

Chapter 130: Consequences

"See - all ten fingers, all ten toes!" Astris declared, as she stood in the living quarters whilst everyone else was eating breakfast. "Fine, fine," relented Yuthura, indicating that she could finally join them. Astris looked towards Jayce for confirmation, and he smiled back. "It was always Doc, not me. Welcome back to active duty," he told her. She grinned, taking back her usual seat as the others gave their congratulations on her successful recovery. "Took long enough," grumbled Ordo. Astris swore at him, using her newly regenerated fingers.

It had been almost two weeks since their attack on Strigon. Two very long, very boring weeks for Astris due to her imprisonment in her room on Doctor's orders, and - from Jayce's updates and the gossip provided to her by her other visitors - very little had happened other than a lot of drinking and a slow journey northwards. "So," she stated, sliding a croissant onto her plate. "What's the plan?" she asked.

"No clue," Jayce answered bluntly, drawing a few curious glances. "Truthfully, I don't know what to do next. Neither does Bjorn. We're at a crossroads, but I'm waiting to see what the consequences for our attack on Strigon are first. I would say the Dungeons is our next objective, but I don't know." A few eyes glanced towards Wicke - she had her eyes locked onto her empty plate. "You've been in the Dungeons before, right?" Astris questioned. Jayce nodded. "It makes sense to continue north, then? Finish the route through the Maw and loop around to the Ice Floes?" she suggested. Jayce glanced towards Bjorn who nodded in agreement. "We'll need to stop off and resupply first, and we need to sell some of Strigon's treasures anyway, so why not?" he suggested. Jayce turned his attention towards Wicke, who still had her eyes down and looked somewhat nervous. "Then let's do just that."

The mail arrived just as Jayce was checking over Falconer's proposed route along with Astris and Bjorn. As usual, the Guild albatross crashed down onto the deck along with its usual stack of papers and letters, but this time Jayce seemed to have considerably more in his name than usual. "Uh oh," he uttered, as he took the haphazard pile from Wicke as she joined the group in his quarters. "Look!" she immediately stated, pointing to the front cover where an image of Jayce was plastered across a large portion. "Uh oh," he repeated, the others looking as well.

"War between Pirate Lords?" it displayed. "Reports confirm that the Vampire Jure Strigon has had a violent altercation with Pirate Lord Exarga. Full details remain a mystery, however a source within the Navy has confirmed that Strigon

and Exarga came to blows with one another over the existence of one of Exarga's crew: a Vampire believed to be the daughter of Admiral Kai - former Marine Lieutenant Commander, Astris Kai."

"Well... if there was any doubts about my existence then that's definitely gone," Astris stated. "It can only be assumed that the conflict resulted in the Rising Ace's victory with Strigon's long secret lair now in ruins along with his fleet – whereas the Rising Aces have been spotted unharmed in the vicinity. Sightings have placed Strigon's flagship heading south in the direction of the Frontier, potentially for revenge on Exarga's home of origin – Admiral Cynane is confirmed to be in the area as a preventative warning. 'Strigon will not have any vengeance against the innocents of the Empire' – the Navy has assured. But now the world is left to wonder: what is the consequence for a Pirate Lord attacking another? Is this the end of the internal conflict, or will the Rising Aces turn their sights on the other Pirate Lords in a bid for more power?" Wicke concluded. "Well that's not a good thought," Bjorn stated, as Jayce looked down at the pile of letters in his hands. He doubted any of it would be good. "Still - at least your home is safe," he added. Jayce nodded in agreement. "We'll have to see if Strigon truly leaves the New World over the next few weeks."

As the others hovered nearby, Jayce sifted through the pile – separating the handwritings he recognised, as well as those marked with official seals. He opened Alara's first. "I don't know how or what you did, but well done. Let me know Astris is okay," it said amongst other script. He set it aside, turning to the letters marked with the seals of various Pirate Lords. They all said the same thing. "You have broken the rules. Expect no friendliness. Retaliation will be given for infringement." Even Zoya's held little other than a stern warning, and a clearly laid out threat not to mess with her. "I expected nothing less," Jayce stated, reaching over to the final Pirate Lord letter – this one from Kitty Deliver.

"You dumb fucking moron!" it began. Jayce grimaced as he imagined Kitty's voice reading the letter. "I told you not to, I told you not to do it, and you still went after him. Well, I hope you got what you wanted – for Astris' sake, because now you're screwed. You have just told the world that anything is for the taking. You have just told all of us that you're willing to fight and take down other Pirate Lords if they have something you want."

"All of that structure, order, and rules that we have is now forfeit. Gone! And now we're all more vulnerable for it. Not just that: Strigon still lives, and he will be after revenge. Any and all trust in you is gone. Did you not think how that

would affect me? You are my fault – your choices reflect on me, so now I have to decide if you're worth it or not. I have to choose between the others and you."

Jayce let out a sigh. "You're lucky that I know why you did what you did and that Strigon is so unlikable, but until I have this whole mess smoothed over you need to hide. You need to disappear and let tensions ease, because if any Pirate Lord thinks you're going after them next, then it is war, and it will be the end of us. Think wisely on how you're going to respond, and stay away from everyone." "Damn," Jayce muttered, setting the letter aside as the others observed him. "Okay," he decided, "We're going north. Through the Maw to the Ice Floes. We're going to take it slow, take it easy, and let things cool off."

They followed the plan Bjorn had suggested, taking the time to stop off at a hub island to sell a large portion of the treasure they had accumulated and to resupply the ship in preparation for a long voyage. The amount they sold to the local Guild representative was hardly a sliver of the vast fortune they had liberated, but the payout brought from it drew countless cheers across the crew. They left the island even wealthier than they already were, now each with their own now fathomless fortunes.

It took several weeks to reach the familiar sight of the endless whirlpools that marked the start of the Maw, but by that point the realisation of their upcoming objective had long sunk in. Jayce wasn't worried, the encounter with Strigon – and likely all that had led up to it – had led to an evolution in his Focus: he was as strong as he could get, fast too, with only a few other techniques left for him to master. Ordo too had benefitted from the encounter, his own Focus far stronger than it had been previously, much to Thalia's frustration due to his constant teasing. Everyone seemed to be stronger, happier, and more focused than ever before – apart from Wicke.

