly. Jayce faltered, freezing for a moment as he shut his eyes. "Excuse me?" he questioned, with as much as force as he could put to the words. "The defeat of Scáthach and her armies is crucial to the Republic," Victoire inserted, leaning forwards. "But this is not our only fight."

"The civilians of the Old World have come to rely on us for aid. Piracy has ravaged the nations that have fallen out of the Sovereign's gaze. Piracy, which today alone has had a sudden surge in activity – thanks to your words. We're helping to reestablish Brunxchume's military and trade routes, the same is true of the Therian Lands in Crea and their other non-human allies," Victoire stated. Bjorn tensed. "Ease up," she stated firmly. "I did not count the therians as non-human. I meant the goblin tribes, the ogres – regardless, even now we're busy cleansing Arcastalum from the remnants of the forces you left alive. The Sovereign is a priority, but we cannot afford for this to be our final fight if you lose."

“Fair points, but you understand that if the Republic doesn’t aid us then the people of this world will never have faith in you again if we win?” Jayce countered. “You will have support,” Cassandra stated, holding up a hand to intercept the Vanathurs. She then looked to her husband. “From both a morale standpoint and also a logistical angle,” he stated, “you will have Alara to support you.” Bjorn, Jayce and the Vanathurs all faltered.

“Come again?” questioned Silas, leaning forwards to look at Philip. “It’s as I said: Commodore Vanathur will be participating in this assault. Alara has demonstrated clear capacity for leadership in her campaign for the Sentries and the defeat of Betrayer Khalid,” Philip stated, only for Victoire to hold up a hand. “Participate, or lead?” she questioned. Philip remained silent for a few moments. “A mixture of both. Alara will receive a temporary promotion and will lead the ground assault against Diasta’s Capital city. The Rear-Admirals with her will handle the Null Legion fleet, with Alara in a position to take command should it be necessary.”

“You’re insane if you think that a twenty-seven-year-old should be made Rear-Admiral,” Victoire stated, only to falter as she realised her audience were the worst to argue that point to. “We were around that age when we were,” Cassandra commented. “But, they’re not wrong Phil – I need reasoning to bet so much on Alara and for what reason,” she stated diplomatically, likely already more than aware of Philip’s strategy.

“Alara has carried the title Hero of the Marines for a while now, and her presence alone has sparked significant boosts in morale, regardless of the costs she has faced in her various conflicts. This is a fight against an enemy not too dissimilar to Crach in his peak, and he nearly brought down the Empire then. Anyone who goes to fight in this war is more than certainly not coming back from it. Put it this way, would an everyday Marine fight without knowing that she is on the frontlines? Our military has always operated on the guise that might equals ranking. Alara is the only Republic Marine to take down a Betrayer, something even we couldn’t do – and whether we could now or not is irrelevant. The Republic war effort has to focus around Alara at its core in order for any assault to work. That or one of us has to go, and we all know the reasons why we each cannot.”

Jayce didn’t like the idea as much as Alara’s parents did. It was reckless, put too much pressure on her, and also made her a colossal target – even more than she already was. “Fine,” Jayce begrudgingly stated. “Alara will lead the ground assault, whichever Admirals you send along will handle the ocean-bound Null Legion until my crew and I have opened up the way to Scáthach – at which point, myself and the other Pirate Lords will engage her together. You better give Alara the Republic’s moneybag and a

shopping catalogue; she'll need everything you have available in order to stand a chance against the Null Legion's finest."

It wasn't perfect, but it was a plan – and that was better than nothing. But as Jayce's parents, Bjorn and Admiral Yashiro departed the room, Jayce remained sat – just long enough for Alara's parents to notice and stay behind. They sat down opposite him. "Do you make her happy?" Silas questioned, looking Jayce sternly in the eye. "I do my best to - not always given our positions in the global state of affairs, but I never want to see her unhappy," he answered. Alara's father nodded. "Good enough for me," he stated, reaching forwards and extending a hand. Jayce frowned and shook it. "You were equally as pissed off with your father's strategy as I was, I could see it on your face. You want what's best for her, and given that she's in the military despite your... unequal status, it's clear that you've done your best to support her even when she's been fighting against you. I have to respect that. I'm built that way. My wife however..."

"You've grown up a lot since I last saw you," she said gently, standing up and walking around the table. Jayce stood up and looked down at her as she cautiously reached up with her hand. Her hand cupped the side of his cheek. "Still the troublemaker putting your mother through a world of stress, but that was never your worst quality. Senior Instructor Ordo has never spoken about anyone as highly as you, and for all that man's faults – of which there are many – he was always good at knowing who was worth betting on. Keep our daughter safe out there, I know you'll have your hands full but... try to come back alive, and maybe I can cook dinner for you like I used to. Do you still like chicken pie with a preposterous amount of gravy?" Jayce nodded and she smiled. "Then perhaps the world hasn't changed as much as I thought it had. Go on, she'll be waiting for you – I'm sure of it." Jayce nodded to Alara's parents and quickly departed, the couple holding each other tightly in a gentle embrace as they watched him leave.

Seize the Seas Tales: Preparations

Alara didn't like her new uniform – the black camo fatigues and matching beret felt alien, uncomfortable, fake. But orders were orders and, as for the moment, she was now acting as a Rear-Admiral. As much as she disliked it, she understood the logic: the armada she was helping to pick was unlikely to come back from this fight. She was unlikely to come back from this fight. Jayce. Astris. Wulf. Riley. Cyrenna, Beowulf, Kask, Weapon and all the others that had fought alongside her for years. All of them were as doomed as she was. But the Republic needed volunteers and she needed Marines to fight and die with her, so playing idol was her assignment – no matter how much she hated herself for it.

“Look at you!” Cyrenna stated, remaining seated as everyone else, including Beowulf, stood to attention. “Commodore,” Alara greeted, looking out across the bar full of distinguished officers. “Admiral,” Cyrenna returned, tipping her head with a finger salute as she sat back with her feet up on a table. “I want to thank you all for volunteering!” Alara began, looking at more than fifty people – all with their own specialist squads and crews.

“I have chosen each and everyone of you for this assignment, and quite frankly the only reason I believe we stand any chance at all is because of you all. You are the best of the best of the best, or some of you have been unlucky to fight beside me before,” Alara stated, looking towards Riley, Wulf and then Cyrenna. “There is every chance that this is a one-way trip, and I am sorry in advance to those of you that will not make it home, but we have a simple mission ahead of us: we are stealing the Sovereign’s city and taking down the Null Legion Generals that are there. Any questions? No? Then make your preparations, put the Republic into debt and make our accountants work overtime! Prepare for war!”

Chapter 245: For the Crown, Regardless of Whom it Ends Upon

The journey south to Diasta's capital was fast, too fast for any of the Rising Aces to enjoy. The Navy had been left behind and, as the Stacked Hand sailed towards Novalis and the Sovereign's mansion beyond it on the horizon, they found themselves alone on the ocean. It was early morning, a fog flowing across the waves and the sun low on the horizon. Jayce found himself stood near the bow, his body tense and cold as he stood in body armour. Sleep had been avoidant for almost the entire crew, but he found himself one of the only members on the main deck. "It's quiet," Astris stated, handing him a coffee before sitting down and looking ahead, dressed in her own armour and covered in ammunition. "It always was going to be," Jayce returned. "No one wants to be the first to arrive to a battlefield."

Astris looked up at him as he bore a grim expression. "It will be okay," she reassured. "We'll make it out of this. I know we will." He forced a smile and looked down at her. "I hope so. I'm not ready to say goodbye to any of our friends. Or her," he added, looking out towards the city of Novalis where Alara was due to assault. "She'll be fine. Alara's tougher than both of us. She'll do her part as long as we do ours, and the faster we do ours the faster we can help her with hers." Jayce shook his head; he couldn't quite understand where Astris' optimism had come from. They both looked back out towards the Sovereign's mansion on the horizon.

Jayce heard the first ship approach the rally point, long before he could see it. The crew were nervous, loud and chatty, but that was representative of their Captain. The Great Seacat came close to the Stacked Hand, the Heavyweight on its other side. "Mornin', great day for a war!" Kitty yelled over from the bow of her ship, before easily leaping aboard the Stacked Hand. She looked up at Jayce, her tabby-coloured hair short and her clothes casual for an incoming battlefield. She wore her usual grey leather jacket and a green choker with a bell. "Just the three ships with us then?" she questioned, looking around. Jayce chuckled. "They'll be here," he stated, the fog still laying low across the water.

A loud zap of lightning erupted nearby, followed by several more as half a dozen ships teleported onto the ocean. "Are we late?" Tim yelled out, pulling up with his flagship – the Knowledgeable – next to the Stacked Hand on the other side. "Still early!" Jayce called over. Tim nodded appreciatively, letting out an exhale of visible breath as he looked out ahead, his body tense and anxious. "Stick to the plan and we'll be fine!" Jayce told him, the younger man forcing a smile as he met Jayce's gaze. "I've not lost faith in you yet. I trust you, Jayce." Jayce could only hope to repay that trust.

Slowly, more and more ships began to arrive. A neat thirty ships full of therians from Tanare, himself aboard a colossal ramming ship. Three huge maroon airships loaded

with countless flyers from the Machinist, alongside two dozen sailing ships and a few submersibles. Thákane flew in the air aboard her water Dragon Nanabolele. Ningyo hovered above the ocean using a jet of water coming out of the back of his head, alongside a small army of ocean crawlers. Finally, a fleet of Engines arrived – their cyclops glowing red in unison as they sailed towards the Pirate Lord fleet. The fleet wasn't small, but compared to what lay ahead of them – it felt like nothing.

The fog evaporated, revealing at least three hundred Null Legion ships spaced out into five separate fleets – two assigned to guard the Sovereign's mansion, two to guard Novalis, with a third in between ready to engage Jayce's fleet. "By the ancestors," Bjorn muttered, as he came to stand next to Jayce, Kitty and Astris. "I'm sure it looks bigger than it is," Kitty dismissed, her joke barely hiding her shaking body. "We've faced larger before," Jayce stated. Kitty shook her head. "Last time they locked themselves into being sitting ducks. This time they're not going to waste their ships." It was true – the Null Legion was made up of veterans from the Old World war; they had faced all sorts of horrors before.

Jayce looked back, a small squadron of flagships sailing towards his fleet. "They're here," he stated, pointing out Alara's ship as well as the flagships of Rear-Admirals Loire, Ewon, and Alpin – each of them experienced Marines that had fought in the New World war. Somewhat alarmingly, there were only the four ships. "Where's the rest of them?" Kitty questioned in sharp alarm as the Navy pulled up alongside the fleet. "They're here," Jayce reassured, spotting Alara, Riley and Wulf across the line of ships between them. Alara nodded to him and he nodded back. "You look good in that uniform," he stated into his communicator. "Shut up," came a firm response.

"So, what now?" Bjorn questioned. "Everyone's here, do we wait for them or do we go to them?" As if in answer, an image burst into the sky over the ocean between the Sovereign's mansion and the fleet – an image of Scáthach. "So," it stated, "I see an army has risen up to challenge my authority! Well, it took long enough! Honestly, do you know how long it has been since I've had a real fight – a real challenge, not that... well, not to discredit... this, but..." Scáthach stated. One of the giant airships exploded in a colossal fireball, Kaina tearing out of its falling wreckage in her giant golden Dragon form. Flames spread outwards, flaming debris falling down towards the ships below whilst also puncturing another airship and igniting the gas that was released in a large plume of flame. "Enjoy! I'll be waiting!" goaded the Sovereign, her image disappearing as the seas between the two fleets erupted in a mass of colossal tentacles and teeth.

"Red, Ningyo, take down Ura Soruk and her krakens!" Jayce commanded, as Bjorn ran back to the helm and took the wheel. Red nodded, leaping into the ocean with his trident as the ocean crawlers dove into the water to engage the sea monsters surging

towards the fleet. "Launch all fighters!" commanded the Machinist, standing inside a large bronze exosuit that looked like an ancient diving suit only with a mounted jetpack, flamethrowers and two huge claws as arms. The bays on the damaged airship opened, a swarm of fighters flooding outwards as the airship tilted to the side and began to fall towards the ocean.

"Forwards! We fear no monster!" yelled the Therian King, his fleets surging forwards towards the sea monsters and the enemy fleet safely behind them. Jayce glanced towards Kitty and her Delivery Kats. She nodded and her two ships charged as well. "Soteria, Zhurong, Ordo, Taranis, Morgana!" Jayce commanded, pointing towards the Dragon diving towards them with a mouth full of fire and a mad snarl. The three Dragons launched off the deck, their sudden propulsion and heavy masses causing the entire ship to lurch backwards. Morgana shot off into the air aboard her broom with Ordo leaping into the skies after her. Wren launched as well with Falconer aboard her back, flying up high past Kaina as she slammed hard into Soteria's shield, shattering it before slamming into Tempest's behind it. Blood flowed out of her nose as she pushed off and took into the air after Wren and Falconer, with three Dragons, as well as Thákane and Nanabolele, in pursuit.

The Engines surged forward aboard their fleet, launching red beams towards the water at any creature that came close. The Machinist's fleet set off as well, her ships spewing flames and lead. The Stacked Hand held back, watching and waiting. Jayce ducked, a spear impaling the air where his head had been as Sétanta seemingly appeared out of thin air, a spear in each hand. "I was wondering when you would show," Jayce stated. A black bolt of a Focus-enhanced bullet flew past his cheek and almost hit Sétanta in the face. The Betrayer stumbled backwards as three more shots came flying past Jayce towards him as Riley and her snipers took shots at him. A grunt then escaped him as Thalia tackled him off the ship, the pair darting across the surface of the ocean. Jayce turned towards Alara's ship, giving a thumbs up, before bending his elbow and then pointing towards Novalis.

"Forwards!" Rear-Admiral Alara Vanathur commanded, her flagship surging ahead of the other three ships. A small group of Null Legion ships moved forwards from their larger fleets, seeing only a small group of ships. "Ready!" Alara commanded. "Now!" she yelled as the ships came into range, her Marines throwing the variety of enchanted capsules in their hands towards the water as hard as they could. The capsules broke on impact, releasing the contained ships inside and unleashing an immediate and battle-ready fleet upon the unsuspecting Null Legion. "Fire!" screamed Cyrenna, her battle group immediately pushing forwards and spewing explosive shells from their top-mounted heavy weapons. The sudden barrage tore apart the enemy in heavy blasts of fire, the rest of their fleets immediately surging

forwards to engage the sudden increase of Republic ships. Alara's fleet was the largest of the four, but the Republic had brought an extra hundred-or-so ships to the fray. The three Rear-Admirals commanded their own fleets to push past Alara's, immediately working on creating openings for her fleet to continue pushing forwards towards Novalis. Periodic beams of blue, cyan and even black Focus launched from Alara's flagship, the snipers picking out anyone on the enemy ships that looked important.

"Jayce?" Bjorn questioned from the helm. Jayce looked across the battlefield; Mages filled the air – throwing spells at one another. Periodically a large blast of golden energy would descend from above, obliterating a ship full of Engines or the Machinist's Pirates. Jayce's eyes swiftly locked onto a blonde woman holding a large staff atop the Sovereign's mansion. "Tim, Alice is on top of the Sovereign's mansion," Jayce warned.

"Not much I can do about it, at the moment, not until those sea monsters are dealt with or those guns are stopped," Tim responded. Jayce glanced down from Alice; the entire coastline of the island was mounted with heavy artillery and a standalone army ready to defend the island. "Take us in!" Jayce commanded, the Stacked Hand pushing forwards towards the battlefield. "Home crew, you know your roles – protect our home and be ready to get us out. Everyone else," Jayce stated, glancing mainly towards Arthuria and Astris. "Engage!"

Jayce leapt off his ship, Sola and Luna extending outwards into a pair of heavy greatswords. He dashed through the air, avoiding the barrage of gunfire shooting upwards from the Null Legion towards the mass of flyers in the air and the Focus-enhanced warriors capable of dashing through the skies. A huge explosion shook the air as the damaged airship finally detonated, but Jayce ignored it – his eyes instead upon Alice and the guns protecting her.

The seas had descended into pure and utter chaos. The Null Legion fleets did their best to stay together, but they were similarly at the mercy of Ura Soruk's sea monsters as the huge beast thrashed about at the top of the waters, grabbing ships, sailors, and ocean crawlers alike before squishing them in their tentacles or devouring them whole in their colossal maws. Periodically, Jayce could spot a faint flash of Red beneath the surface as he and Ningyo engaged the ocean crawler Betrayer. A loud whine began to fill the air, the water bubbling in the centre of the battlefield before erupting outwards as a huge bipedal creature stood up. Jayce's eyes widened as he stared at a World Walker wearing an Engine's mask. The fallen giant unleashed a devastating beam of energy, disintegrating an entire line of enemy ships before a kraken launched itself out of the water and wrapped its tentacles around its huge body, the two colossal creatures falling into the water and thrashing about.

He carried onwards, glancing down to Astris and Arthuria carving a bloody path across a Null Legion flagship, with Lucinia and Orianna following Astris, each armed with a singular pistol and helping where they could. A roar drew Jayce's gaze east to the Dragons fighting against Kaina. She was far larger than all of them, with Nanabolele the largest of the quartet. Falconer and Wren had vanished, but periodically a large bolt of green would split the clouds and shatter the deck of a ship. Even Ordo seemed to have given up against Kaina, instead he and Thalia were dashing across the waters in pursuit of Sétanta as he cackled maniacally, cleaving apart ship and sailor on his chaotic dash away from them. He launched himself towards the Stacked Hand, only to bounce off a shield of lightning and a huge vengeful blood-crystal to launch towards him.

Through it all Zeta sang, her battle chants and songs drumming along with the thundering of the countless guns, a spectral band hovering behind her and playing guitars and drums as she channelled her magic to enhance those fighting with her whilst intimidating those against her. Across the warzone, blue portals would appear – eating up barrages of cannon fire and unleashing them back upon those that had sent it. Soldiers made of bone would crawl up along the hulls of ships before charging towards those aboard.

A steady plume of steam was making its way across the battlefield, the water bubbling as something moved beneath it in the direction of the therian fleet. "Tanare!" Jayce warned. "Incoming, southwest!" The ocean erupted as the Destructive One rose up aboard a pillar of molten rock, beaching Tanare's ship aboard a platform of lava. The djinn let out a gargling roar, its orange armour opening up into a liquid maw. "You want to play with fire, huh?" Tanare questioned, taking off his hat and setting it down. "Then let's turn up the heat!" he yelled, charging at the being made of magma as his fur ignited into blue fire.

Jayce dropped down out of the skies towards the Sovereign's island, the guns turning towards him and immediately raining orange bullets towards him. He twisted and rolled, pushing off the air to increase his acceleration before landing in a loud burst of rock and dust as he shattered a weapon emplacement, before darting forwards towards the Null Legionnaires charging at him. He cut them apart with his swords, making a hole in the defence before leaping upwards towards the rooftop of the mansion. "Oh shit," Alice muttered, turning to face him with wide eyes. "Now this is unexpected," she stated, as Jayce darted forwards and cut straight through her. But her form broke apart into ice, a soft laughter in the wind. "That's me done! Byeee! Tell the Sovereign I'm sorry!" Alice stated. A nearby flash of purple indicated that she had fled. "Alice has fled the battlefield, keep your eyes out for her!" Jayce warned, looking out across the waters before dropping back down to fight the army beneath him.

Morgana weaved through the air aboard her broomstick, periodically dropping a singular vial of flash down towards a ship below. The resulting potion would then either begin to melt a hole through the decks or would burst into green flame that quickly began to spread and only got worse with water. She did her best to avoid the screams from friend and foe alike. There was nothing she could do to help them, not really, but she kept her eyes firmly on Astris and Arthuria as they made their way across the ships towards Jayce. If there was anyone she was willing to risk her life for, her sister was that person. One way or another, they were making it out of this – together.

Huge tendrils of wood whipped around the deck of the Stacked Hand as Bjorn weaved the ship towards the Delivery Kats and Tanare. “Die, die, die!” Gaea yelled, smashing the ships in their way. “Caelie, supply request!” Marisha stated, using the elevator near the front of the ship to hoist cargo from the cargo hold onto the main deck. “Where?” Caelie questioned. Marisha pointed forwards towards Tim’s ship, a portal forming on the main deck that Marisha immediately shoved a crate full of magic stones through. “Medical supplies needed on Lord Solan’s ship,” Marisha then stated, pointed east. Any ship they could keep in the fight gave them an edge over the rapidly falling mass of Null Legion ships.

“All Pirate Lords, a hole has been made in their defences!” Jayce stated, wiping blood out of his face as he weaved through a series of strikes and cleaved a Null Legionnaire in two. “Make your way when you can! I will clear the path!” He staggered backwards, catching his breath for a moment before letting out a snarl and throwing Sola at a charging Legionnaire. “Just give up! Don’t waste your lives!” he complained, to a mass of corpses around him. “Godsdammit!” he yelled, turning towards the sealed giant doors leading into the Sovereign’s mansion. “Sola,” Jayce commanded, the mimic returning to him before forming with his sister into a huge hammer. He swung, the doors shattering inwards in a spray of splinters. Jayce then half-ran, half-staggered inside. “Vexx!” he yelled.

“Astris, we need to move!” Arthuria yelled, twisting and beheading a pair of masked Null Legion with a single strike from her secondary sword. “I can see!” Astris stated, unloading her guns upon a trio of soldiers before immediately reloading. “We’re going to need assistance!” Arthuria yelled, as Astris resumed shooting at anyone in sight. The Vampire Lord paused before shaking her head. A sigh escaped her. “No, you can make it!” she yelled back, apparating behind a group taking cover and gunning them down. “What do you mean ‘you’? What about you three?” Arthuria questioned, taking a grenade out of her bottomless bag and dropping it below deck before closing the hatch shut. “We’re needed here! All the Pirate Lords will be after that crown, someone needs to finish this fight! You need to find Elaine! She’s not on

this battlefield and there will be a reason for that – she and Vexx are the Sovereign’s last line! Go find your sister, turn her or kill her! And if Jayce can’t do the same for Vexx then I’m counting on you to take him out!” Astris yelled. “Ready? I’ll clear you a path!” Arthuria nodded, the two Vampire girls apparating ahead in a splash of blood before Astris charged past them, guns blazing. “Good luck!” she yelled as Arthuria surged past.

“You too!” Arthuria yelled, dashing across the surface of the ocean as ships opened fire on her. Astris apparated from ship to ship, shooting the gunners before moving on. Arthuria made it to the island, cleaving through the few rallying defenders before surging in through the broken doors after Jayce. A moment later Morgana dove in after her aboard her broomstick. “Elaine!” Arthuria yelled. “Arthuria!” yelled Morgana.

Seize the Seas Tales: Last Push

Wicke sat tapping her foot as she sat on a beach in the sun outside of the final Dungeon. The faint remains of a scrapped outpost sat around her, everything that the Guild couldn’t be bothered to pack up in their hasty abandonment of the southern Dungeon. A stack of newspapers lay in a crumpled heap underneath her boot, the wind threatening to drag them away towards the waters. The one benefit of the Syndicate’s rise to power was that the news now came from countless different sources – the issue with that was that it now required Wicke to subscribe to a whole roster of publishers in order to get some gleam of the full story on whatever was happening across the world. It was frustrating, and irritating, but for once all of the newspapers were saying the same thing: war.

War was on its way in the Old World, war led by Alara Vanathur and Jayce Exarga against the Sea Sovereign. “Hmph,” Wicke uttered, adjusting her tiny sunglasses and then tipping back her wide-brim hat. “About damn time!” she stated, scrunching up the final paper before igniting the pile with a simple incantation. “Anything important?” Morgause questioned, leaning against a concrete wall as Wicke approached the Dungeon. “Only that we’re on the clock. We need to be ready for Jayce and the others to return. We have about a month.”

Morgause glanced out towards the south. “One month...” she muttered. “One month, sisters.” Wicke carried onwards, glancing over towards Damian and Wam drinking some beers. “On your feet, we’re going in! The Rising Aces are at war!” she called over. The pair looked at each other, tapping their bottles together before chugging the contents. Damian put his fingers in his mouth and whistled, Enki and Sabine looking up from their card game and Cinderlee and Raido glancing over from a cauldron bubbling over a firepit. “We’re moving!” he confirmed, the group rushing to ready

themselves before all assembling in front of the lone white tower. “The last one,” Damian said to Wicke, looking to her. She nodded, a stern expression on her face. “The last one on this side of the Frontier.”

Chapter 246: Bonded by Blood, Broken by Family

Jayce ran straight at the main doors leading directly to Scáthach's throne room, and he slammed into them before bouncing back down the stairs leading up to it. "Great," he muttered, looking at the squad of Null Legion aiming their rifles at him. "The long way it is!" he growled, rolling to his feet and dashing at them with a sword and shield. They stood little chance against him as he ran left along the corridor crossing the front of the mansion.

Arthuria faltered as she looked down at the blood and vivisected bodies lining the floors. They all led off in one direction, given the trajectory of the blood sprays, so she immediately ran forwards – spotting Jayce up ahead of her as he pushed open a large set of doors. "Jayce!" she yelled out after him, as he stepped through into the next room. He stopped and waited for her as they stood in a large open room with four sets of doors. "That way, right?" she questioned, as she caught up to him. "Probably," he stated, pushing forwards and opening the door. "What, you don't know?" Arthuria questioned, striding alongside him.

"Guys, wait for me!" Morgana yelled, as she flew into the room aboard her broomstick. She crossed the room almost instantly, but the doors closed before she reached them. She hopped off her stick, the broom floating alongside her as she pushed open the doors, only - instead of finding Jayce and Arthuria - a squad of Null Legion stood waiting on the other side. "What the?" she questioned, the quintet drawing their blades. "I'll give you one warning: surrender and you'll live," she told them. They advanced towards her, the doors closing behind her to the cut-off sound of screams on the other side.

"The path is constantly changing, whatever is controlling the layout will throw as many obstacles our way as it can," Jayce told Arthuria, the pair of them duelling against a small group of cybernetically-enhanced Null Legion – their metallic limbs glowing blue as they swung large blades. "Right, so we're on our own until we make it through?" she questioned, catching a heavy downwards blow with her sword and then grabbing the blade with her gauntlet. She freed her sword and stuck the blade upwards into the Null Legionnaire's ribcage, the blade piercing out through his collarbone. He screeched, a metallic wail coming through the mask, that quickly ended as she grabbed the hilt of her blade, twisted, and cut up through his body before decapitating the cyborg. "Yeah, it seems so," Jayce confirmed, his blades slurping the blood covering them as they cleaned themselves. Arthuria tore off a piece of clothing from the deceased and wiped her sword. "Ready?" Jayce questioned. She nodded, discarding the bloody fabric. "Ready," Arthuria confirmed, the pair of them pushing through a randomly chosen door into the next room.

A large cannon sat in the middle of the room mounted on four crab-like legs. A gunner sat next to it and fired a huge shell at them. Arthuria dove to the side, but Jayce swung down through the middle, parting the metal shell and sending the two halves into the wall behind him in a large explosion. Jayce dashed forwards, sliding under the walking gun and cutting open its underside. The legs gave out and Jayce finished off the gunner. "What in the Gods is that thing?" Arthuria questioned, as Jayce looked more closely at the broken weapon. "Some sort of Guild prototype," he stated, pointing out the Guild markings. "They'll throw everything they have at us." Arthuria nodded in acknowledgment and they continued onwards.

Half a dozen rooms came and went, everything inside them meeting a swift end as Arthuria and Jayce pushed forwards. The fatigue was building, the pair of them noticing it in each other, as they pulled closer and closer in order to guard the other. Arthuria pushed up her visor, before taking off her helmet altogether. "I need a rest," she stated, taking a waterskin out of her bag as Jayce watched the room. "Your turn," she then said, giving him the remainder. He drank it quickly before letting out a sharp exhale. "You know what's coming," Jayce told her. She nodded, looking ahead to a slightly more ornate golden door ahead of them. The rooms had been randomly connected using magic, but even she could sense that this one was different. It connected back to the path leading towards the throne room. "Yeah," Arthuria stated, wiping sweat from her brow and straightening up. "Then let's do this."

They pushed towards the door, shoving it open and stepping into a large circular, pillared room. The floor was covered in sand, congealed blood and broken weapons. A lone warrior stood in the middle dressed from head-to-toe in black armour. "Yours," Jayce stated, stepping back and letting Arthuria step forwards. Two blades lay embedded in the ground in front of her, both of them large and heavy, made of black, shard-like, metal with one side curved in two places and the other side straight. The hilt was short for such large swords, and both were marked with countless scratches. Elaine's armour was dark as night, visible pieces of chainmail lay beneath the numerous spiked plates and the pauldrons were large and jagged, like weapons themselves. A black cape connected to the back, but Elaine reached behind her and tore it off in a simple movement. Her helmet looked almost draconic, with two narrow diagonal slits for vision and a large golden plume coming out the back. "Sister," Arthuria stated, stepping forwards. Elaine grabbed the two blades in front of her and took a defensive stance. "Good luck," Jayce told Arthuria, running towards the door towards the far left of the room. Elaine didn't move to intercept, she let him go – her gaze locked entirely on Arthuria.

Arthuria held her spare sword firmly in her right hand, she then tensed her left and a round golden shield appeared on her left arm. Arthuria nodded her head and her

helmet reappeared, its own black mohawk plume atop the golden helmet. Her armour was gold with black accents, far smoother than Elaine's jagged armour with a metal battle skirt and cape on her lower back. "I don't want to fight you," Arthuria stated, stepping forwards towards her sister. Elaine said nothing. "Please, sister – let's talk."

"No," growled Elaine, lunging forwards and swinging both huge swords with a ferocity and speed of far lighter and smaller blades. Blocking and defending was all Arthuria could do as she was pushed back step by step with each strike intending to kill. The blows were heavy and exhausting, but Arthuria kept her guard up, waiting and watching the blows for patterns. Her foot left sand and touched stone, Arthuria then thrust with her sword, catching a chink in Elaine's armour. It wasn't much, Elaine's mastery of Focus immediately created a barrier to prevent the blade from touching her skin, but the metal broke under the blow – her chainmail splitting and revealing the skin underneath. Elaine took a step back and Arthuria pressed her, charging into her with her shield to knock her staggering backwards.

"End this now! I don't know what Scáthach has on you, but we're putting her down! You don't need to fight with her," Arthuria yelled, engaging the blows with precise slashes and thrusts that pierced through Elaine's defences. "Shut up!" Elaine yelled, unleashing a blast of Panic that staggered Arthuria. Elaine then swung her leg, sending Arthuria flying across the room into and through a large stone pillar. Arthuria coughed as she pushed up off the floor, only for her eyes to widen as a shadow descended upon her, impaling the floor where she had been as she rolled to her feet and darted forwards as Elaine hounded her.

Arthuria turned on her heels, a new layer of ferocity having surged out of Elaine as her blows came faster, harder and heavier than before. Arthuria waited, watching for the slight pause in Elaine's chain of blows – but the pause had vanished as another kick swept Arthuria's legs, an elbow dropping them both the floor. Arthuria swung with her shield, catching Elaine's chin and knocking her helmet free from her head. She then rolled away but Elaine dropped her left sword and grabbed her cape, pulling her back before slashing across Arthuria's back. The armour held, but the blow knocked the wind out of her as her cape tore and she fell forwards.