After a mention of concern from Marisha, Jayce found her sat inside Caelie's secret hideaway. The field of grass and flowers felt warm, far warmer than the now autumnal weather outside, and the fake skies above was a picture-perfect sunny day. Something clinked as Jayce stepped inside, a look of disappointment crossing his face as looked down at the empty soda bottle by his feet and then at the various empty wrappers littering the area. Wicke lay in the middle, the lair now containing various pillows and a large supply of readily accessible sweet goods.

She sat up, her eyes wide, hair a mess, and a lollipop in her mouth. "Jayce-" she started in surprise. "Let me stop you right there," Jayce said, folding his arms

before raising a single finger. "I'll tidy up..." she muttered, looking down in shame. "You're fifteen, Wicke, and I'm not your parent. Do whatever, but you know better, and you know what this place means to people – to me." She let out a sigh. "Not like you ever come in here..." she muttered.

"Say again?" he questioned, his hearing far than good enough to have heard her. "I'll fucking tidy it!" she yelled, grabbing the book she had been reading before a handful of litter and storming towards the exit. Jayce stepped in her path, a flash of fire burning out of her amber eyes as she glared up at him. "Stop," he told her calmly. "Let me out," she returned with an icy calm. She glared at him, and he glared back. "What is your problem? Who was I bothering?" she snapped, dropping everything in her hands and stepping backwards with a wide display of gestures. "You're stressed-" Jayce attempted.

"No shit. I can't be bothered to use magic to move you or get past you, so you've trapped me!" she yelled. "Who sent you after me?" she demanded. Jayce stepped to the side. "I came because I was worried," he partially lied. She huffed and stormed towards him, picking up her book. "Who sent you?" she demanded once more, glaring up at him. "Marisha said-" Wicke kicked the glass bottle by her foot, sending it sailing across the room before it shattered on the far wall. "That bitch! I'm going to kill her."

She immediately escaped through the small entrance and continued to storm onwards. Jayce followed, but as Wicke stopped outside of Marisha's room she didn't get a chance to knock as he wrapped a firm arm around her shoulder and guided her onwards. "Let me go!" she screamed, uselessly pushing back against him. "I'm not holding you," Jayce stated, guiding her forwards towards the stairs. She stopped fighting and stepped forwards out of his grip. "Keep going," he ordered, herding her to the main deck and out into the open air.

She stopped at the top, her face red and eyes brimming with tears. "I hate you!" He ignored her, calmly approaching her and gesturing towards the open water. "Throw your most powerful spell," he told her. She continued to glare at him. "Why?" she snapped. He didn't answer, continuing to gesture towards the open ocean and the various whirlpools around them. She let out a yell of frustration and stomped her foot before she began to chant and walked to the edge. Black tattoos covered her exposed skin from her chin downwards as she concentrated on her spell.

The waters in the distance began to swell, several whirlpools collapsing into themselves before forming into a far larger one. She swept her arms, tears

bubbling in her eyes, before she let out a scream of frustration and sent a colossal wave across the ocean. Immediately, as the wave broke apart, she dropped to her knees and began to cry, clutching her legs and burying her face into her chin. Bjorn glanced towards Jayce from the ship's wheel with a look of concern, but Jayce dismissed it with a flick of his hand, walking and sitting down next to her.

"I hate you..." she murmured from within her arms. She was wearing a simple shirt, and he could already see her getting cold, so he took off his brown canvas jacket and placed it over her shoulders. She didn't look up, and at the gentlest touch she retreated into herself, but she didn't take it off. She continued to cry, but eventually she loosened her grip on herself, so Jayce scooted a little closer to her. "Better?" he asked quietly.

"Fuck you!" she muttered adamantly. Jayce couldn't help but smile as he leant back and looked up at the grey skies. "You're so annoying," she followed up with. "I know," he returned. "But you still like me regardless. Ready to talk?" he asked. She tucked back into herself. "I take that as a no, fine – you can listen," he stated. "I have three ideas as to why you're like this today. Want to know them?" "No."

"Good. So tell me what's wrong so I can try to fix it," he told her. She mumbled something inaudible. "Come again?" he asked, leaning on his knee and looking at her. She sat up, her eyes and face red and face covered in snot. "You know why!" she exclaimed. He held out a handkerchief – she snatched it from him and blew her nose into it. "Ew!" they both said, before she immediately threw it at him. He was not happy as it landed in his lap, but he took it back and buried it in a pocket. "The Dungeon?" he questioned, as a faint smile broke through. She didn't answer immediately, but eventually a nod came in turn. "Why?" he asked. She shrugged. "Wicke..."

"I don't know! I hate it! I don't want to go there, and I don't want to leave!" she blurted. "Leave? Leave where?" he asked. She retreated back into herself, but this time Jayce didn't let her. He wrapped his long arm around her and pulled her towards him. She made herself into a ball and rolled into him, but this only worked in his favour as he straightened out his legs and positioned her, so she was facing the sky. With a scowl she untucked, laying her head onto his legs with a huff and facing away from him.

He smiled, placing a hand onto her head and running his fingers through her hair. He was long used to her antics and, as much as she was often treated like an adult, she was still a child. He felt the tears resume as they dripped onto his

leg. "Leave where?" he asked her softly. A few moments passed in silence, but eventually she spoke. "This. Home. You," came her answer. He nodded, not that she could see. It had long been a worry of hers, one that reemerged every-so-often.

"You're not going anywhere and we're not leaving you. We were always going to go back to the Dungeons – your sisters asked us to, asked you to. And you want to know what's at the bottom, don't you?" he pressed. She shook her head. "Wicke, you're the most curious, nosy, inquisitive person I know. You can't lie." "I'm not," she stated. "I don't want to go, I don't want to lose you." He sighed, leaning forwards and scooping her up with simple ease and placing her between his legs. She leant back into his chest as they sat together.

"Someday we will part. Someday you'll go home to your sisters," he stated. "Nuh-uh," she stated childishly. He smiled, resting his chin onto her head. "Yeah-uh," he said in turn. "It will happen someday, probably not for a while, but someday you'll outgrow us, outgrow me, and will search for your own crew – your own adventure - and you'll be better for it. An Archmage – the most powerful Wizard in all the world! But there is a long road between there and now. A lot still to do: five whole Dungeons, the Frontier and the Old World. There's still so much we have to do together, so don't worry. It's okay. We're not going anywhere."