Arthuria released her shield as Elaine picked up her dropped sword and rounded back upon her. A heavy kick caught Arthuria's chin, knocking her own helmet loose as she fell on her back. "You never should have come here!" Elaine growled, her slightly rounder face red and golden eyes furious as she lifted both blades up to stab down at Arthuria. Arthuria swung with her shield knocking the blades aside as they came down towards her before following with a two-footed kick that caused Elaine to double over. Arthuria rolled backwards and threw her shield like a discus at her sister

as she retreated without her weapon. The shield bounced off Elaine's skull, causing her to stagger backwards and then let out a roar of anger.

"Why? What did I do to you for you to hate me so much? You left me alone! Abandoned me!" Arthuria yelled, as Elaine shook her head and refocused her vision upon her. Elaine grit her teeth, unable to look Arthuria in the eyes. "Why?" Arthuria screamed. Elaine leapt at Arthuria, swinging her swords at the empty-handed Arthuria. In a single motion, Arthuria drew Caliburn, swinging the flaming sword as her body erupted into radiant energy and white-feathered wings appeared across her back. The three swords met and Elaine was knocked backwards across the room. She rolled and slid backwards to a crouched position before she charged forwards as Arthuria took up into the air and flew down upon her.

One minute. One minute was all Arthuria had to put her sister down before she was left practically defenceless. "Dad was the scumbag! He left our family!" Arthuria cried, swinging a dozen blows in a blink of an eye. Her flaming sword left golden lines in the air as the blades clashed together, sand turning to glass around them, pillars shattering from deflected strikes and huge grooves gouging the stone floor as they clashed. "But you left me!"

A glancing blow tore open the armour across Arthuria's left arm, revealing crimson scales covering her body. "Mum took away our sisters, but you took away the only person I ever really had! You took away my sister!" Arthuria yelled, cracking Elaine's chestplate. Elaine swung, their blades clashing once again but locking in place against each other. Elaine leant forwards, pressing her swords down towards Arthuria, but then Arthuria flapped her wings pulling up above Elaine and pressing the blades down.

Elaine twisted the blades to the side, cutting through Arthuria's left wing to no effect before thrusting the other blade through her thigh. Arthuria screamed, throwing a gauntleted fist into Elaine's jaw before flying backwards. The blade remained in her leg but she tore it out before diving down at her sister trailing blood. "You gave up on us!" Arthuria yelled, swinging her sword at the singular blade left in Elaine's grasp. The anger in Elaine's face seemed to crack, a glance of confusion crossing through before the anger returned. "That's not true!" she yelled. "You chose solitude! Even now, you hate him so much that you don't even think about the only damn good thing that bastard did! He gave you me and me you!" Arthuria yelled, Elaine's blade faltering. Arthuria knocked the sword aside and thrust, her blade entering the crack in Elaine's armour and piercing straight through out of her back.

Arthuria's wings disappeared and she dropped to the floor in a crunch as Elaine staggered backwards with a confused expression on her face. She dropped her sword

and slowly reached up to Caliburn in her chest, pulling it free in a large spray of blood. Elaine coughed, a dribble of blood escaping her mouth before she fell forwards onto her face. "No, no, no!" Arthuria cried, crawling forwards as blood seeped from her own wound. She rolled her sister over, the older woman looking up Arthuria with an expression of grief and loss as the anger subsided and tears filled her eyes. "Why did you come here?" Elaine questioned in a quiet wheeze.

"Shut up!" Arthuria snapped, taking out a large gemstone from her bottomless bag and pressing it to Elaine's chest before chanting. "Why?" Elaine questioned, shaking her head. "You fight me, kill me and now you're trying to save me? Twisted, don't you think? What's the point? I'm just going to fight you again," she warned. Arthuria finished chanting, her hands glowing golden as the wound started to knit closed. "You may have given up me, but I haven't given up on you. If I have to kick your butt all the way to the New World and back I will! Every day, for years, I waited for you to come home. To rescue me from that hellhole! You left me behind – you didn't even ask if I wanted to come with you!" Arthuria sobbed, tears falling down onto Elaine's face. "I would have run away with you, instead you made me watch our father kill our mother! When he left again... it was like she was... empty. And I went through that alone!"

Elaine shook her head and shut her eyes, a soft stream of tears sliding down the edges of her face. "I'm..." Elaine couldn't bring herself to even apologise, instead a bubbling anger brewed once more. She tried to sit up, feeling Arthuria's blood on the back of her head as she lay against her lap, but Arthuria pushed her back down. "You're not healed!" Arthuria growled. "I'm not letting you die on me, not when I've got two little sisters counting on me to bring you home! I don't even know what to buy them for their birthdays - I already screwed up once, I'm not dealing with it alone again!"

A faint smile crossed Elaine's mouth, but Arthuria's face turned a ghostly white and she slumped to the side. "Arth..." Elaine yelled, only for her name to get caught in her mouth as she said it for the first time in almost a lifetime. Elaine sat up and grabbed her sister, looking down at the huge wound in her leg. "No, no, no! Fuck!" Elaine yelled, desperately putting pressure on the wound. "Don't do this to me! You asshole, don't make me care again and then leave me!" Elaine cried, reaching into Arthuria's bottomless bag for anything of use. The door opened behind her and a pair of feet dashed across the floor towards them.

"Move!" Morgana yelled, glaring at her much larger older sister as she uselessly tried to shove her aside. Elaine flashed a simple warning, but then faltered as she met an identical set of eyes to her own. Morgana rummaged in her own bottomless bag, pulling out a healing potion and nursing Arthuria with it. Arthuria coughed on it but the colour returned to her face, her eyes fluttering open before focusing on her sisters.

A faint smile spread across her face as she noticed Elaine holding her hand. "I don't know if you two have met before," Arthuria said quietly. Morgana and Elaine looked at each other, Morgana's face was blank and ghostly, whilst Elaine could barely look at her. "We..." Elaine said awkwardly. "A long time ago," she answered quietly. Morgana stared at her eldest sister with a confusing mixture of emotions.

Elaine looked very similar to Arthuria, only bigger and with a sharper nose and rounder face. She looked like she could snap Morgana like a twig, and almost certainly could, given her status as a Betrayer. The entire mansion shook around them, dust falling from the ceiling above. "A conversation for later perhaps... sisters," Elaine said awkwardly, groaning as she stood up before picking up Arthuria. A gentle spurt of blood came out of the crack in her armour and she immediately grimaced. "Put her down!" Morgana commanded, throwing Elaine's large arm over her shoulder as Arthuria took the other. "There are too many doors between us and the exit to fly straight out of. Come on!" Morgana stated, beginning the walk forward as the trio limped together.

Seize the Seas Tales: Horrors of the Past

"Wicke, this jump is something unreal!" Damian yelled, as the pair of them lay against a toppled stone pillar – a heavy vortex of fire incinerating the air above them. "You don't say!" she returned, holding her hat to her head as the air was eaten up around them. Every single floor had been a battle: a combination of a hostile environment, monstrosities that thought and strategized and didn't just throw themselves at the group, as well as symbiotic relationships of creatures that by all accounts should have never allied.

"Move!" Morgause yelled from somewhere up ahead, the fire stopping and a loud croaking coming from above as the flames gave way to a swarm of brightly coloured frogs, the size of cats, stuck to the ceiling. Damian grabbed Wicke and dove forwards as they were descended upon; they rolled over each other and Damian scooped her up into his arms as she began to chant, throwing bolts of lightning behind them that popped the frogs like balloons. A heavy slicing sound filled the air further up the tunnel, a loud roar following before the ground shook. "Mop up the rest of them!" Morgause yelled, the tunnel illuminating as streams of magma flooded the walls.

"You two good?" Wam questioned, as he approached Damian and Wicke, Wicke still in Damian's arms. "Yeah," they both responded, only to immediately realise Wicke was still being carried and for her to be dropped to the floor like a sack of potatoes. "Ow," she complained, taking Wam's warm hand when it was offered before glaring at Damian. "I know you two mentioned the Dungeons increase in difficulty with each clear, but this seems... borderline unfair," Wam stated, as the three of them rejoined

the others. They weren't even at floor eighty yet and several injuries had slowed them down significantly.

"Another Dungeon has fallen, but not from us," Cinderlee stated, kicking a purple magic stone with her shoe. "How can you be sure?" Wicke questioned. Cinderlee fumbled in her bag and pulled out a strange block-like device with a large antenna upon it. She shook it slightly and the glass cover glowed green as a liquid sloshed inside. She showed it off proudly to the group as several large patches turned red. "Um," Sabine uttered, raising her hand. "I don't get it."

"Gosh, you baboon – it's so utterly intuitive, even a banana peeling-" "We get the point," Wam cut off, folding his arms. Cinderlee let out an exaggerated huff. "The magicules in the air, the mana, ki, whichever term you prefer – whenever a Dungeon falls, that which is stored within it is released into the atmosphere. Like a... like a... a bomb, or volcanic eruption. Ash fills the skies, the same is true of the raw components of magic. It's why the Dungeons get stronger, they have more to suck in and use – just look how electric the air is with it," Cinderlee explained. Wicke and Enki both frowned, stepping closer and looking at the strange device. "Are you saying the world is getting more... magical, with each falling Dungeon?" Wicke questioned. Cinderlee grinned. "Exciting, isn't it? All that Focus stuff, the length of time for spells to refuel or be cast – it's only going get more explosive!" Wam and Morgause shared a glance. "Not good," Morgause said quietly, Wam nodding in agreement.

Somewhat reluctantly, Wicke agreed to slow their pace. And with proper preparations, usage of Raido acting as a scout using his wax clones, and actual strategy – the remaining floors began to fall away, until once again the group found themselves within the Dungeon's control room. "Are we bothering trying to capture the Demon again?" Damian questioned, as Wicke stood and pondered in front of the central stasis chamber. She thought back to the warning she had been given last time and the risks involved. A sigh escaped her and she shook her head, both beings inside had spent too long acting as living batteries. They'd gone in knowing they were unlikely to come back out. "No, get ready," she stated, touching the console and shutting her eyes.

"Well, so you're the one destroying the Dungeons I spent so long designing," stated a young man dressed in blue robes eating a donut. Wicke glanced around at the endless blank environment they were in. "Where did you get that from?" she questioned, pointing at the donut. "Please, I've been sealed inside this place for what a few hundred years? Millenia? Longer? You think I wouldn't at least give myself the means to enjoy some luxury." Wicke shrugged and then nodded. "Fair enough. I'm Wicke, who are you?"

He vanished and she felt a finger tap her spine. "Curious thing you are, Wicke. Call me Aramos, Archmage of all that flows," he stated, clapping his palms together before forming a ball of water that spread out into the shape of a dolphin that flew around the open space. He was young, probably only a few years older than her, but Wicke knew better than to make assumptions on the ages of Mages. "So, given you're dismantling my Dungeons, and I'm about to die – I'm guessing you have questions for me?" he asked, crossing his legs and sitting on nothing. "These Dungeons, they were made to hide the world away from... the Entrasites? What are they exactly?" Wicke questioned.

"Ah, well unfortunately – even I don't really know. All I do know is that they were highly resistant – no, that's not the right description – those monsters fed on magic. They were drawn to our cities, our strongest Mages, our strongest fighters and they devoured them. Nothing seemed to stop them, or so I heard. Truth be told, they killed my master, and no one survived an encounter with them – the world just grew darker and darker as they made their way north, consuming cities and nations. The Dungeons were designed to starve them out, to create an inedible wall of guardians for the people within. Clearly it worked - you're welcome. Perhaps they've starved to death, or maybe retreated back to the dimension they came from. That's all I know." Wicke thought to herself and he looked at her with distinct curiosity. "How bemusing, very human," he mumbled. "What?" she questioned. He shook his head, a blue book appearing in his hands. "Well, carry on our legacy – please release the others too. If you have the time, of course." His body shattered like glass and Wicke stumbled back, immediately getting dragged through a portal back to the surface.

Chapter 247: Vexx

He was waiting for Jayce. He knelt in the middle of a colossal rectangular room. The floor was shiny, ceiling decorated with carvings of the ocean, and a dozen pillars lined the path leading to the Sovereign's throne room. Vexx hadn't changed in the last few years. He still had a mess of dirty blonde hair, a short and skinny yet muscular frame, pale skin apart from orange stains on his hands and forearms. His eyes were shut, but they matched the red earring hanging from his left ear. He wore a simple pair of black shorts and a black vest, his feet bare.

Jayce stepped forwards into the room, his eyes immediately glancing towards the retinue of additionally armoured Null Legion across the edges of the room. "So you finally arrive," came Scáthach's voice, her form shimmering into existence next to Vexx – her hand on his shoulder. Vexx didn't react, his eyes still shut. "I've come for him, and for you," Jayce stated, stepping forwards. All of the Null Legion raised their bayoneted rifles and aimed at Jayce. From the way their bodies reacted to his outreach of Focus, he could tell that these were the cream of the crop, the veterans amongst veterans, all of them more than capable of putting even Thalia into an early grave.

"Now I thought that would be the case," Scáthach stated, raising a finger to her lips as she feigned thought. "But, now well that causes me some issues. You see, Vexx and I have a little arrangement – broken man to broken woman and all. I swore to him, that if he disobeyed me, I would kill you. You see when I came across him, way back when, he was heartbroken. Lost and sad." She tutted. "A real loser. But out of the kindness of my heart," she stated, pulling out a bottle of some brown liquor out of thin air and presenting it Vexx. "I nursed him back to health." Vexx slapped the bottle out of Scáthach's hands, the bottle smashing on the ground. "Only, for some reason or another he didn't actually want to accept my kind offers. So, I had to improvise. And that's where you, Jayce Exarga, come in."

"Now, I have a deal to not kill you in exchange for Vexx, and I made a deal not to kill Alara in exchange for you, but she won't make a deal for Vexx's life so our little three way doesn't quite pan out. But I didn't end up killing Alara when you betrayed our little group of Betrayers, and that makes me look... weak. So, what do I do? I quite like a big dramatic battle to the end, scorched earth and all that, but if Vexx is only serving me to keep you alive then how can I get him to fight you?"

"Oh, I know."

"Kill him boys," Scáthach commanded, her soldiers all twitching as they began to pull the triggers of their rifles. In near synchronicity the masked helmets of the Null Legionnaires exploded, spraying blood into the air before collapsing. Vexx hadn't moved, he was still sat on the floor, but his hands dripped blood. "Thought as such..."

tutted Scáthach, looking down at Vexx and shaking her head. "Then I guess we go a different way. If you won't fight Jayce, then in order to save him I need you to first slaughter his crew, and then Alara and her friends, and then make your way onto his brother and parents. Now that, I know you can do."

Vexx's red eyes opened, locked directly onto Jayce as he stood up and took a step forwards. "Vexx, no, don't do this – please," Jayce begged, stepping forwards as Vexx began to walk towards him with glazed over eyes and a vacant expression. "I'm sorry," Vexx said softly, as he got within a few metres of Jayce, but Jayce swung a gauntleted fist catching Vexx in the jaw and sending him staggering backwards. Vexx slowly looked at Jayce out of the corner of his eye before he spat blood and popped his jaw back into place. "Vexx, now hang on a moment," Jayce immediately attempted, holding up his hands as Vexx glared at him and turned to face him with a look of malice. "There we go, see you soon," Scáthach goaded, vanishing into thin air as Vexx knocked Jayce to the floor with a single precise punch to the stomach.