She didn't answer, she simply played with her fingers and continued to lay into his chest. "This Dungeon is still such a mystery, who knows what we'll find." "It'll be dangerous. More dangerous than Strigon," she stated. He chuckled, shaking his head. "Maybe, but we'll face it as a crew. And we're far stronger than last time." Eventually she nodded, but he could still sense her uncertainty – her worry.

"I said I'd show you the world, and we still have that bottle to share together," he reassured. "So I can't get rid of you just yet, can I?" She elbowed him and he laughed. "You're not getting rid of me ever," she corrected, a small smile on her face. "Yeah, most likely." She shook her head and looked up to the grey skies and the few birds following the ship. She didn't want it to end, any of it, but even as she sat in his arms she couldn't help but feel the end of their adventure was coming. The Dungeon was just the first step.

The Maw otherwise held little for the Rising Aces other than a sparse misadventure or two, but with little reason not to, and Jayce's constant insistence, the group stopped at almost any and every island that looked interesting. Often

for little more than a quick meal and a drink. But eventually the whirlpools, the crags, and the various harpies and monsters local to region began to thin, replaced with an icy wind and snow-covered islands.

"Do we need to obtain the ice charts again?" Bjorn questioned, as the crew sat around the dinner table, looking vaguely in Falconer's directions. "No, you didn't have me last time. Wren and I shall provide the direction required to navigate the floes. We can head straight to our destination," Falconer reassured. Bjorn nodded appreciatively, glancing curiously towards the empty seat at the dinner table. "Where's Wicke?" he asked Jayce.

The door slammed open and Wicke stormed inside with her arms full of the latest newspaper and various letters. "There she is," Jayce stated obviously. Wicke attempted to place the items onto the dinner table, but Marisha intercepted her. "Absolutely not, over there, and then sit down and eat!" she ordered. Wicke dropped the pile onto the nearest sofa before she picked up the newspaper and turned it to the group. "He's gone!" she stated. Jayce's eyes widened as he stared at the front cover. "Strigon crosses Frontier!" it read.

Seize the Seas Tales: Ghost of the Night

"Just get me those assessments, now!" growled Rear-Admiral O'Lecky, as she sat in her office late in the evening. Her assistant bowed low, a simple man who she often wondered must have been dropped at least twice as an infant – likely on his head. She sighed as he shut the door, leaving her alone to her contemplation, and the colossal stack of papers concerning the serial killer prowling her domain. The killer had only targeted members of the Church or the Navy – with confirmed reports of encounters with Marines resulting in no conflict. Shara O'Lecky did not like it, she did not like it one bit – the whole thing stunk.

The door opened and her assistant returned with a small folder in his tiny hands. "Here you go, Admiral. Is there anything else?" he asked, a small and charming smile on his pretty little face. For all his faults, it was hard not to deny he was good-looking, well-mannered, and otherwise charming. She smiled back as she took it from him, her mood alleviated just ever-so-slightly. "No, that is all, Alasdair. You may go," she ordered, taking the folder in her slightly wrinkled hands and spinning her chair away from him. He nodded, walking to the door and flicking the light switch – as he always did – to darken the room apart from the lamp on the Rear-Admiral's desk. "Good night, Admiral," he told her, closing the door behind him.

She let out a sigh as she heard it click shut, spinning back around and placing the file amongst the rest before leaning on her arms across her desk. "Godsdammit," she grumbled, the long day of fatigue adding onto the weeks and months of failure. Another day had passed, and likely another ally would meet their end to this... creature prowling the Gardens. Initially she had been hopeful, full of promises and plans and strategies, but nothing had worked – and now she just felt and looked like a fool.

A yawn escaped her, and she forced herself upright, flipping open the file before grimacing as she looked at the photos of the latest crime scene. The victim looked little more than a dried-up husk – as if they had died years ago or had their very essence drained from their body. Most looked the same way – sometimes the killer seemed to take it more personally: with signs of physical assault and broken bones or even a stab wound. But the method almost always seemed to be the same – the victim was alone, and normally attacked from the front.

A small gust of wind ruffled some of the papers on her desk, the air cold. She frowned: she didn't remember the windows being open – and she normally kept them closed due to the constant noise of the surrounding military base. With a tired growl she stood up, shambling towards her large windows overlooking her base before she shut the open pane. She shook her head - perhaps the cleaner had left it open by accident.

But as she turned around, she knew immediately that wasn't the case. A figure stood in front of her, small and skinny, with a heavy cloak of fur and feathers across their body. A blue, black and white ceramic mask sat on their face – a pair of golden hazel eyes peering through. They seemed to glow, a fiery movement to them. "So you come to me?" Rear-Admiral O'Lecky asked with a soft chuckle. "Brave - and foolish."

In an instant the world shifted as a spectral spear burnt through her, a shattering of glass reaching the Admiral's ears and the rushing of wind moving past her as she fell through her windows. The night sky seemed to darken above her – the stars fading and her body cold. The figure stood above her in her office, those golden eyes watching her as she continued to fall – a bubbling of water filling her ears. "Oh," O'Lecky said quietly, before she hit the ground with a crack.

Chapter 131: Haunting Memories

It had been a long time since Jayce had last seen the Ice Floes, and a lot had changed since then, but the memories of his crew's first voyage still sat clear in his mind. He leant on the railing next to the ship's wheel, shivering inside his large coat as Bjorn steered the ship between iceberg after iceberg. It was an unnerving feeling: watching the colossal, island-sized pieces of ice surround the Stacked Hand. Each channel and path they took between the ice seemed no different than any other, but a single wrong choice could result in a dead-end between two enclosing ice walls. But he didn't really have to worry. A large shadow covered the ship as Wren and Falconer flew high in the sky above them, providing constant directions for the crew to follow.

"In all honesty, it's strange to be back here," Bjorn told him, as he made an adjustment to the ship's heading. Jayce turned to him. "How so?" he asked. "I don't know. It's just... strange to think about how we last left here. Who we left here with, and..." Bjorn chuckled, shaking his head. "Just how many of us there were back then." Jayce nodded in agreement, turning back to the main deck where Thalia and Wicke were building snowmen and RK was copying them, creating a snowmountain in comparison. "We really have grown," he stated.