"I have no choice," Vexx stated, turning and beginning to walk towards the door. "There is always a choice!" Jayce yelled, diving forwards and grabbing Vexx's ankle in a pathetic attempt to stop him. Vexx looked down at him in disappointment. "Let go," he commanded plainly, his knuckles cracking as he formed a fist. "You're not going anywhere ever again!" Jayce growled, a kick hitting his side and sending him sliding across the floor across a pool of blood. Jayce retched before forcing himself to his feet and running at Vexx.

The assassin shimmered, Jayce's eyes barely managing to track him as he dashed to a pillar and then leapt off it with a flying punch. Jayce raised his arms and blocked the blow, physically feeling the bones in his forearms crack under the impact as a sonic boom followed. "If I have to put you under, I will!" Vexx stated, his body shimmering as he moved across the room attacking Jayce from all manner of angles with a series of punches and kicks.

"I cannot let you do this. You're better than this, she's controlling you!" Jayce cried, swinging helplessly as Vexx slid under the strike before pressing his hand into Jayce's ribs – the bones cracking with ease. "This is just me – the killer – it's always been me, Jayce," Vexx stated, his entire figure vanishing from the room as the lights illuminating the room shattered and plunged the room into darkness other than a single beam over Jayce's head. "The Sovereign hasn't made me do anything I wasn't willing to do before," he stated, his words in the back of Jayce's ear.

Jayce turned and swung, but he wasn't there. "I'm sorry, Vexx," Jayce stated. Shutting his eyes and swinging, his fist caught Vexx in the neck – a surprised gasp following. "I'm sorry for abandoning you when you needed me most. I shouldn't have left you

alone. You needed us and I..." A blow caught Jayce in the back of the knee, dropping him down to one leg – he felt Vexx's hands across his head, but the grip released and Jayce was spared. "One," Vexx said quietly.

Jayce scanned the darkness, ducking under a spinning kick before grabbing Vexx's heel as he thrust out a secondary strike. Jayce slammed him down onto the ground, but Vexx rolled away into the shadows. A moment later Jayce felt Vexx's fingers slide across his throat. "Two," came another whisper from the darkness. "I... I failed you," Jayce stated. A fingernail ran itself down Jayce's spine. "Three."

"I searched for you, waited for you!" Jayce cried out. A palm tapped his chest over his heart, a simple puff of air blew out his right eardrum. "Four, five." Sola and Luna extended out into copies of Vexx's dagger, a chuckle coming from the darkness. "Even now you're still trying to save me! Why?" questioned Vexx. "Because I messed up, not you!" Jayce yelled. Vexx stepped into the light and looked up at Jayce, shaking his head. "No," he said quietly. "No, you didn't."

Jayce dropped the two daggers but Vexx snatched them up and Jayce felt the air split above his skin before the two mimics bit Vexx and were tossed away by him. "Six," he stated, stepping back into the shadows. Jayce shook his head, spinning on the spot as he tried to see Vexx. Jayce looked down at his fist, clenching it as tight as he could and channelling Focus through it. It flashed with black Focus. "Six," Jayce mirrored, remembering their first fight back in the Imperial Arena.

Jayce swung, catching Vexx midair and sending him flying back into the darkness with a loud grunt. He heard stone crumble as a pillar collapsed. "Seven," Jayce warned. "I waited for you!" Jayce yelled, concentrating a little bit more Focus into his fist. "I know you did. I know you all did..." responded Vexx, a sense of sadness to his words. Jayce's ankles were knocked out from under him as Vexx rolled through them before he positioned himself and sat on Jayce's back. "Seven," he stated, standing up and stepping away as Jayce desperately got back to his feet.

"Come back to us, it's not too late!" Jayce pleaded. He was tackled into the darkness, a fast pain crossing his body as he crawled desperately back towards the light. "Eight." Time was running out; Jayce knew it had to end. They both knew it had to end, and there was no way he could defeat Vexx without lethal force. Jayce looked down as Sola and Luna slithered back onto him. "I deserved it. I nearly killed the kid. She would have died if I'd stayed."

"No! No!" Jayce protested, taking an unconscious step back as Vexx walked out of the shadows and stood before him. Slowly Vexx reached forwards, placing the edge of his palm gently to Jayce's arm in a soft chop. "Nine," he said sadly. Jayce threw a fist into Vexx's jaw. His head barely moved. Jayce threw another and it moved less. On his

third strike Jayce felt the bones in his hand break. With a soft sweep of the leg, Jayce toppled to the floor laying flat on his back as Vexx mounted him and pulled back a fist ready to strike. "I'm sorry for letting you down," Jayce said honestly. "I failed you Vexx, and I wish more than anything I could go back five years and stop you from leaving our ship."

"You didn't fail me!" Vexx screamed, his face red and eyes blurry. "How many fucking times do I have to say it? I made the choice! I did! I nearly got Wicke killed! Me! I chose to screw up my opportunity to take your hand! You waited; I know you did! But I got so fucking high that by the time I came to, you were gone, just as you had said you'd be! You stuck to your word, and you were better off without me! As you always were! So do it! Kill me before I do the only thing I can to make up for failing you!" Vexx cried.

Jayce lay there stunned. "Vexx... We didn't leave Caedom for... weeks. We waited in the tavern by the harbour, but... you never came." All of the blood left Vexx's face and he shook his head. "No... no-no-no, I... you were gone," he said in disbelief. Jayce shook his head. "I thought you'd chosen to leave," Jayce said quietly. Vexx stood up, hyperventilating as he stepped away into the darkness before a slow laugh turned into a loud cackle. "What the actual hell! Fuck!" Vexx yelled, shattering a pillar with a punch before returning to the light. "You're telling me, that you were in that tavern? I thought you were going to wait at the pier?" Jayce shook his head and Vexx grabbed his head by his hair. "All this time... I thought you'd left me behind because I didn't find you guys in time." "I thought you'd left us because we hadn't been there when you needed us most."

Vexx sat down and put his head to his knees, shaking his head before slamming his forehead into his knees. "All this time... all this time... I could have gone home..." Jayce scoffed before beginning to laugh, only to double over in pain and hold his broken ribs. "Ow! You idiot! I thought... oh for fuck's sake Vexx!" They both sat there laughing at the idiotic miscommunication that had harassed both their lives for the last five years.

"I'm taking the blame for this," Vexx stated, eventually, his red eyes meeting Jayce's blue in the low light. "Damn right you are! Had you waited like five minutes you'd have known where we were! And all of... this..." Jayce trailed off as he thought about everything, he and his crew had been through without Vexx. "Xander died," Jayce eventually said quietly. "And Caelie, but she came back, and Falconer's birds."

"Not Wren too? I thought I saw her," Vexx questioned. Jayce shook his head. "No, she's fine, but... five years Vexx. You... you could have been there." "I'm sorry, and I'm sorry about the old man too. I didn't know him long, but... I

remember him. He seemed... good." Jayce nodded, opening up his bottomless bag and taking out a healing potion. He threw it to Vexx who drank it quickly before taking out another for himself. "I thought you wouldn't take it. It would probably clean out your system."

"I... I am clean. No drugs, no booze... and you got in a few good hits. You're definitely stronger than you used to be," Vexx stated, throwing the vial into the darkness. "Um, thanks," Jayce stated, before gasping as his ribs popped back into place. The entire mansion shook, several streams of dust falling down from above. "We should probably get out of here, she's going to be pissed so we should find somewhere quiet to lay really low," Vexx stated.

Jayce stood up and shook his head, looking through the darkness towards the door leading to the throne room. "No, I'm here to finish this fight and that's what I'm going to do," he stated, taking a step forwards. Vexx dashed to block his way, placing a hand to Jayce's chest. "Jayce, no. You don't understand, she's... we can't beat her. Not even together," he stated, a real sense of panic in his voice that brought out a cold sweat in Jayce. "The world is counting on us to, we have to – the consequences for this will be so severe that there will be nowhere for us to hide if we do run away. And what about the others? The crew, Alara, the Republic, Kitty, Tim?"

"Jayce... please, I'm begging you. She's a monster." Jayce glanced towards the faint outlines of the corpses in the room. "We have to Vexx. I need to. Fight with me, we can beat her – together," Jayce stated, reaching into his bottomless bag and taking out a necklace. Vexx's eyes widened as he looked at his old communicator. "Is that...?" Jayce handed it to him, a faint smile on his face. "Come back to us, I need you now more than ever before, Vexx." Vexx squeezed the enchanted pearl, before tying the necklace around his neck.

"This is getting rough! I don't know how much more of this we can take!" Bjorn yelled out, as Astris and her girls landed back onto the Stacked Hand. The Pirate Lords had left the battlefield and, in their absence, the Null Legion were rallying much harder than they had before. "Hang on! We need to hold out for Jayce," Astris yelled up to him. "Trust in him! Only a little longer! I know it! He'll come through!"

Wicke sat on the beach of Last Drop, looking out towards the ocean as the sun sizzled the tattoo across her back. She let out a sigh, her mind elsewhere as the boulder crabs scuttled around her, fighting over homes. "Don't let me down, Jayce," she muttered, listening to the communications flying out from her communicator. "Don't die on me," she prayed, dropping her eyes onto her knees. "Daddy's home," came Vexx's voice from her communicator – the voice foreign, alien, but not forgotten. Wicke leapt to her feet, her eyes wide as she fumbled for her communicator as a uniform thought

escaped the mouths of all of the original crew. "Vexx?" questioned Bjorn, Wicke, Yuthura, Marisha, Falconer, Zeta and Caelie. "Ready for me to win a war for you arseholes?" Vexx goaded, extending a fist towards Jayce as they stood in front of the throne room doors.

Bjorn chuckled. "Piss off, assassin. You're five years late to duty," he stated, spinning the Stacked Hands wheel and turning towards the Sovereign's castle for another assault. "Sorry old bear, does that also mean I have five years of backpay to collect?" Vexx returned, as Jayce bumped his fist and pushed open the door. "We'll see. Survive this, and maybe I'll consider it." Vexx grinned, but his smile faded as Scáthach glared down at him from aboard her throne.

"I thought we had an agreement?" Scáthach questioned, the typical smile on her face gone – replaced instead with a glare that froze both Vexx and Jayce in place. "Deal's off!" Vexx stated. "I'm where I belong, where I've always belonged!" "Pity," Scáthach stated, Vexx dropping to his knees and then the floor as Jayce dropped to a kneeling stance. Scáthach vanished from her throne, appearing in front of them both with her boot on Vexx's neck and hand on Jayce's throat, her brown eyes glowing purple. "I would say I'm enjoying this, but I was hoping for more from you," she stated, looking down at Jayce as he gasped for air. "You, I got what I expected," she added, looking towards Vexx. Jayce concentrated on his hands, black Focus covering them as he tried to break free. "Please," Scáthach stated, her entire body burning with white flames. "You still know nothing!"

A blast of blue light slammed into Scáthach sending her sliding backwards into the centre of her throne room. "Jayce!" Kitty stated, running to his side as he took in a heavy gasp of air. "You okay?" Tim questioned, following in after her. Tanare gave a look down towards Vexx. "Get up," he said unsympathetically. The doors on the other side of the throne room opened and group of eight Engines of varying sizes charged in with the Machinist in her exosuit, Ningyo and Thákane. "My Pirate Lords, you've come to me!" Scáthach cackled, backing up towards her throne and gesturing for the group to come fully into the room. "Good, saves me the effort of hunting you all down!"

Seize the Seas Tales: Parting for Now

It was finally over; the Dungeons in the New World were all gone. Wicke had done exactly as Jayce and her sisters had asked, yet it felt almost disappointing. She was disappointed. For better or for worse, as she looked across the group in front of them, standing across the busy harbour of a nearby island, she didn't want it to end. "The war should be coming to a close, hopefully," Wam stated as he looked down at Wicke. She nodded. It was happening as they spoke, and regardless of the outcome – her time

with the group was over. "I... I just want to say thank you," Wicke said nervously to the group. "I couldn't have done this without each and every one of you. I know it hasn't always been the best, and it certainly hasn't been the safest few years, but... it's meant a lot to me to have you guys as my-" Wicke looked towards Damian, "-our crew."

Sabine immediately began to wail, tears streaming down her face. "I don't want it to end. I have like no other friends! And although you guys paid, like, a lot of money – I don't know if I'll ever meet anyone as cool as you guys!" she sobbed, wrapping her arms around Wicke and squeezing hard enough that she felt her ribs crack. "We'll keep in touch, once we're back with Jayce and the others we might be able to bring you along!" Wicke gasped. Sabine released her and wiped her eyes. "You mean it? I know we're technically all members of the Rising Aces second crew already but..."

Wam slowly turned and looked at Damian and Wicke, raising a firm eyebrow. Neither Wicke nor Damian had any defence, waving away his silent judgement with a simple gesture. "We'll meet again," Morgause stated, placing a hand on Sabine's shoulder and pulling her in for a hug. Sabine began to sob again. Damian then turned towards Cinderlee. "You're free to go, as far as the Republic is concerned, you're not an issue for them. Just don't go blowing anything up that doesn't belong to you."

Cinderlee grinned madly. "I hear you perfectly - I'll do my best to only blow-up things that don't belong me," she stated, nodding to Wicke before turning and walking away. "No, I said don't!" Damian yelled after her, but she vanished into a crowd with disturbing ease. "Oh well, not my problem," Damian muttered, wiping his hands and looking towards Enki. "Do you have everything you need for your report on the surface?" Wicke questioned, to the ocean crawler. He nodded. "I believe so. This should be plenty to earn me an elevation in position amongst the archaeologists." Enki looked towards Damian. "It has been fun, despite all the violence – I did enjoy our time together. Should you be in need of me for any more exploration, do not hesitate to reach out," he offered before walking towards the water. "And how would we do that?" Damian questioned. Enki tapped his necklace. "Fair seas to you all!" Enki called out before jumping into the harbour.

Damian and Wicke then turned towards Raido. He let out a long sigh and held up his hands. "As discussed," he stated, stepping onto a large sheet of paper that had been laid out on the floor – a ritual circle drawn upon it along with two clay dolls. He groaned as the dolls took the forms of the two Demons he had played host to. Somewhat mercilessly, Wam immediately grabbed them as the two Demons attempted to run away – stuffing them into his bottomless bag. "Take care of them, my mind will be lonely without them and my nights lonely without you all. May our blades cross again on the same side," he stated, turning and walking away.

Morgause released Sabine, stepping closer to Wicke, Damian and Wam before looking back towards the bawling Sabine. "We'll see each other again," Wicke assured her. "I promise. Friends don't break promises." Sabine sniffed and wiped her eyes before forcing a smile. Wicke began to chant. "I'll miss you," Sabine stated before the group vanished in a flash of purple lightning, leaving her all alone.

Chapter 248: For the Old World

"We'll do what we can Vanathur, but their warships are more advanced than ours!" yelled Rear-Admiral Alpin through her communicator. It was undeniable: the crews of the Null Legion fleet were veterans amongst veterans, geared to the teeth in enchanted equipment, with fleets personally designed and forged by the best the Guild had to offer. As fights went, it was like bringing a foam baton to blows against a metal mace.

Alara grit her teeth as her onboard Mages focused on defending her flagship against long-range barrages. Her ship - the King Killer - groaned under the assault of the rough ocean and the mortars from the shore. "Hang in there," she muttered to her new flagship. A beam of black fire blasted from overhead as Riley blew a hole through the hull of an enemy vessel, the ship imploding as she hit the gunpowder stores. Alara couldn't help but shake her head as Riley racked her new anti-material rifle and took aim at a new target; the weapon was preposterously large and, in her arms, hyper-lethal. "Do what you can to support our aiding fleets, but keep your eyes open for breaches in their lines. When one appears, and it will, we are going through. Anyone unable to keep up will be left behind!" Alara commanded to her fleet, through her communicator.

"Aye, Admiral," responded her three Commodores: Kask, Kai and Kai. Alara glanced out towards the Pirate fleet; the entire warzone to the southwest had descended into utter mayhem, the harassment of the sea monsters, paired with the Null Legion and the Betrayers, had resulted in a central mass of death to any daring to enter. She could see the Stacked Hand sitting towards the rear, but - from the Dragons in the skies, the beams of green energy from the clouds, the blue portals, and the booms of lightning as Thalia pursued her prey - it was clear that the Rising Aces were doing anything but holding back. "Admiral, I need you here!" stated the Weapon to her right, his eyes locked ahead on the mass of ships before them. "Right, sorry," she said quickly. Jayce, and Astris, were not her concern - they would come later, provided they all survived to see the end of this hopefully brief and brutal war.

Riley and her, significantly-expanded, squad of snipers had been spread across a variety of ships, all acting within their own communications array to isolate high-value enemy targets. Each of them had been assigned a spotter - a Marine whose sole objective was to locate targets for them and point them out. The sole exceptions were Artemis and Riley, the pair of which were on Alara's ship with specific commands to use their mastery of Focus to inflict maximum destruction in whichever way they saw fit.

Wulf and his Marines were below deck, waiting to act as the first line in the ground assault – a role they had volunteered for, despite Alara's protests. She didn't know what she would do if she lost him, and the mechanical automata waiting for them on the shores were undoubtably going to be a poor match for her therian men and women. Alara didn't want to lose any of her people, but she'd resigned herself to admitting that they were probably all dead. Anyone, including herself, that made it back would be something to celebrate.

The three fleets ahead of hers had angled themselves on a trajectory towards the Sovereign's mansion. It put them in between the two defensive lines, in what was essentially a suicide channel, but it was slowly thinning the defensive fleet around Diasta's Capital – Novalis – as it dragged them forwards in order to pursue and protect the swiftly thinning Null Legion fleet in front of the Sovereign. For every ship that made it through the rain of cannon fire, a reinforcement was added to the Pirate fleet, and Alara could only imagine what the Null Legion Generals barking orders from the shore were saying about that.

Her snipers continued to execute commanders left, right and centre, throwing the defensive fleet into fast panic. An enemy ship moved forwards out of Novalis' defensive fleet, ahead of the rest in a curious display of aggression. Alara faltered as others ununiformly did the same. She glanced to the right; Rear-Admiral Ewon had pulled his Flagship away from the southwest assault. It was foolish, he was using his own ship to shield others behind it, but it was also an irresistible bait – one that several crews, now relying on improvised leadership, were eager to take.

"Here's your hole, Vanathur! Make it count!" he yelled, turning fully towards the enemy fleet. His communicator remained active, his war cry ringing true across the entire battlefield as he sailed straight at the foremost enemy ship before turning at the last moment to move into the gap between the enemy ships. "Argh!" Rear-Admiral Ewon yelled, as his ship was torn apart from all sides, continuing to sail deeper and deeper into the defensive fleet before detonating in a vast and horizon-consuming blast of crimson flame.

"That fool!" Alara yelled, gripping the nearest railing and shielding her eyes. "By the abyss! What the hell was that?" questioned Cyrenna across the communicators. Alara grit her teeth, a wave of flame flowing outwards across the ravaged Null Legion fleet caught in the huge radius of the blast. "A bomb! Ewon had rigged his ship without telling me!" Alara answered, curious as to just how long he had been planning the suicide bomb and whether any more lay across the other ships in his fleet. "Admiral, a hole!" Kask stated, a faint giggle sneaking through. Alara nodded to her Helm before shaking her head to herself. A loud siren began to wail

across the King Killer. "I see it, Kask. All crews, we're going in!" Alara declared, her ship lunging forwards on a new heading.

"Snipers, protect the Rear-Admiral!" Riley commanded across her communicator. "Belay that," Alara countered, a steady haze emerging from Novalis. "Incoming flyers!" Alara yelled, her anti-air cannons immediately roaring to life as they spewed exploding shells into the skies. It was almost impossible to see, the flames of ruined ships had filled the seas with smoke, and the explosions in the air were painting the sky in black and orange. But the King Killer continued its blind charge forwards, Commodore Kask's vanguard ahead of Alara with both Kai's either side of her. Kask's stern sat almost underneath Alara's bow with how tightly they were sailing together, and Alara could physically see both Cyrenna and Beowulf as their fleet sailed in a kite-shape. A single lucky heavy bomber could have probably taken out all four of their ships if it made it through, but between the continuous stream of anti-air and Riley's snipers, nothing could make it past the forward ships.

Alara counted the metres as the shores approached, all lined with their own guns and defences. The ships didn't have to survive, they could all crash for all Alara cared, as long as their assault crews made it to land then there was a chance that they could, and would, eliminate the Null Legion's high command. Desperation rose on both sides of the battlefield. Null Legion ships were surging forwards on desperate ramming charges, looking to put themselves between the fleet and shore, but Rear-Admiral Ewon's bomb had completely separated the defending fleet, putting them far out of position to do anything other than collide with the tail of Alara's fleet.

The shore came within a few hundred metres. "All guns, light them the hell up!" Alara commanded, her forward guns spewing a wall of death at the defenders. Her anti-air aimed downwards, her snipers gave up on slaughtering the flyers, and the second sand met the hull of her first ships, Alara's Wolves leapt out from the bowels of the ship. Wulf bounded across the deck, leaping from the bow onto Kask's ship with Channing and Boot close behind him. "For the Republic!" he howled, every therian Marine racing out of their ships towards what remained of the defenders.

Alara watched him leave, taking a brief note of her surroundings as she gave her therians a chance to do their job. Her fleet spread out where they could before using the ships in front of them as extensions of the shore to launch their assault. "All crews, abandon ship!" Alara ordered, dashing forwards with Riley, Artemis and the Weapon close behind her. "Navy, you have your objectives!"

It was a mass abandonment of the fleet; the ground assault was now all that mattered and anyone still left on the crashed fleet was going to be torn apart by the now rapidly approaching defensive fleet. A few bold crews near the rear of the fleet had refused to

abandon ship and instead were trying to peel away from the mass to engage the approaching ships and buy time for the ground assault, but Alara knew that their fates were sealed. Alara dashed through the air over the ruins of her fleet, her two personal guards, Riley and Artemis, darting closely behind her. They landed on a rooftop, glancing down at the corpses and destroyed machinery as the Navy crews swiftly set themselves up in their stead.

A large plume of flame drew Alara's eyes to a courtyard up ahead. She could hear gunfire all around her, both from defenders guarding their city and the occasional flyer dive bombing from above. Riley aimed up and fired, sending a flyer spiralling down towards the city ahead of them. "Save your ammo," Alara ordered. "We can deal with them later. For now, we need to identify where our targets are."

Alara dashed forwards toward a rooftop overlooking the large courtyard spewing fire. She leapt backwards, somersaulting down before cleaving a huge golden automaton from head to waist. It split in half and fell apart in front of her, she then turned and fired off a pair of orange bolts of energy from the rear of her glaive into the cores of two more giant machines. They exploded from the inside out, the metal flowering outwards. Alara tilted her glaive to the side before ejecting the flickering magic stone inside. She manually slotted another inside before turning to her Marines as they emerged from cover, Wulf at their lead. "Thanks for the assist, Admiral," Wulf greeted, catching his breath. Alara nodded to him before looking back up towards Artemis, still crouched on the rooftop above them and scanning the city. "Give me some good news!" Alara called up. Slowly Artemis raised a hand and pointed southeast. "Their royal houses are awfully chatty," she stated, "and are packing an awful lot of heat."

"Then we have a heading! All forces, converge on the royal houses! Cyrenna, their forges are yours! Beowulf, take out their airfield! Kask, secure the rear!" Alara commanded, looking to the small army gathering around her. "We take this city, and we cut off the Sovereign's hands! She stole our world from us when we fought through blood and tears to liberate ourselves from the talons of the Church! Today we avenge those that died for an Empire that had already fallen and for those that gave us everything to put the ground beneath our boots! Forwards!" Alara yelled.

Against all of Alara's instincts, she held back – letting her Marines take the lead as they fought through the wide streets of Novalis. Where they met walls of guns and soldiers, Wulf and his therians broke through houses and clambered onto rooftops to take street after street. Artemis guided him from above, dashing from roof to roof in complete silence. Periodically an explosion would erupt from ahead leaving a roadblock devoid of life for Wulf and his squads as they charged through. Riley

remained by Alara as they observed the assault, her rifle aimed solely on the royal houses, the numerous automata and weapon emplacements.

It wouldn't be long before a vast number of enemy reinforcements were deployed into the city. The rest of the Republic Navy were doing what they could to delay the Null Legion, but Alara knew that it was inevitable. A series of blasts erupted from the large factories in the distance, the machinery meeting its demise at the hands of Cyrenna. Mere moments later, Alara spotted vast plumes of smoke fill the air from the rough direction the flyers were coming from and returning to. "Objective achieved," stated both Kais. A small smile crossed Alara's face. "Rally on Wulf's position, I'll meet you there," Alara stated, nodding to Riley before charging towards the royal houses.

Wulf lay against a toppled over mobile cannon, Boot sat with him hugging his side before looking at the blood on his hands. "Ow," Boot said grimly. Wulf glanced towards him, the pair of them grabbing Channing and pulling him down as he attempted to clamber over the top. "Don't be a hero," Wulf ordered, temporarily phasing out of his therian form to deal with his own wounds. His fellow wolves did the same. The rest of the Wolfpack were some distance behind them, trying to advance against the heavy guns and machinery guarding the royal houses. "Someone has to do something," Channing stated, looking at the other two. "Sir, we're pinned here – I might be able to buy a moment or two," he attempted. "That's a one-way trip," Wulf immediately returned, shaking his head as a fellow Marine was gunned down attempting to reach them. "One I'm willing to make, Wulf. Let me do this, sir." Wulf shook his head, one hand on Boot's shoulder, the other on Channing's forearm. "No, that's an order. We're staying here and waiting for support." The metal around them groaned as a shell impacted it, a bullet whizzed past their heads as a hole was made.

But then the guns stopped as a huge and heavy impact shook the ground. "Come on!" Alara yelled, standing in a crater of her own making. The three wolves peered out from cover as she moved like a blur up the stairs towards the guards desperately firing at her. "Now we go!" Wulf yelled, darting out after her with his heavy sabre. Boot and Channing bumped fists and ran out after him with their own battle cries.

Alara blew open the main doors with her upgraded glaive, purple dust falling of out her weapon as she slammed in a new crystal and blew apart a Null Legionnaire. Limbs and gore coated the marble floors as she hacked, slashed and shot her way through the huge building. A cannon on wheels rolled out from behind a wall, only to detonate as a window shattered and a bullet coated in black Focus sailed through.

Soldiers and automata rushed to meet her, to desperately do anything they could to slow her down, but nothing survived longer than a few seconds. A wall collapsed up ahead as Alara stared down a long corridor. Cyrenna emerged from the dust, her

gauntlets dripping blood. "Down!" she yelled at Alara, before pointing in other directions for her own Marines to clear out sections of the royal houses. Cyrenna then ran over to Alara's side as her Marines cleared a large space on floor and stepped back in a ring. Wulf and the Weapon stepped forwards into the middle of the circle with a silent gesture from Alara, the trio standing around Cyrenna. "At least three floors deep," Cyrenna stated, her palm to the floor and eyes shut. "I trust your senses, get us down there," Alara commanded, crouching down. Weapon and Wulf did the same. Cyrenna Focused on her fist, her gauntlet glowing black before she punched through the floor.

They dropped and hit another floor, Cyrenna immediately throwing another punch as the guards around them took aim and fired. They fell again and she punched through once more, the group landing hard within a large room covered in panels displaying flickering lights. All around them were huge tables covered in maps, terminals sparkling with magic stones showing images of the battlefield, and a vast group of Null Legion with their helmets off and eyes wide. "To arms! For the Sovereign!" cried an elderly man, his uniform laden with golden icons. He went down almost immediately as Alara blew a hole through his chest with her glaive. "Leave none alive!" Alara commanded, her Marines rappelling down from the floors above. "For the Republic!"

Seize the Seas Tales: King of the Seas

The ocean writhed and thrashed as the squad of ocean crawlers Ningyo had brought with him dashed around the krakens and leviathans under Ura Soruk's command. But Red didn't have any time to pay attention to them, instead he dashed around after the Despoiler, propelling himself through the water using the jets in his body. "We take her here and now!" Red declared, drifting in the water next to Ningyo as close to the ocean floor as possible. "Agreed," stated the blue ocean crawler with red eyes and red armour, a pair of curved swords in his hands.

Ura Soruk's purple body floated ahead of them both. She looked at them before glancing upwards to her monsters. She withdrew a pair of short blades from behind her back before letting out a cry that immediately drew the attention of the colossal monsters. She pointed at the pair in front of her as the creatures descended upon them. "Ignore them!" Ningyo yelled, dashing towards her. Red pursued him, but swiftly found himself unable to ignore the mass of sea monsters swarming around them.

Whether they could fight her or not was irrelevant, the creatures under her command were too many, too powerful, and now too heavily invested in hunting down the two surviving ocean crawlers. Red retreated, pulling further and further underwater with his back to the ocean floor as the dark mass of pulsating tentacles pursued him. He pushed through ship debris, sinking ammunition, and corpses until he hit the floor, a small cloud of sand erupting upwards around him. The monsters continued to push towards him, thrashing over each other in a desperate bid to get him, but Red simply crouched before pushing off towards the mass as fast as he could swim.

The ocean folded and split far above him as Ura and Ningyo clashed with their weapons, but Red kept his attention solely on the sea monsters ahead of him. He took in a deep breath and then squeezed the propulsion organs on the back of his head, launching forwards like a jet as he weaved through the maelstrom of tentacles, claws and teeth. He squeezed and darted, soft and squishy flesh enveloping him in all directions. Red slid between giant suckers as the tentacles collapsed around him. He dashed through an open beak, the mouth snapping shut on the bubbles left in his wake. He twisted and broke free, the mass of bodies slamming into the ocean floor behind him and granting a momentary vision of clarity upon the Pirate Lord and the Betrayer fighting beneath the ocean's surface.

Ura grunted as Red slammed into her, breaking her free of the water's embrace and thrusting the pair of them out into open air. "What are you doing?" questioned Ura in a brief hiss, before the pair of them slammed into the hull of a Null Legion ship and tumbled inside the lower deck. "Breach! Breach! Bre-!" cried a Null Legionnaire, only for her second repetition to be cut off as Red impaled her throat with one of his

headtails. Water rushed into the deck through the hole in the hull as the soldiers around them fled for the higher decks. Ningyo dashed in through the hole, looking around before looking towards Red in confusion. "You think an enclosed space like this will weaken me?" questioned Ura with a cackle. "I'm not sealed in here with you; you are trapped here with me!" she growled, but her eyes glanced towards the hole in the hull and the water rushing in and quickly filling the deck.

The three ocean crawlers maintained a defensive stance waiting as the water rose to their waists, then their shoulders, before finally fully enveloping them. Ningyo and Ura dashed at each other, their weapons tearing open the wood around them, but Red let out high-pitched trill. Both Ningyo and Ura faltered, their eyes widening as Red called for the monsters he had shook off. "No!" Ura realised, darting towards the hole in the hull, only for a huge golden beak to seal the gap and snap at those still inside. "What have you done?" Ningyo questioned, in similar shock to Ura, as the Null Legion ship shook and shuddered before beginning to groan as it was enveloped in all angles by the sea monsters Ura had brought to the war. "You'll kill us all!" Ningyo yelled, turning in a panic before grunting as a blade pierced his side. Red grabbed his shoulder and pulled him backwards away from the bow, placing himself between Ningyo and the Betrayer.