"For the better, I like to think," added Bjorn. "The ship was too empty back then – heh – it still is a little bit now. A ship this size could have more than fifty, and we only have twelve. Fourteen with Wren and Little Witch." Jayce shook his head, a soft shudder passing through him as he imagined four more Thalia's and Wicke's. "Gods help us if that happens. Dinner is chaotic enough as it is," he stated. Bjorn laughed, nodding in agreement. "Perhaps someday. We could always start to take on hirelings. We have the funds, and more bodies would relieve some of the stress," he stated, leaning on the ship's wheel. "What stress?" Jayce countered. "The jobs you guys do is minimal. Tempest has automated most travel and the rest is just cleaning." Bjorn rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean."

The giant snowman began to topple before it fell over with a crash, much to Wicke's and Thalia's dismay. Jayce couldn't help but laugh, until he was caught in his open mouth with a snowball. Without hesitation, he leapt over the railing scooping up two handfuls of snow before going on the offensive against the two in front of him. Astris emerged from the deck a few minutes later, only to receive her own snowball to the back of the head. "You're on our team!" declared Wicke, much to Jayce's ire. "Three versus one seems unfair!" he protested, backing away

towards RK for protection as he was assaulted by a barrage of snowballs. A moment later his cover turned on him, dropping the snowmountain on top of him and completely burying him.

After shivering for the rest of the day, the baths had never felt so warm. They had docked the Stacked Hand in a small area where Falconer had confirmed no icebergs would travel through, and after dinner most of the crew had retreated to the baths. The others didn't stay long, and soon Jayce found himself alone in the hot waters. He floated in the salted bath, his eyes shut as he took deep breaths in and out.

His mind kept flicking back to the last time they had been in the Ice Floes, travelling aboard the Small Catch. It had just been the six of them: himself, Wicke, Bjorn, Vexx, Little Witch and Yuthura. He thought about his death, and his experience in the Abyss; his journey through the underworld and his following encounter with Abbot Song. He thought about his meeting with Yuthura and their journey north. He thought about his and Vexx's infiltration of the island of Frozen Branch, and the amount of blood that covered Vexx when he returned. Finally, his mind rested on the Northern Dungeon, and the monsters it contained. They had come very close to death on that day, and it had been Vexx that had saved them. But Vexx was no longer here. Jayce had to manage without him. He just hoped he could. Wicke was counting on him to.

The waters eventually cleared as the most northern landmass came into view. The Dungeon sat exactly as Jayce remembered it, a short walk away from the coast edge. It was the same as the others: a lone white tower, reaching high into the sky. The last time Jayce and the others had visited, a small encampment had been build around the tower, which had not stood up very well against them then. Jayce had been expecting it to have been improved upon, reinforced against another forced entry, but - even as they sailed some considerable distance away from it - he could tell it had been abandoned. There were no Navy ships in sight; there hadn't been since their arrival into the Ice Floes – even the Maw had had some.

Bjorn noticed it too, his eyes narrowing as he looked ahead at their destination. "Strange," he muttered, locking the wheel and folding his arms. He looked down towards Jayce. "Do you think it's been abandoned?" he questioned. Jayce nodded back, scanning the horizon using his Focus. "I see and sense nothing," he returned. "How odd," Bjorn stated. "But I guess this place must have been guarded against my people. There's no reason for anyone else to come up this

way, so what would be the point in protecting something no one was after?" "Are there tribes other than yours?" Jayce questioned. Bjorn nodded. "There are, but mine was the largest, and, from what I've heard and been told, they have left as well. We might just be alone here," he stated, adjusting the wheel and bringing the Stacked Hand closer. "Then that's perfect for us," Jayce stated. "All crew, get ready for landfall."

The wind wrapped around them as they marched through the ice and the snow towards the Dungeon, the tower stretching impossibly high in the sky with each step. It had felt less unnerving the last time for Jayce, but now he knew what they were facing, at least partially. A dozen passing conversations had put guesses of the number of floors between fifty to a hundred in number, but the cold and brutal fact of it all was that no one really knew the answer. Even professionals who made livings off of exploring the Dungeon in the West had never been beyond floor fifty. His heart raced in his chest, a nervous excitement only growing more and more.

The others too shared his nervousness. Some were more excited than others: Thalia couldn't hide her grin and Ordo kept asking Bjorn for details on the enemies he had encountered last time, but Zeta kept pausing in her step, and Wicke couldn't lift her eyes off the ground. "I don't want to do it, I don't want to do it, I don't want to do it..." Zeta chattered on loop, huddling within her coat. "It'll be fine," Marisha reassured. "Realistically we can't go that far in. We haven't got enough supplies for a long trip, and we need enough food and water to survive the two-way trip there and back, and our voyage afterwards. Some of the divers in Caedom said a trip to floor fifty could take weeks."

Zeta's eyes widened as she glanced towards Marisha, the pair unaware of the silent stream of tears freezing to Wicke's face and her fast and shallow breathing. "You're serious?" Zeta almost whispered. Marisha nodded, a cold shudder passing through her. "Does Jayce know?" Marisha nodded once more. "Yeah, he does - but you know what he's like when he sets his mind to something."

A whimper escaped Wicke's lips, a cold, pulsing beat reverberating through the snow and her bones as she forced herself to take another step after Marisha and Zeta, the pair slowly leaving her behind. "Tell me the truth Marisha, do you think this is a good idea - even if we had more food and water?" Zeta questioned, looking up at the snow-covered encampment and then at the tower as the pair passed through the gates. Marisha shook her head.

"If there is a Dungeon in the Capital then there is no way the Empire hasn't tried to send people in before. Trained soldiers, probably an Admiral or more, and we still know nothing. Fair enough that we've got Jayce, Thalia, Ordo, Astris... but I don't think the risk is worth it. Even if the Dungeon gifts us magical items as we go... fifty floors... each getting more and more dangerous. We could die and no one would find our bodies."

Zeta immediately turned away from her towards Jayce and the others as they stood outside of the colossal dark metal doors marking the entrance. "Jayce, I don't think this is a good idea. What about our supplies? Marisha says we don't have enough," Zeta chattered, drawing his attention. His eyes immediately snapped towards her with a look of frustration before passing onwards to Marisha. "We'll be fine," he stated, but his face immediately fell as he looked beyond them.

A soft thump hit the snow behind Zeta and Marisha as Jayce surged towards them. They turned, eyes wide as they saw Wicke face down in the snow, Jayce immediately rolling her over and resting her across his knees. "Wicke! Wicke, wake up! Wicke!" he cried, trying to wake her. Yuthura immediately moved him aside, checking her pulse before reaching into her bag and pulling out a strong-smelling pouch. Wicke bolted upright in an instant with a sharp gasp. "Wicke?" Yuthura questioned, only for Wicke to immediately fold over and clutch her ears. She gasped for air, her eyes wide and streaming. "Wicke, can you hear me? Wicke?"

Jayce stared in stunned shock as Wicke hyperventilated, her face white and eyes wide with fear. He followed her stare, her eyes locked onto the doors of the tower. "Damn," he muttered, stepping in-between. In an instant, the panic faded from her eyes, but the tension in her face remained as well as her hands over her ears. "Jayce," Yuthura stated, drawing his attention. He looked towards her, and she shook her head. "She's not ready." With a reluctant sigh, he nodded. "Okay. We're not going in! Everyone back to the shore."

Wicke sat alone in her room. She had asked to be alone - she couldn't deal with any more looks of disappointment. She had ruined it for the others and, most of all, she had let herself down. They were here for her, and she couldn't even get through the doors. With a sigh of frustration she curled into a ball, leaning against her wall and feeling the gentle rocking of the ship. Even as she knew they were sailing away from the tower, she couldn't get her thoughts out of her head. The feelings of entrapment and the fear of once again getting stuck with no way out.

They didn't have Vexx, he wouldn't rescue them if they had gotten trapped. Marisha and Zeta's conversation also echoed through her. And finally, Jayce's promise, and the fact that once the Dungeons were cleared she was going home. It all swirled into a soup of anxiety that she didn't know how to get rid of.

A few hours passed before she felt brave enough to go for dinner. Everyone had already eaten, so she had hoped she would be alone. Instead, Astris sat waiting for her. "Yo," she said, uncovering a small platter of food set aside for her. Wicke noted immediately that the tomatoes in the salad had been picked out for her. "I saved what I could, but you know what they're like," she stated, as Wicke sat down opposite her and pulled the platter of mostly cured foods towards her. "Thanks," Wicke said quietly. Astris nodded, clasping her hands together and resting them on the table.

"They sent you to keep an eye on me?" Wicke questioned suspiciously. Astris' eyes widened and she immediately shook her head. "What? No. I volunteered," she stated. "Great..." Wicke muttered, rolling her eyes and focusing on the food. "Look, I get you don't want to talk about it, but I just want to know one thing. What now?" she asked. Wicke looked up and frowned, Astris' eyes glowing slightly red in the darkness of the night and the low lamp light. "What?" "What next? If you don't want to go in the Dungeons that's fine, but this was for you... right? So what do you want us to do now?"

The world fell onto Wicke's shoulders in an instant. "I don't know!" she returned, shocked by the tune of the conversation. "That's fine," Astris stated. "Do you want us to go in for you? We can head to a nearby island, get some more supplies and then go in ourselves. You don't have to go anywhere close," she suggested. Wicke shook her head. "No. No way! What if something went wrong? It's my job, my sisters told me to do this. It's not on you guys."

Astris leant forwards looking directly at her. "Look, I don't know. We don't even know for sure if the fifth Dungeon is in the Imperial Palace," Wicke stammered. Astris nodded. "We do, I've seen it, but I get your point. That's the hardest to sort out so we should start there. Good idea. I'll speak to Jayce." Astris immediately stood up. "Wait, no, that's not what I-" Astris ignored her, but she paused at the door. "Trust me. You can't run away from these things forever. I'll buy you time, but you need to be ready for when we arrive at the Capital," Astris warned. She paused, waiting for Wicke to answer. "I-I... okay. I will."

"And how just exactly do you propose we do that?" Jayce questioned, the following morning. "Don't look at me," Astris returned, sitting in his chair and

leaning back as far as she could. Bjorn rested a finger on it, just enough to bring a flash of fear across her face. She glared at him, but he had already turned away. "We dealt with Strigon, perhaps that could be used as a leverage to get us access," he suggested. Jayce and Astris looked at each other, both questioning the idea before nodding in acceptance. "As best an idea as we have. Should probably send a letter first though. We'll try the Capital Dungeon, and then we'll come back."

It took a little while before they reached the highway leading towards the Capital, but before they entered the ocean currents, Bjorn suggested a short stop at the nearby trade hub for a resupply, just in case the letter they got back wasn't going to be a friendly invitation. Jayce and a few others found themselves in a small café within the giant floating barrel surrounded by piers. It was quiet, surprisingly so for likely the only stoppage point within the Ice Floes belonging to the Guild, but he wasn't overtly upset by that. A small stream of employees catered to his and his crews' every need.

As the others sat and chatted, Jayce couldn't help but let his attention wander. The place was almost identical to the service port he had stopped off at with Corina, Damian and Alara over two years prior. He smiled, glancing down to the area below where he had brawled with Kitty's crew. He let out a quiet chuckle, standing up. A few of his crew glanced towards him. "I'm going to get a cocktail," he told them, turning and heading to the bar.

A radio was playing in the distance, a familiar tune he recognised from his own ship: one of Zeta's countless songs that now sat in near constant cycle across the various Guild stations. His face fell slightly as he sat down, recognising which particular song it was: Wild Girl – the song she had written about Caelie. "What can I get you?" asked the barkeep, a soft-faced young woman with curly brown hair and dark skin, and a pair of bright green eyes. "Any chance you do a Green Seahorse?" he asked. She chuckled, nodding and beginning to make his drink. He glanced over towards the menu: the Green Seahorse was the Guild's signature drink and was prominently displayed. He shook his head - he couldn't believe he'd forgotten that.

He sat in silence, listening to Zeta's song with his head held low, but eventually it ended, and he received his drink. "Thanks," he told her. She nodded, taking his payment and the hefty tip along with it. "Anything else for you?" she asked. He shook his head and she nodded. "Let me know if you need anything, just ring the bell," she told him, taking off her apron and stepping away from the bar. He smiled in appreciation, and she left him alone with the radio.

A melody played, announcing the news and snapping him away from his thoughts. "In the latest news: the serial killings across the Gardens have continued to occur – but a recent string of attacks on Imperial buildings have been thought to be linked to these elusive murders. Confirmations are yet to come, but recent arson attacks have been appearing in similar locations as to some of the killings. The Navy has to yet to comment and there has been nothing but silence from Rear-Admiral O'Lecky's office. Current advice is to avoid the region altogether, but should you need to travel, or are currently in the area, it is recommended to stay inside and to not go out at night." Jayce shook his head. "Good thing we're not going that way..." he muttered, finishing his drink and standing up.