"Take ownership of your position! This battle is beyond the two of us, but if the Despoiler dies here then not only will those fighting with us benefit from our sacrifice, but all of the great waters of this world will. Flee if you must, Ningyo – I will not. This is my stand and where I fulfil the debt I owe!" Red declared. Ningyo looked towards the stairs leading up towards the main deck before glancing back towards Red as he desperately held back the Betrayer in the collapsing ship. She trilled, commanding the sea monsters away, but Red commanded the opposite. "May the depths accept our embrace," Ningyo muttered, turning back towards Red and charging forwards into Ura as he copied Red's trill.

Ningyo slammed into Ura, pushing her further back towards the bow just before the wood around them cracked and crunched down towards them. "Ningyo!" Red called out, grabbing the Pirate Lord's ankle and pulling him back as the ship imploded. "Scum!" Ura yelled, desperately pressing out at the collapsed beams around her. "You'll pay for this!" she screamed, her arms buckling as tentacles continued to squeeze on the wood around her.

The ship split in two as a huge tentacle tore through the hulls, exposing Ningyo and Red to the ocean for a brief moment. "Go!" Red yelled, dashing out into the open with Ningyo as Ura screamed – the tentacles continuing to squeeze the debris enveloping her. A spray of blood escaped the press, the scream silencing along with it. Red and Ningyo looked towards each other as the rest of the sunken ship met a similar fate.

“Go!” Red commanded, letting out a trill and turning the sea monsters against the Null Legion.

Chapter 249: The Sea Sovereign

All eight Pirate Lords, and Vexx, rounded on Scáthach as she stood before her throne, the air tense and electric with fear. “We take her together!” Jayce declared, Sola and Luna flicking out into a pair of longswords. Scáthach tilted her head and looked at him, a bemused smile on her face as Jayce cautiously edged forwards. Her deep brown eyes pulsed purple and she darted towards him. He raised his blades to block her strike but a hand grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back. “Snap out of it,” Kitty warned, the entire environment around them changing in an instant.

Scáthach sat on her throne, an extended finger tapping her chin as she watched the display in front of her. Her dark orange hair was messily tied up, with a few strands hanging over her eyes. She’d kept in her numerous piercings throughout her nose and ears, a lone lip ring on the bottom right of her mouth. Dark, winged eyeliner surrounded her eyes and she wore simple green baggy trousers and a plain black t-shirt. No weapons sat in her hands, not that she’d need them. The eight Engines had all turned on one another, beaming holes through each other in a desperate fight against nothing.

Jayce turned to stop them but Kitty’s grip remained firm on his shoulder. “They’re dead already,” she stated, Scáthach’s lips curling into a sadistic grin. One surviving Engine staggered forwards, only to lurch backwards as Scáthach shimmered in her chair and apparated in front of it. She grabbed the cyclops mask and pulled, peeling the flesh from the metal in a long gargling retch as the metal tendrils throughout the host were forcibly ripped out. “Well?” Scáthach questioned. “Are we just going to stand around, or are we going to fight?”

Tim began to chant and the Machinist unleashed a pair of thin streams of golden fire towards Scáthach. Jayce, Vexx, Ningyo, Thákane, Tanare and Kitty all darted forwards, pursuing Scáthach around the huge throne room as she dashed backwards in a series of fast leaps. She moved impossibly quickly, using the air itself to propel and twist herself away from Kitty’s and Tanare’s glowing and flaming claws, all whilst avoiding and ducking under Vexx’s precise chops, kicks and strikes. Ningyo did what he could, but as he moved after Jayce and the others a periodic dribble of blood would fall to the floor behind him. He was injured and Scáthach noticed it immediately.

“Protect him!” Jayce yelled, all four other melee Pirate Lords turning and lunging to intercept Scáthach as she suddenly leant forwards and leapt at Ningyo with intention to kill. In a singular point, Jayce’s blades, Kitty and Tanare’s claws and Vexx’s palms met Scáthach’s extended fingers. Focus met Focus, sending waves of black and white flame across the room as Jayce yelled out, his legs slowly bending as Scáthach pressed

closer and closer through the unified defence. But a bolt of lightning caught Scáthach from behind, causing her to lurch before Tanare delivered a firm and well-placed kick to her side that tore her free from the melee.

The Machinist bent over, unleashing a barrage of rockets from her back that Scáthach pirouetted and somersaulted through as the floor of the throne room shattered and exploded. A twin plume of flame was then launched from the Machinist's exosuit as she aimed her flamethrowers and fired, met by a large beam of icy energy on the other side from Thákane's draconic mouth. Scáthach screamed with brief pain as her clothes tore and ignited. A crackling storm of lightning filled the ceiling of the room, Scáthach's eyes turning away from the Machinist, even as she stood caught within the plumes of flame, towards Tim.

She took a step forwards, but Tanare intercepted her, dancing with her in the flames in a flurry of blue swipes and slashes. "Wear her down!" Vexx yelled, leaping into the stream of fire and ice with Tanare and filling the gaps of his strikes with his own. Kitty and Jayce both faltered, neither of them were fast enough to match the blows, their own eyes barely able to keep up with the storm. "Tanare!" Tim yelled, wary of catching both Vexx and Tanare within his spell. "Do it!" yelled the therian, a heavy lightning storm descending upon the trio and drawing out screams and grunts of pain from all of them. Still, they battled, until finally the flames from the Machinist stopped as her tanks ran dry. "Shit!" the Machinist cried, Scáthach ducking away from the pair of traitor Betrayers and launching at the exosuit as it desperately tried to use its reserves to pull away.

"Screw this!" yelled the Machinist, launching like a rocket at the main doors and shattering through them. A furious Scáthach tore after her, with Thákane flying after them using a pair of large draconic wings. Vexx and Tanare both staggered, the pair of them covered in char and burns. Jayce fumbled inside his bottomless bag and tossed them both a healing potion before taking off after Kitty and Ningyo, both Betrayers following closely after with Tim bringing up the rear.

The Machinist reached open air; the death-filled warzone all around her, as she looked for any of her people to refuel her suit. "No-no-no!" she cried, only for something hard and heavy to hit her from behind, sending her spiralling down towards the ocean. She twisted her body to try and pull up but her thrusters weren't responding, a grin filling her visor as Scáthach proudly showed a fist full of components. A heavy kick sealed the deal, sending the Machinist crashing into the ocean – the weight of her exosuit causing her to sink fast. "Help! Help!" she cried, a crack in her visor swiftly spraying water into her face as she tried to fumble for her emergency release. She sank into the darkness, eyes wide in terror as her suit filled up with more and more water.

Jayce glanced down towards the debris covered ocean; there was no telling where the Machinist had crashed. She was gone.

A huge beam of icy energy knocked Scáthach out of the air as Thákane's Dragon fired at her. Jayce swung with his swords, cutting deep into her sides, only for the wounds to almost immediately regenerate. Scáthach winked at him and grabbed his shoulders, twisting and throwing him as hard as she could into the surface of the water. He bounced across the top of the ocean as his Focus braced the impact, a series of heavy punches detonating the water where he had been as Scáthach chose him as her next victim. "They rally around you, Jayce! You fall, and so do they!" she yelled, only to grunt as Vexx tackled her.

Kitty, Tanare and Thákane dove after Scáthach and Vexx, throwing blow after blow at her as she dashed across the warzone – the entire war nothing more than a backdrop to their battle. Ningyo leapt free from the water, swinging his trident at her whenever he could before descending back below the safety of the surface. "Cute trick!" Scáthach yelled, shattering her way through a Null Legion ship in her path before obliterating a Machinist vessel. Nanabolele roared as she dove down towards Scáthach, but the Sovereign leapt up into the air, flying past the Dragon towards the lightning-charged clouds above. The Pirate Lords pursued, with Nanabolele surging past them on a ravenous charge towards the Sovereign. The wingless water Dragon twisted through the air, only for her eyes to widen as Scáthach stuck her hand into the clouds and threw a devastating lightning-charged fist straight into the Dragon's face.

The Dragon's scales shattered and popped as the wrath of the skies tore through her, the blow ending her life instantly. "No!" screamed Thákane, her draconic visage vanishing from her body as her companion was executed. She began to fall, screaming as she did so, but Scáthach tore through Jayce and the others to fall beside her. "Weak," Scáthach told her apathetically, giving a gentle kick to her tumbling body and sending Thákane spiralling down to impact upon the broken mast of one of the Null Legion ships. Thákane hung there, staring up at the sky, her body impaled and eyes wide and glazed over.

"Jayce, we're running out of bodies!" Kitty yelled, as Scáthach skated across the surface of the debris-filled ocean - her eyes scanning for Ningyo. "We need to get her back inside!" Jayce yelled to Tanare and Vexx. The pair nodded, and charged forwards after Scáthach. "Tim, slow her down!" he then yelled. "Kitty..." She nodded, diving after Tanare and Vexx, her numerous glowing tails flicking behind her.

Scáthach lurched as a fist of water grabbed her ankle and held her in place. She frowned as she looked down at it, before twisting her body to avoid a pair of flying fists from Tanare and Vexx. The water around her turned inky black, the surface

twisting and bubbling as tentacles thrashed around her. "No!" Scáthach yelled, a tentacle grabbing her arm and pulling to the side as another grabbed her other arm, before two more took her legs. A huge beaked maw appeared below her, Jayce and the others pulling back in surprised horror as the tentacles pulled and stretched her as she thrashed, screaming, against it.

Jayce glanced to the side; Ningyo floated in the ocean – a grin on his face as he commanded the sea monsters to kill Scáthach. Limbs snapped and tore before the huge maw snapped around Scáthach and dragged her under. Kitty cheered, but both Tanare and Vexx stood stunned, unable to even believe what they had seen. "Ningyo, you did it! She's dead!" Jayce yelled, turning and looking at Ningyo only to find Scáthach sat on top of the water with a bored look on her face. She let out a yawn, Jayce's eyes widening as an ocean crawler's arm floated atop the water where the Sovereign had been. A tentacle quickly snatched it and pull the last remains of Ningyo under. "Horrible way to go," Scáthach said with a dark smile.

Scáthach apparated in front of Jayce, her nose touching his as she stared into his eyes and pulled back her arm. "Jayce!" Kitty cried, knocking him aside as Scáthach thrust her arm through Kitty's chest. Kitty coughed blood into Scáthach's face before falling away down towards the ocean. "Kitty!" Tim cried, but one of her glowing tails vanished and her body instantly regenerated. "This isn't over! Snap out of it!" Kitty yelled at Tanare and Vexx.

The pair of Ex-Betrayers lunged at Scáthach, both far faster than they had been moments before. Tanare raked his claws across her face and Vexx slashed across her neck with his hand, almost beheading her. The skin knitted back together, Scáthach's face turning into a snarl of aggression as her playtime came to an end. "This is losing its fun!" Scáthach yelled, throwing an impaling fist at Vexx only for Kitty to once again throw her body in the way, sacrificing another of her lives to open up an opportunity for Jayce and the others to wound the Sovereign.

"Bitch!" Scáthach yelled, turning on Kitty as she regenerated once more. A beam of black energy hit her from behind, another spell following almost instantly from Tim. Vexx covered for Tim as she charged at him, knocking her aside only for Tanare to land a firm swipe and for Jayce to cut her open a moment later. In a rhythm, the five of them struck at her, using Kitty as a sacrificial lamb to take any blow that go too close for comfort. "Running low!" Kitty yelled, a trio of tails flicking angrily behind her as she died and revived once more. A golden circle surrounded Scáthach, a beam of divine energy slamming down onto her from above as Jayce, Tanare and Vexx pinned her inside the circle. "Dammit!" Scáthach yelled, dashing through them back towards her mansion.

She moved like a blur, far faster than even Vexx could move. They pursued her, crashing back into the throne room in a spray of dust and stone but she was nowhere in sight. "Where is she?" questioned Jayce, stepping forwards with a firm grip on his swords as he scanned the room. "Oh no," uttered Tanare, his eyes towards the throne. "Oh no?" questioned Kitty. "What the hell do you mean 'oh no'?"

A heavy metallic clang shook the room, a vault door rolling free from beneath the stairs leading up to the Sovereign's throne. It fell over with a crash and Scáthach stepped out from beneath the steps, dressed from the chin down in a black skintight suit covered in armour plating. A pair of large axes hung in both hands, the sight painting an uncomfortable resemblance to Jayce's own mother. The suit glowed vividly in Jayce's eyes, firm enchantments embedded throughout it, and with each movement, as Scáthach rolled her arms a faint mechanical whir could be heard within.

Vexx stepped over towards Jayce. "I may need these," he stated, looking down towards Sola and Luna. "I'll do you one better," Jayce responded, reaching into his bottomless bag and pulling out a pair of spiked gauntlets and a small curved dagger. "You kept them?" Vexx questioned, unable to force a faint smile as a loud whining built up from Scáthach's armour. "Leave nothing in reserve!" Jayce stated. "Tim, get it done!" he commanded.

Yells came from behind, a flood of Pirates and Engines charging in as reinforcements. "Whoever takes her head rules the seas!" declared one of the Machinist's cyborgs, charging straight past Jayce with a large cleaver in hand. Scáthach barely moved, chopping downwards with terrifying speed and splitting the cyborg cleanly in half. A faint trail of her body followed her around as she tore apart the reinforcements, twirling her axes around in a fatal and brutal dance.

Blue flames ignited across Tanare's body as he and Vexx dashed into the fray, twisting and ducking under her blows whilst throwing back brief attacks of their own – their strikes either being absorbed by her combat suit or her body regenerating from the blows. Jayce dashed into the fight, leaving Kitty to guard Tim as he painted a ritual circle on the floor and dropped a small clay golem into the ring before repeating the process in another part of the room. Pirates and Engines threw themselves in desperation at Scáthach, each being cleaved apart with ease for their effort, but the mass of bodies helped defend Jayce, Vexx and Tanare – especially with Vexx and Tanare cruelly pushing the grunts into the living blender that was Scáthach with little concern to the lives they were helping to end.

"This isn't going to go your way!" Jayce yelled, stepping into a downward blow and blocking it with his swords, only to hastily defend a quick sideways chop aimed at his midriff. The force of the blow sent him sliding away across the blood-covered floor.

"You and your Demon will perish here together! You can't beat us all!" Jayce declared. "Paimon foresaw your downfall! Your end, Astaroth!" Jayce goaded, targeting the Demon within Scáthach.

"Shut up!" Scáthach yelled, her movements only getting faster and faster. "You know that Baal is in my crew, as is Belial, Paimon, Raim, Asmodeus, Byleth!" Jayce pressed, Tanare and Vexx picking their moments to interrupt Scáthach's blows and throw her off balance before countering with their own strikes. Jayce glanced backwards, the faintest of nods coming from Tim as he began to chant and rise up into the air.

Scáthach turned and dove at him like a lightning bolt, Kitty getting torn in half through the waist for her trouble as she blocked the blow. A heavy boom rang out, sending Scáthach crashing into an opposing wall. "Two," Kitty groaned, her body reforming in a green flash. "Now or never!" Jayce yelled, leaping at Scáthach and meeting her heavy blows with his own. Vexx came in from the right, striking her weapons to knock them off trajectory and granting Jayce openings to begin cutting at the minimal weak points across Scáthach's armour. Tanare roared and slammed into her, picking her up before slamming her to the ground.