Caelie plagued his mind throughout the rest of the day, and the night that followed. It was only as he took out the photo album that had been made for him, and spent an hour looking through it, that his thoughts finally settled. He shut his eyes, laying back into his pillow. She was gone. She had been gone for a long time. "Maybe it's for the best that I don't forget her," he muttered. "How could I?" he asked. He shook his head and let out a sigh. "I miss you. I just hope wherever you are that you're happy. Goodnight, Caelie."

To his surprise he slept in. No one woke him, and by the time he finally stepped out into the cold winter air, the Stacked Hand had begun to ride the currents towards the Capital. "Afternoon," Bjorn stated, drawing his attention. Jayce let out a yawn and nodded to him. "Why'd you let me sleep?" he asked. Bjorn shrugged, looking off into the horizon. "Something just told me you needed some time to yourself. Was I wrong?" Jayce shook his head, stepping past his friend and placing a hand on his shoulder. "No. Thanks."

Jayce headed into the living quarters, the place mostly empty apart from Marisha and Zeta. He grabbed some coffee and some fruit before sitting down on the sofa next to the fire. They left him be, other than a brief hello, and he appreciated it. Eventually they left and he finished his belated breakfast, but as he sat up he heard a loud cry of a bird above – the Guild albatross making its presence known. The door opened and Bjorn strolled in, taking a seat on the sofa opposite Jayce and laying down. "All good?" Jayce questioned. Bjorn thought for a moment, before a smile spread across his face. "You know what? I think I am. I think, for the first time in a while, I actually am. Life is good, and I think the worst is behind us--"

The door slammed open and Wicke raced in, her eyes wide and face red. Letters were falling from her hands as she ran towards them. "You're dropping-" Jayce stated, only for a newspaper to be thrust into his face. "Woah, what's this?" "Look!" she ordered. He leant back, taking it from her and holding it properly. "Navy Admiral Murdered!" read the headline. "Rear-Admiral Shara O'Lecky was assassinated in her office earlier this week. Reports state a masked figure entered her room through her window and killed her in a surprise attack."

Jayce frowned, looking up at Wicke, confused by her expression of panic. "Read!" she yelled. "Relax," he told her, looking back down, only for his eyes to widen as he stared at the printed photo – the newspaper slipping from his fingers. "Jayce?" Bjorn questioned, as Jayce's heart stopped in his chest. He opened and closed his mouth, unable to articulate any words as he held his head in horror. "By the ancestors!" Bjorn stated, standing up and holding up the page. A small group stood in the photo, each holding flaming bottles and throwing them at nearby Navy buildings. All apart from one member who stood in the front, looking directly at whoever took the photo.

They were a smallish figure, lean and thin, a girl or teenage boy, with a fur and feather cloak across their back, and a blue, black and white ceramic mask that Jayce himself had helped to paint. A mask that had previously belonged to Vexx. A mask that had last belonged to Caelie.

Seize the Seas Tales: High Priority Target

Sweat rolled down Alara's face, dripping from her chin onto her collarbone before flowing down her arm, across her hand and then onto her glaive. The steady droplet continued to build on the point of her blade, her eyes shut in deep concentration, in deep Focus, before finally it fell. She moved in an instant, sensing the minute change in her glaive, catching the droplet and flicking it up into the air using the cold metal of her weapon. She leant into it, pivoting the large pole around her body in an instant before cutting through the falling droplet, a moment before it touched the floor of her private training room.

She was fast, far faster than she had ever been before – more precise and more powerful as well, but she still couldn't imagine herself anywhere near to Jayce. His strength seemed unfathomable to her – the gap between them eternally large, and indigestible. She shook her head - that couldn't remain true, the meeting she had as consequence for their encounter on the Rose had made that clear. Although not to blame for the loss of life, that meeting had been an interrogation

for all present. A questioning into loyalties and the New Era's capability when encountering multiple Pirate Lords.

"Dammit," she muttered, her mind slipping and her Focus fading. She had held it for almost an hour - a veritable marathon, but an exercise in composure. A knock came at the sliding doors marking the entrance to the dojo - a familiar face peering at her with curiosity. "Still training?" Riley questioned, taking off her boots and entering the hall. "Trying to - shouldn't you be as well?" Alara responded, entering back into her pose: her left leg extended forwards and straight, her right slightly bent, and her glaive positioned across her body like she was an archer.

"Do you even know what time it is?" Riley responded, walking over to a nearby bench and picking up the towel sat upon it before throwing it in Alara's direction. Alara cut it in half, before swearing and picking up the pieces. "It's almost midnight," Riley clarified, leaning back and looking up at the rooftop windows - the stars twinkling above. "Already?" Alara questioned, before letting out a sigh and separating her glaive into two halves.

"Any progress?" Riley asked, walking to the door as Alara grabbed her things. "A little, but I just don't see how he does it. It's not about stamina, I just can't seem to break through that ceiling. I'm stuck at Advanced. You?" Alara asked, as they stepped out into the halls of the Marine base they had been assigned to. "My orders were clear. My designation given and specialist role confirmed," Riley stated. Alara rolled her eyes. A medal had been given almost exclusively to Riley for defeating the colossus - the dead had also received their own, but it had just been to silence all talk of the entire encounter. "Well, Sniper, apart from specialist equipment and permissions, any actual progress?" Alara pressed. Riley shook her head. "So we are all doomed to be second best then..."

They returned to the quarters that had been provided for Alara and her main Officers, a rather bored looking Marine standing outside, along with the usual guards. She perked up immediately upon seeing Alara. "Commander, there you are. New orders," she stated, handing Alara a sealed document. Alara nodded, dismissing her before she immediately opened it as Riley open the door for her. "Shit..." Alara muttered, waiting for the door to close before looking towards Riley. "That bad, huh?"

"We ship out immediately. Rear-Admiral O'Lecky was murdered and we're to hunt down the culprit," Alara stated, holding up the image of a small figure clad in a fur and feather cloak with a blue, white and black mask on their face.

Chapter 132: Left Behind

"I need all crew to make their way to the main deck immediately," Jayce ordered, as he paced back and forth in the living quarters. "Woah, Jayce, hang on – I know what you're thinking, but there's no way it's her," Bjorn stated, setting the newspaper down – Wicke immediately picked it back up analysing every millimetre of the photo. Jayce turned on Bjorn, his eyes wide and heart racing as an uncontrollable tsunami of guilt and hope battered his mind. "We saw her die," Bjorn stated.