The ritual circle they landed on began to glow. "Astaroth! This is your only chance!" Jayce threatened. The clay doll beside her began to twist and melt. "Traitor!" Scáthach cried as her Demon abandoned her, a small white goat with four large horns forming from the clay. Jayce snatched up the Demon and stuffed him inside his bottomless bag. "Give him back!" Scáthach cried, an expression of utter hatred on her face as the battle suddenly and immediately became very real for her.

She unleashed a blast of Panic, knocking the five of them away as she leapt back up to her feet. Jayce rolled to his feet as the others got up, the group spread around her. "So, this is how it ends. The five of you. One of me. Well, go on then! Who will take my crown?" she questioned, a golden band appearing on her head. No one stepped forwards, they were all exhausted. "It doesn't have to be this way," Jayce attempted. Scáthach turned and faced him, a look of disappointment on her face as Kitty rolled her eyes and shook her head. "You know it does," Scáthach stated. "It's the way it always has been - a battle of blood and a bid for true freedom."

She stepped forwards towards Jayce and Vexx lunged, meeting her heavy swings with his gauntlets in a spray of sparks. Kitty dashed through, her claws opening a hole in Scáthach's side. Scáthach groaned and threw one of her axes, the blade embedding itself in Kitty's head. Tanare then struck from behind, knocking Scáthach to the floor. She laughed as she lay face down, slowly crawling forwards towards Jayce. She raised

her head and looked at him, opening her mouth only for a heavy foot to stomp down on her neck and end her life.

Jayce looked up at Tanare as he panted heavily. Despite it all, Jayce couldn't help but feel some form of pity for her. She had been a monster, yes, evil to the core, certainly... but... Jayce shook his head and stepped forwards, closing her eyes. The crown atop her head faded away into nothingness, a golden beam falling down upon the Sea Sovereign's throne and the crown sat upon it. The mansion shook, a heavy chunk of ceiling crashing down to the floor nearby. "The bombardment has begun," Kitty stated, stretching on the floor like a cat before looking towards the throne. "This place will be rubble in minutes. It's over."

"No, it's not," Tim stated, stepping away from the group towards the throne and the Sea Sovereign's crown. "Tim, let it go," Jayce stated, stepping forwards and placing a hand on his shoulder. "The boy is right," Tanare stated, similarly stepping towards the throne. "This isn't over. She may be dead, but that throne belongs to someone." Jayce's eyes widened as Tanare and Tim continued forwards towards the throne, the pair of them stopping at the bottom of the stairs and facing one another. "Guys, this isn't worth it! If anyone takes that crown then the whole cycle will just continue! You'll be the next Scáthach, and people will be trying to take your head too," Jayce argued, approaching the pair, even as more chunks fell from the ceiling. "Jayce..." Kitty said softly, glancing towards Vexx – whose gaze hadn't lifted from Scáthach's corpse.

"We can end it here, bury the title with her death. Let it end, please!" Jayce pleaded. Tim turned and looked at Jayce, a weary smile on his face as he drew his sword. "You know, Captain, you inspired me to be a better man – to push for more and make a bigger impact on this world than just a life as a monster hunter. My Grandfather taught me that there's always a limit to people's achievements – a wall will always arise to stop them. This is your wall, not mine. As a friend, Jayce, go. This throne is mine, and I will surpass you!"

Tanare also looked at Jayce, his hands igniting in blue flame. "You know kid, Valentine always dreamt of sitting atop this world... of being the freest man alive... But he's gone, and I'm still here. So, I'm sorry Jayce. I really am. But I cannot let this go – not for my people, not for you, not for the Captain." Both Pirate Lords met each other's gazes: one that had inspired Jayce, one that Jayce had inspired. A heavy clanking drew their attention to the doors, a near-dead Engine dragging its body into the room and extending a metallic tentacle towards the throne. "Mine!" it buzzed, only for a spear of ice to impale it and a sailing slash of fire to cut it down. Both Tanare and Tim then looked warningly towards Jayce and Kitty – a silent threat to not intervene. "Jayce, we need to go!" Kitty told him, grabbing his arm and pulling him

backwards. Jayce turned and ran, grabbing Vexx and snapping him out of his daze as the room erupted into fire and ice.

"This way!" Vexx stated, angling away from the main entrance back towards the countless rooms in the mansion. "The exit is right there!" Kitty yelled, stopping in her tracks as Jayce ran after Vexx. "But the vaults are this way!" Vexx yelled back, Kitty's eyes widening. "You want it to fall into the hands of those two?" "Point taken, lead on!" Kitty yelled, a wide grin on her face as Vexx led them through the maze of doors.

"All therians! The Sovereign is dead and this land is ours! Fight for it, fight for your new Sea Sovereign!" Tanare declared across the communicators. "All mages, wipe out the animals and show them who's in charge!" Tim responded, the mansion continuing to shake as Jayce, Kitty and Vexx approached the main vaults. Vexx placed his hand to the metal before grabbing the wheel and spinning it. The locks disengaged and the vault door slid open, revealing towers upon towers of platinum-coloured pearls, gemstones, scrolls and magical items. Kitty's eyes sparkled as she took an unconscious step into the vault. "By the Gods, what a disgusting sight!" she stated, reaching forwards and shoving a fistful into her pockets.

"Stand back!" Jayce told her, aiming his bottomless bag and sucking in the contents of the vault in a matter of seconds. He then turned and nodded to Vexx, but not before Kitty could place a hand on his arm. "I want a fair share, understood?" He grinned at her and nodded, the three of them running for the exit as the mansion began to collapse. "Bjorn, we're getting out of here! We need a pick-up!" Jayce yelled into his communicator, as Kitty did the same to Somme. "On our way," returned Bjorn.

Jayce stumbled as he ran, his body giving out on him from the sheer exhaustion of the day. Kitty grabbed his arm and threw it over her shoulder as Vexx did the same. "Everyone back to the ship!" came Bjorn's voice through Jayce's and Vexx's communicators. "We're getting the hell out of here!" They emerged into fading daylight, the sun on a downwards trajectory to the horizon. All across the Sovereign's Island, mages and therians fought all around them – a new war taking place from the old.

The Stacked Hand was sailing quickly towards the curved tip of the island, the Great Seacat close behind. Both ships had taken a beating but were still mostly intact. "Come on!" yelled Astris from the main deck, the three of them running through bolts of energy and claws and teeth. "It's Jayce Exarga! Kill him and you'll be famous!" yelled someone, the attention of the mages and therians swiftly turning towards Jayce, Kitty and Vexx as they stumbled their way towards the cliff. "Jump!" Vexx yelled, leaping free and landing on the Stacked Hand before catching Jayce as he practically fell onto the Stacked Hand with Kitty close behind him. "Where to?" Bjorn yelled.

“Get us clear! Take us south!” Jayce returned, laying on his back and panting heavily.

Seize the Seas Tales: Loyalty to One

Kaina let out a roar of pain as she spiralled out of the sky and crashed into the garden of the Sovereign’s Island. Her body was covered in dozens of bites, scratches and bullet holes – each of them little more than tiny pricks in her gigantic body. She lay there, panting heavily with her eyes shut. The fight was far from over, but her life was fading – she knew it, the three small runts and the Rising Aces would spell her end. An end that had never truly been hers.

She thought back to the last time she had lain injured like she was. That time she’d been in water, a red-headed woman on her chest with an axe to her throat – brown eyes tainted with purple. She remembered her lungs being filled with blood that wasn’t hers, her mouth having torn and chewed so many of her brethren that her home had become forever closed to her. A lone tear fell from Kaina’s eyes – a short lifetime of agony, and this was where it led to.

“Get up!” came a command from above, a short, grizzled man covered in black and blue scales flying above her. Kaina opened her eyes and looked up at Ordo as he held out his greatclub towards her. Lightning sparked around him, Zhurong and Taranis circling above. “I expected more from a Betrayer!” he stated, panting heavily from the hours of battle. Kaina condensed her massive form, returning back into the body of a naked near-human woman. She created clothes to cover her and looked up at him.

A streak then zoomed over him, a long-haired man fleeing from a woman wielding an anchor. “She’s dead!” Sétanta yelled, dashing off towards the horizon. Kaina’s eyes widened. She sucked in a heavy inhale before spewing fire around her. When the flames faded, she was gone – free to a world she didn’t know.

Chapter 250: A New Home

The Great Seacat and the Stacked Hand sailed south together, leaving the flames of Novalis and the Sea Sovereign's mansion behind on the horizon. The Heavyweight had sunk, but Somme had managed to rescue as many of his crew as he could, bringing them aboard the Great Seacat before its demise. Kitty sat on the deck of Jayce's ship in silence, her eyes periodically glancing towards Elaine as she leant looking out towards the war they had left behind, and Vexx as he stood by the wheel with Bjorn. She knew the reason to them both being present, but she couldn't help but feel slightly uncomfortable. All the more uncomfortable as she quietly said goodbye in her head.

"I will miss you," she whispered, to the Demon that had been her truest companion for so many years. "There are no words to say what you mean to me, dearest Kitty," returned Pursan in her head, as Morgana drew a ritual circle on the deck and placed a clay golem inside it. "But all good things must come to an end, and it appears this is it." Kitty smiled softly as Jayce offered a hand to her. "We're ready," she said gently, stepping into the circle. A faint flash of red light and it was all over, a small green cat with nine tails purring by her feet. "You're far cuter in this form," Kitty said, with a tearful grin to Pursan. The cat sat and looked up at her with his green and gold eyes. "How diminishing, but..." he stated, looking at the similar tiny forms of Baal – a blood covered humanoid with two pairs of curling horns and a pale face – and Belial – a humanoid with horns and a blank mask-like face dripping gold from its eyes. "Well, I suppose I'm amongst kin."

Kitty nodded, stepping away and watching Pursan approach the other tiny Demons. "You'll take care of him, right?" Kitty questioned to Jayce. He nodded, holding out a bottomless bag to her. "Falconer knows a spot. It'll be perfect for them, I'm sure." She smiled before grabbing him in a tight hug. He stood frozen for a moment before wrapping his arms around her. "Never in a million years would I have presumed we'd end up like this," she said into his chest. He held her back and rested his head on hers. "No, but I'm glad I could count on you until the very end."

She stepped back and wiped her eyes with the bag containing a greater fortune than several nations. "You say this like it's goodbye forever," she half-laughed, half-cried. "True, it's just for now. I may need you to deal with those two fools," he stated, pointing back north. Kitty smiled and shook her head. "Pair of idiots fighting over nothing," she said, looking up at Jayce's head and the stubborn crown that refused to leave his head. A sigh escaped her and she turned back to her ship. "We best get going if we want to avoid that mess. Be seeing you, Sovereign Exarga," she stated with a curtsy, before leaping aboard her ship. "Alright boys, let's go home!" she yelled, her crew cheering as they pulled away. "Bye bye!" yelled her sailors, waving at the Rising

Aces. Jayce shook his head as he watched them leave, all eyes slowly settling upon him and his crown.

"So, care to explain how you have that?" Bjorn questioned from the wheel. "Well, rather irritatingly, it appears that it has decided I'm the new Sea Sovereign," Jayce stated, folding his arms. A few chuckles emerged, and with a roll of his eyes he took it off and threw it overboard, only for the crown to fade back into existence upon his head. "Tempest, please fix this for me," Jayce stated, taking it off and handing it to the djinn. "I will do my best, Sea Sovereign." Jayce nodded appreciatively and looked towards the rest of his crew.

The three sisters were all sat with each other in a quiet and nervous silence. Vexx nodded to Jayce from his position by the helm with Bjorn. Astris sat brushing the hair of Lucinia as Orianna waited her turn. Zeta was helping to bandage up Ordo and Thalia with Jeanne and Yuthura. Marisha was walking around with snacks and fresh water with the help of Gaea. The three Dragons were asleep. RK was grumbling by the bow with Caelie sat on top of him and the Demons were running around in a circle by his feet whilst Mai Lu attempted to settle them. Wren sang as she flew over the Stacked Hand and Red was stood leaning against the main mast. But Jayce's gaze landed on Falconer, the stoic man's golden and green eyes locked on the island they were approaching, and the sheer cliff where the ocean ended and the Scourge began just beyond it.

"Are you sure this is the best place for them?" Jayce asked him as he stood next to Falconer. "It is by all definitions, the end of the world. The Leyline will support and protect them. And... trust me, Jayce, I know they will be safe," Falconer returned. Jayce nodded, his eyes glancing towards the vast wooden growths covering Falconer's body. "Are you... are you alright?" Jayce questioned cautiously, but where pain had been on Falconer's face a simple smile broke through. "Yes, I am. For the first time in a while, I feel I can breathe easier." Jayce rested a gentle hand on Falconer's human shoulder, the pair of them turning to the approaching island.

They brought everyone and the ship with them, stepping through a short tunnel out into a large grove. The ground was dry, a few patches of nearly dead grass across the huge crater. There were signs of an old spring but a weak dribble was all that remained. The Demons looked around in hesitation, as did the Rising Aces. "Are we sure this is the place? I mean – I know they don't need to eat or anything but this seems a little... cruel?" Zeta questioned, looking around.

Falconer stepped away from the group, slowly approaching a small and dead tree in the middle of the grove. "Falconer?" Jayce questioned, approaching him. "I haven't been fully honest with you, any of you," he said, turning to the crew. "The Scourge...

it is not dead, only asleep, and whilst we were all separated Fenn and I sought about changing that. Here is... the last point to undo the damage wrought upon our world, but... well."

Falconer knelt down and gripped the dead tree with his wooden arm. The wood began to twist and extend, wrapping around the tree before digging into the ground. "What are you doing?" questioned Yuthura, stepping forwards. "Someone stop him!" she stated, pointing with her cane before stumbling to her knees, her body still covered in wounds she had taken upon herself. "What's going on?" Marisha questioned, the ground shaking before flowers and grass sprouted around them.

Jayce's eyes widened and he stepped towards Falconer only for a firm human hand to be held out towards him as Falconer shook his head. "We all have our duties, our purposes. We do not always know or understand them, but we all know when they are ours," Falconer told them. "This is mine, it always has been." A spray of water erupted from the spring as water rushed out of it, the entire island shaking violently.

Large roots tore out from the ground, digging into Falconer's legs and body as his wooden growths began to wrap around him. "No! Falconer!" Jayce cried, stepping forwards, but Falconer simply smiled at him. "We all have our dreams. This is mine and I will see yours become a reality, my friend. Thank you all." The wood twisted around his head, enveloping him completely within the trunk of a huge tree that reached high into the air. Jayce dropped to his knees. "No..." he cried quietly.

Silence fell across the entire crew as they all stared at the tree Falconer had turned into. The grove had transformed, the dead replaced with life. A loud cry split the skies as Wren circled above before slowly dropping down to land on a large branch that extended outwards in a near-perfect perch. She sung loudly before dropping to the floor with a crash and laying against the tree. Jayce hung his head low as tears silently fell from his face.

"We can bring him back right, get him out of there? He's just inside the tree, we can get him out right?" Zeta questioned, rushing forwards and placing her hands on the tree. "Gaea, we can get him out – right?" Zeta questioned, looking towards the dryad with tears streaming down her face. "I... I'm sorry... he's... he's gone," Gaea cried. Zeta slowly slid down the tree and buried her face in her hands. "No..."

The stars had started to appear above by the time any of them were ready to accept what had happened. But Vexx was the first to say anything. "You were a good man, a great eye," he said quietly to the tree, before stepping away. "I will look after your garden," Gaea then reassured. Marisha stepped forwards and placed a hand to the trunk. "I could always count on you to be the voice of reason, and - in a crew distinctly lacking it - I was glad to know you were always there."

"You've dumped your workload onto me now, old friend. It was pleasure," Bjorn said gently. "Stupid fool," Yuthura whispered, placing her forehead to the tree and leaning into it. "The old people should always go first." Each and every crew member said their goodbyes until the eyes landed onto Jayce. Slowly he approached the tree. "Every good crew has its Navigator. The person that tells them where they're going and how to get there. You were always more than that. You were our light in the desert, our rock in the storm, our eyes in the skies. Thank you, Falconer, thank you for being here all this time and never giving up on me... on any of us."

Jayce turned towards the large roc leaning against her master. "I'm guessing you're staying here?" he questioned, approaching Wren and placing a hand on her head. She cooed gently and he smiled. "Look after him, Wren, look after them all," he stated, looking towards the Demons across the grove. She let out an ear-piercing shriek and Jayce nodded to her before stepping away. Slowly he left the grove, releasing the Stacked Hand from its bottle and waiting for his crew to return when ready.

They stayed by the island until the morning, all of them grieving in one way or another, but as the sun rose, they found a new sight ahead of them that in someways brought a little bit of relief to them. The Scourge had shattered and fragmented: huge canyons had spread across the barren lands ahead of them, a steady layer of water spilling out of the ground and filling the horizon. The water flowing over the edge of the world was no longer simply fading into the ground, it was filling the south of the world and the red was turning green. "That damn fool," Yuthura said gently. "He actually did it. He healed the world."

They turned away from the edge of the Ancient World, beginning their long journey north, but rather than teleport all the way – Jayce figured he and his crew should take it slow, and enjoy the journey back home. Tempest took them northeast, just enough to get out the way of any potential enemies and then, with a casual trajectory towards the Frontier, the crew finally took a real moment to breathe again.

Vexx however, didn't really know how to do that. He'd spent pretty much the entirety of the day staring out from the crow's nest looking for anything potentially hostile. Unsurprisingly, with the whole world reeling from the death of Scáthach and the emergence of, what people were now referring to as, the two Pirate Emperors: Tim Kane and Therian King Tanare, there was nothing waiting to fight them. Periodically someone would visit him in his spot, mainly Caelie, who would sit in comfortable silence for a little bit with a snack or two, or Jayce who would share a story from his adventures, but time passed and the sun swiftly rolled over his head towards the horizon.

Eventually, Vexx descended from the crow's nest and began to wander in search of some food. "You okay?" questioned Jayce when Vexx stepped into the living quarters. Both Astris and Caelie were asleep and leaning into him as he sat on one of the sofas. "Yeah, just a bit hungry," Vexx stated, helping himself to the remains of dinner in the fridge. "You know, you could eat with us. And that goes for Elaine too. You two don't have to be all edgy and keep your distance. You're welcome here, regardless of... well... everything."

Vexx looked at the sofa Jayce was gesturing to, his eyes slowly glancing towards his old bounty poster on the wall, his first title amongst the crew and his signature written upon an ancient document. "Sit," Jayce pushed. Vexx sat down with a plate laden with leftovers and looked towards his old Captain. "So...?" Jayce questioned, a faint mumbling coming from Astris as he gently repositioned her. "A lot has changed... everything has changed," Vexx said quietly, stuffing his face. "You'd be surprised at what has changed and what hasn't," Jayce returned. "Anything in particular that stands out?"

Vexx scratched the back of his head, a simple glance towards Astris saying enough. "She and Ordo found their way to us. When Astris became infected... there wasn't really a home for her in the Empire and Alara asked me to take her in. Ordo was on the chopping block, a target for the Church and the Navy to eliminate. With a bit of luck, he bumped into us and he helped fill a gap you left." "Right..." Vexx said quietly, Jayce immediately questioning whether he had misspoken. "It wasn't really my question but it explains a few things." "How so?"

"This place, this crew... feels a lot closer than I remember. Everyone seems to have someone." Jayce glanced down towards Astris and Caelie before looking back at Vexx. "Was there anyone...?" Jayce questioned. Vexx stared at him before the tips of his ears flashed red and he looked away. "A long time ago... I left him behind," he partially lied. Jayce held his tongue for a moment, letting Vexx continue his meal. "Was this Oni?"

Vexx choked on his meal and almost swallowed his fork in the process. "Who – argh – who told you that name?" Vexx questioned, his entire posture defensive and red eyes twinging with panic. "It was a name that came up from the Republic, they have a few Fists amongst them now." Vexx's face darkened as he looked at the floor. "It was..." He shook it off. "A story for another time." Jayce nodded. "Sorry," Vexx immediately stated, but Jayce shook his head. "I just need a bit of time to get used to... this again." He stood up and headed to the kitchen, dumping his plate in the sink. "Marisha will kill you," Jayce warned. Vexx chuckled, washing up his things before leaving. "Night, Jayce."

"Night, Vexx."

Elaine nodded to Vexx as he stepped out onto the main deck. He nodded back to her but kept walking, descending below on his path back to his room. She almost called out to him, her right hand leaving the safety of the edge of the Stacked Hand before it clenched into a fist and returned back to position. It didn't feel real. No one had threatened her, or told her to leave. There was animosity, plenty of it, along with a more than fair dose of fear, but the Rising Aces had been fair to her – and she hated it. She wished they would scream and yell, threaten or attack her. It all felt... unnatural. Too quiet.

"I'm going to bed," Arthuria stated from across the deck, "you remember where my room is, right?" Elaine nodded to her sister. "Okay, goodnight big sis." Elaine tried to speak, to return the words but it got caught in her throat. She simply nodded and turned back out towards the moonlit waters. A gentle set of far softer footsteps than Arthuria's stomps pitter pattered next to her, a long exhale announcing Morgana's arrival as she looked up at Elaine. Elaine towered over her in practically every measurement. She was a foot taller, her shoulders near equal to two of Morgana's and her weight likely similarly doubled from her dense muscular form. They really didn't look like sisters, yet as Marisha walked past and their identical golden eyes glanced her way – there was no denying it.

"Do you remember much about Dad?" Morgana asked softly. The wood creaked in Elaine's clenched grip. "More than you, that's for sure," Elaine responded, looking up at the sky and trying to block out her last memory of Uther Pendragon. "Yeah... definitely," Morgana returned, immediately piercing an uncomfortable feeling into her sister's heart. "Fuck, what do you want?" Elaine pressed, turning to face Morgana and causing her to physically step back with fear. "Never mind," Morgana muttered, turning and stepping away.

"Morgana, shit, fuck! I'm sorry!" Elaine stated quickly, abandoning the safety of the edge of the ship and following her sister. Morgana turned and looked at her. "I... I don't know how to do this. Any of it. I don't have any happy sisterly stories to share. Or fond memories of the home with two crying babies and a house full of adults screaming and shouting. But..." Elaine met her sister's gaze. "I want to try to be better at... this," she stated, gesturing between them. "I just... don't know how." Morgana stepped forwards and buried her face in Elaine's large chest. "Just hug me back," Morgana returned. Fearing she would shatter her if she wasn't careful, Elaine slowly hugged back. "I remember this..." Morgana said into Elaine. "Your smell."

"Well... I guess I did sit with you sometimes, when I was holding... Mor... Morgause? Are you crying?" Elaine questioned, feeling a dampness spreading across her chest.

"No," Morgana lied, pulling deeper into her eldest sister. "Okay, sure." Eventually Morgana emerged for air, before gesturing towards Gaea's tree. They sat down underneath its pale branches. "This is more me," Elaine stated, feeling the grass in her fingers and the breeze on her face.

Morgana sat in silence, not quite sure of what to say. "I'm sorry about your mother," Morgana eventually stated. Elaine tensed but it quickly faded. "It's... it's okay. I knew it in my heart that she was gone. She was... a weak person, and a selfish one for forcing us to abandon you and your sister... and your mothers. I'm sorry for not... for not being enough to stop them. It wasn't fair for one family to be..." Elaine trailed off with a chuckle and a shake of her head. "My Mum died too... sickness. Um, but Morgause's mother is still well." "That's... nice. She was kind, if I remember correctly. Practically a child when she had Morgause, she felt more like an older sister than a... stepmum."

"We... We could go see her?" Morgana proposed. Elaine looked over towards her. "I... I'm not sure. This is a lot and there's something you deserve to see first. If you want to afterwards, then sure – I'll go wherever you guys want me to." "Promise?" Morgana questioned, extending a pinkie finger to Elaine. Elaine nodded and hooked the finger with her own. "I promise... little sister. We do things together now... as a family."

Final Bastion eventually came into sight after a few weeks of gentle sailing. An expansive fleet surrounded it in all directions, the Republic wasting no time in exerting their authority in the Old World and bringing in a whole variety of nations into the arms of the Republic. Syndicate ships were sailing almost continuously in and out of the Frontier, but none of it mattered to Jayce. He stood on the main deck as Bjorn guided the Stacked Hand into the Navy's main harbour.

Astris, Lucinia, Orianna and Ordo all stood in front of him, each of them wearing their own backpacks and with their bottomless bags containing all of their personal items. "Have you got everything?" Yuthura questioned once again to the two young girls. "Yes, granny – we've got everything," the girls returned, a genuine smile on Yuthura's face as she stood hunched over on her cane. "Take care of each other, and of her," Yuthura told the children, gesturing with her cane towards Astris. "We will," promised Lucinia, hugging Yuthura tightly before her sister did the same.

Astris and Jayce refused to break eye contact with each other, a faint smile on both their faces as they stared at each other. "I would say it was fun..." he eventually stated. She shook her head, letting out a small laugh. "It was hell for me, and you know it... but I wouldn't trade it for anything." The Stacked Hand came to a rest; six people stood ahead of the numerous guards on duty on the pier below. Admiral Exarga stood

at the rear with Wulf and Riley, both Cyrenna and Beowulf were before them, but Alara stood at the front.

Astris and Ordo moved from crew member to crew member, giving a long hug or a firm handshake to each individual. "Don't you dare fail to keep in touch," Arthuria told Astris, hugging her tightly. "Same to you, Paladin. I hope your new Order is better than the last or you'll have me knocking on your doors." Arthuria smiled, looking down towards Jeanne. "Oh, you can count on it, Vampire Queen."

Ordo stood in front of Yuthura, the old woman hardly able to meet his gaze. "You deserve a retirement, there's a hospital here that would benefit from your guidance. A lot of young fools that could use a firm cane to guide them," Ordo offered. Yuthura shook her head. "No, Ordo. My place is with these idiots. And with you gone the average age is going to drop significantly. Someone around here needs to carry on the cranky old person persona," she said, hugging him tightly. He could feel her body trembling, the toll from the war evident. "Look after yourself, Doc." She released him and he stepped away.

Ordo turned and looked at the human form of Taranis, the Dragon standing proudly before him. "You could come with me?" Ordo offered to him, but the Dragon shook his head. "No," Taranis stated. "Our terms are up, and it's time that I to show the world once again why we are the top race! But... maybe once in a few years I might call upon you to fight alongside me. If that is okay?" "I will be waiting," Ordo stated, placing a firm hand on his Dragon's shoulder.

Jayce followed Astris, Ordo, Lucinia and Orianna down onto the pier. Astris ran straight into her brother and sister's arms. "You're home!" Cyrenna cried, holding Astris tightly. "You're finally home!" Astris nodded into her arms, tears falling from her arms as Cyrenna nearly crushed her. Eventually Cyrenna released her and both the elder Kai's looked up towards Jayce. "We are in your debt, Jayce," Cyrenna stated firmly. "In ways I don't think we'll ever be able to repay."

"Just take care of her," Jayce returned, before glancing towards Alara. "Them both," he added. Cyrenna and Beowulf both nodded, stepping away as Astris stepped into Alara's arms. Ordo stepped through the group with the two young Vampires. "Glasses," Ordo greeted to Philip. Admiral Exarga nodded to his old mentor. "Senior Instructor, welcome back. Who are these two girls?" he questioned. "New recruits, special aides of Captain Kai," Ordo stated, looking towards Astris as she and Alara looked at Jayce and made their goodbyes. "Well, Special Operator Kai may find it easier for her aides to settle in with her after her debrief." Ordo nodded, looking back towards the Stacked Hand and the crew that had saved his life. "An adventure unlike any other..." he muttered, tipping his head to Bjorn.

"I thought this was it, Jayce?" Alara questioned, the smile gone from her face and her voice hushed as she stood near to him. He held his hands up and backed away. "Last one, I swear. One last adventure to drop Wicke off with her sisters and then I'm out. I promised her, and I don't break my promises to you – do I?" he offered. Alara glared at him, her fists clenched and face red. She then looked down and stepped nearer to him, her eyes blurry. "I... need you," she said in a shy whisper. "I miss you and I'm done with waiting for you."

Astris stood nearby, taking a definitive interest in the type of wood the pier was made of. "I will be back, and then you'll never lose me again," Jayce stated before looking towards Astris. "Take care of her for me?" he asked gently. Astris stepped forwards and took Alara's hand. "We'll be fine. Just go and take that girl home. She's six years late for dinner." Alara met Jayce's gaze, stepping forwards and planting a kiss on his lips, before following up with a firm slap. "Last one, and then you're marrying me!" she threatened. She then turned on Astris and dragged her away. "Come on, we're getting drunk!" Alara practically yelled as she stormed off. "Alara, she has a debrief with me first!" Philip called after her. Jayce nodded to Ordo and he nodded back.

Zhurong and Soteria looked at Arthuria and Morgana, the two Dragons uncertain of what to do as the Stacked Hand sailed through the Frontier. "You don't have to leave us," Morgana said, her eyes brimming with tears. Soteria hugged her tightly. "I need to see what I am without... humans. I need to be me again, not us." Morgana nodded, pulling back from her Dragon and waving after her as she took off into the air after Taranis.

Arthuria finally met her stubborn Dragon's gaze, darting around as he refused to look at her. "We didn't always get along, but... thank you for fighting with us, risking your life for us, even against your will," Arthuria told him as he stubbornly met her gaze. "It wasn't intolerable," he returned. "But know this, that should you seek me out in the future for any undertakings, it may take some bargaining for me to join you on any adventures." Arthuria smiled. "Fried fishcakes? Chocolate donuts? Hamburgers?" she questioned. "Perhaps those would be acceptable. Stay safe... Arthuria Pendragon." He took off after his brethren, disappearing into the trees of the Frontier.

Eventually the trees parted, giving way to the familiar sight of Last Drop. A familiar redhead stood on the pier, a wide-brim hat on her head and a large grimoire in a holster on her belt. Her arms were folded, a firm expression on her face. "You're late!" came Wicke's voice through Jayce's communicator. Slowly he looked over his shoulder towards Bjorn and Vexx. "Here we go again," he said with a wide grin.

Seize the Seas Tales: Lost

Kaina groaned as she crashed into an island, her condensed form leaving a colossal trench behind her. Rain poured down upon her, dripping down from her hair as she weakly tried to push her body up from the mud, her body covered in cuts and holes. She looked up: a small hut sat ahead of her – the windows glowing orange. The door opened, a figure standing in the light. “Gods,” came the voice of a middle-aged man. His boots splashed in the mud as he ran towards her. “Are you okay miss? You look hurt?”

Kaina groaned, slumping forwards. “Lucy, she needs help!” he yelled back to the hut, reaching down and attempting to lift her, only to find himself unable to budge the giant Dragon in human form. “She’s heavy, I need a hand!” A young girl raced out into the rain, similarly attempting to help lift Kaina. “Come on love, use your legs – let us help you,” he asked, trying his best to support Kaina. With a pained groan, Kaina forced herself to stand and limp forwards towards the hut. Her reptilian eyes glanced towards the young girl and her father. She could easily crush and eat them both, but something stopped her: the pitiful expression of that old man – Ordo – filling her mind as he offered her mercy. “Help her towards the bed,” the man stated. Kaina attempted to lay upon it but the frame immediately collapsed. “Um, papa?” stated Lucy.

“Make a bed for her on the floor,” he corrected.