The truth was undeniable: they had watched Caelie die. Paladin Sentinel Baudricourt crushed her neck in front of them – an image that remained tattooed in the mind of every crew member that had been there. Everything from the way her arms had fallen limp, to the surprised look in her eyes before they glazed over, to her final whisper: "Run." Jayce, Bjorn and Wicke relived it all in a moment, each trying to come up with any hope that it was actually her. "It has to be," Jayce stated, his hope ignited and now unable to dwindle. "It can't be," Bjorn returned. "Kitty said she died and came back. I did as well," Jayce stated, his heart in his throat. "You didn't die. Not really, and not in the same way. I want to believe it's her, truly, but we can't just pretend that we didn't see Baudricourt kill her."

The living quarters door opened, and Marisha peeked inside with a look of curiosity. "You summoned?" she questioned towards Jayce, the others stood outside in the snow behind her. He nodded, looking back to Bjorn and Wicke. "I'm not going to pretend I don't want it to be true. I couldn't wish for anything more, and I know it's a longshot. But if it is her, then that means we left her behind, on her own, for more than a year. Regardless of if it is her, I can't leave that mystery alone, and I couldn't live with the idea that we didn't find out the answer. If she survived somehow, or died and came back a Demon, it is our responsibility to get our Cabin Girl back or to at least stop whoever is mimicking her." Marisha eye widened as Wicke walked over and passed the newspaper to her. "Just don't get your hopes up," Bjorn warned.

A stunned silence fell across the group, Falconer observing with a sharp glare of surprise from his position behind the wheel. "Who is this Caelie?" Thalia questioned, as the rest of the crew other than Astris wrestled with their thoughts. "She used to be in the crew," Astris responded, watching as the newspaper was passed around. "She died, along with another member," Bjorn added. Thalia

frowned, thinking to herself for a moment. "Ah, those two on the board, of course."

Eyes turned towards Jayce expectantly, all looking for answers. He shook his head, he didn't have any. "Where was the location?" Falconer questioned from above. "It says the Gardens," stated Zeta, an unusual look of determination on her face. "We're heading there, right? To get her back?" she questioned. Jayce nodded. "We can't be certain it is her," Bjorn rationalised, spotting the flicker of hope spreading across the group. "Bjorn is right," Ordo stated. "It has been a long time. I know what she meant to you all, but surely she would have contacted you - any of you."

"Caelie was not exactly what you'd call savvy with tech or social customs," Yuthura stated. "I agree she could of, but... she's been on a killing spree. Sorry, I don't know what else to call it. Countless members of the Church and even a Navy Rear-Admiral. If it is her, not to say it is, she likely hid for a while to heal from her injuries and has since then been taking systematic revenge for their actions against us. No Marine or civilian casualties, only Church, only Navy."

Jayce caught Astris' eyes as she stood reading his expression. "Yeah, yeah, I know it's not good. I get it. Even if it is her she's... not the same as she was. But I can't blame her. I felt the same and I wasn't even killed... Anyway, I called us together to make a decision," Jayce stated, all eyes looking towards him. "Bjorn is right, and - I hate that I have to say it - but there is a chance this is just someone who took her things off her corpse. There is a real chance that Caelie is..."

"That Caelie died," he finished. "But now there is a real chance that she is still alive, or that she came back in the same way Kitty did. I never found her soul in the afterlife, like I did Xander's. We never got the chance to bury her, but now we have a chance for certain to ensure that her memory is not soiled by an imposter, and a real chance to bring her home. I'm not asking any of you to put that hope in your hearts, because I know what the cost will be if she's truly gone. I want to find her, I want to find the truth. And-"

"You're not honestly thinking any of us would be against this?" Marisha interrupted. Jayce looked towards Bjorn. "You've said what I needed you to. It might not be her, but if it is, then we're getting her back," Bjorn stated. "Our heading won't change much," Falconer declared. "The Capital is still the fastest route, but I will plan our journey to the Gardens." Jayce nodded in appreciation. "The world will be hunting her," Ordo warned. "She killed an

Admiral, that's not a small deal. We may not have long to find her." Jayce nodded. "So let's get moving. Use everything we have and bring her home."

Even with the Stacked Hand moving as fast as it could – using magic and the highway – Jayce couldn't help but feel time running out. Each passing day brought another news report reassuring the Imperial public of the efforts being made to capture the terrorist group. Almost every other day came a report of another attack – another murder, arson or bombing. The entire situation felt wrong in Jayce's mind, and it was his responsibility to fix it, before it was too late.

Throughout the entire accelerated journey to the Gardens, Jayce and his crew tried everything in their power to confirm it was Caelie. Marisha yielded nothing through her transceiver, in any Imperial or Guild channels. Wicke's spying magic yielded no results – her attempts blocked by the masked leader's own willpower and awareness. And Jayce got no response from his parents, and nothing back from Alara.

He sat in the living quarters as Ordo and Astris ran through the plan to the entire crew. His eyes sat focused on the floor, his mind wandering once again to the day he had lost her. He had analysed every memory of it, every second he could remember as he tried to picture her supposed end over and over again. She had died, but the report at the time had only said that one body had been recovered. That had to have been Xander's.

"Jayce?" questioned Astris, snapping him out of his mind. He looked towards her, bags under his eyes and dark shadows across his face. "Sorry, go on," he stated, glancing towards the others as they stared at him. "We need you awake Captain, maybe we should stop the night shifts now that we're here," Ordo suggested. Jayce's face hardened. "No, now it's all the more important that we don't. Carry on," he ordered.

"Okay, as we were saying. This... terrorist group is mobile and discrete, they seem to appear from nowhere and disappear with the planning of a highly organised militia. From what information we've stolen, there's at least six members along with the leader. A small crew who we still know nothing about," Astris repeated. "Vanathur and the Marines have been ordered to intervene and to hunt them down," Ordo warned. Jayce immediately perked up, confused as to where the information had come from. "I haven't heard anything..." he stated.

"You haven't, I have," Ordo stated, folding his arms. "Seeing how important this was to you I reached out to the Old Dogs – well, those still alive." Jayce read

Ordo's face, an unusual reservation coming through: he was hiding something. "They are currently staying away, but they all still have contacts just like I do," he stated. "Originally it was just the Navy New Era dispatched, but Vanathur was tacked onto the mission amongst a small squad of other Marine Commanders and Captains – orders came from Admiral Exarga's office."

"She knows too then," Jayce muttered, nodding in appreciation but still sensing something further to the story. Astris was the only one who seemed to notice his thoughts. "With the Empire on full search and experienced hunters like Vanathur on the prowl, it is likely only a matter of time before this group is found. As such, we should be looking at where this group will hit next, rather than where they've been," Ordo stated.

"They have a history of targeting the Church and Navy – likely in an act of revenge for the assault on Sunflower Island," Astris clarified, looking towards Wicke who stood up and approached. Wicke held up a large map of the Gardens archipelago with countless scribbles marking at least fifty islands. "Wicke has searched for any mentions of targeted attacks, and quite frankly it is terrifying how this group has managed to be so successful."

"The latest attack was here, at Poppy Hills," Wicke stated. "There is a sizeable cathedral on an island right next to it – Delphinium Spire. This is where the next attack will be, I'm sure of it." Ordo, Wicke, and Astris all looked at Jayce. "If you've figured that out, then surely the Church have as well." Wicke nodded. "The targeting is well known. Paladins have been dispatched across the archipelago and a mass is being held for a visit from a Cardinal. It's quite literally too good of an opportunity for an attack, an obvious trap and a show of force." "Then let's go before it's too late," Jayce ordered.

Jayce struggled to sleep once again, his mind bombarded by everything that had come before and all of the potential things that could go wrong before he even had a chance to see her. He was now truly certain it was Caelie. It had to be her. It could only be her. He sat on his bed in the darkness, hugging his legs as he stared out into the storm surrounding the ship – the rocking of the ship hard and the lightning illuminating the complete darkness with sharp flashes of purple. In a flash the morning came. He wasn't certain if he had slept, but he didn't care – he was ready to fight. Ready to save Caelie. Ready to bring his Cabin Girl back home.

He stood next to the ship's wheel for almost the entire morning - only leaving for a short breakfast - that he initially hardly touched - before it was all but shoved

down his throat by Bjorn. "We have hours to go, don't be a fool or you're not leaving the ship," Bjorn threatened, holding Jayce's plate close to his face as he tried to leave the room. Jayce felt hungry, but he had no appetite – not that it mattered to Bjorn. With his plate cleared to Bjorn's and Marisha's content Jayce returned to his post – the eyes of his crew remaining on him for every second of that morning.

"I've never seen this side of him before," Astris stated, as she leant against the mast of the ship wrapped in a coat to protect against the cold autumn air. "Perhaps you just never looked, because he was the exact same with you," Marisha stated, practicing some weapon drills with her spear. Astris shook her head in disbelief. "He wasn't... was he?" she questioned. Marisha turned her head and raised her eyebrow. "Astris, he fought for you against us. Even when he only had his hope that it would work out to back him up. He was right, and we're better for it, but at the time there was nothing more than his stubborn faith in you to believe in. It's who he is: a big idiot with a heart that cares and a stubbornness to face the world on a whim."

Astris looked back towards him, his face a stone wall as he stared ahead. "What will happen if he's wrong?" Astris asked. Marisha shook her head. "Then the one thing that has been holding him back from annihilating the Church will be gone, and with it so will that heart of his. Something changed when Caelie and Xander died, an anger emerged through the sadness – something... indescribable and infectious. You sealed it away, gave him something to believe in, but if it isn't Caelie under that mask – or worse, it is and we can't save her – then it's on us to stop Jayce. Because if we don't then he will seek revenge, and he'll be the one to ignite a war."

Astris looked down, shaking her head as she tried to grapple with the idea that Jayce could do that. "You know him better than me, but I can't see that," Astris stated. "I get it, but it wasn't me who said this – it was Yuthura. She's the one who thinks that is what is coming, along with Falconer." Astris frowned. "When was this discussed?" she asked. Marisha shook her head and shrugged. "No clue. Yuthura just asked me not to involve the Guild if it does happen. If Jayce decides to destroy the Church – regardless of the consequences – who on this ship would actually oppose it?"

Astris looked up, letting out a long sigh. "I'm the only one, aren't I?" she asked. "Yeah, you are. I owe Jayce everything. He's given me a chance to... fix my past. So if he asks me to, I will probably burn the world with him. Thalia and Ordo

wouldn't hesitate, neither would Wicke. Falconer's loyalty to us would overrule his morality, and it wouldn't take much to convince him that the Church is damaging the world – they already corrupted a Leyline at least once. Bjorn has no love of the Church and the Church paralysed Zeta's sister," Marisha explained. "Commander Vao..." Astris muttered. Marisha stopped there, but the point was clear.

The pair looked at each other. "If it came to it, would you try to stop us?" Marisha asked. Astris crossed her arms and looked down, she didn't know what to think. There had been whispers of war for years now and the idea that she would be one of the people to start it brought nothing but fear to her mind. She looked back to Jayce – she owed him everything that she was, he had believed in her when no-one else would. When she had lost faith, even in herself, he had been there for her. She shook her head. "I was a Marine. I guess I still am in some ways, and I still dream of going home, but I can't ignore everything I've seen. The Church is a cancer that should only be removed through democracy and the Emperor's wisdom, but if it comes to it and he asks me to – I will burn the cancer away with you all, regardless of who stands in our way."

A hint of smoke floated on the wind, causing Astris to frown and interrupt Marisha before she could respond. "What's wrong?" Marisha asked, as Astris turned and looked ahead. Far on the horizon, barely in view, was a tiny island - its skies covered in smoke. "Jayce!" Astris called out, as Marisha gasped. "I see it," he acknowledged. "I want magic on the sails, we're too late to stop it, but hopefully not too late to save them."

The island was larger than Jayce had expected, but he didn't have time to care or to analyse it. An orange haze covered the entirety of Delphinium Spire, with large fires painting the entirety of its huge cathedral in a bright amber. Countless ships and boats were departing the island as fast as they could, all apart from a quartet of Navy and Marine ships docked in and around the main port. "Falconer to the skies. Wicke, Bjorn and myself. Zeta, Ordo and Thalia. Yuthura, Marisha, and Astris. Tempest and RK will stay in the ship, which I'll keep in its container," Jayce ordered as his crew assembled on the main deck, as Bjorn brought them in to port. "Find her, and let the others know. Do not let anything stop you!" Jayce ordered. "Aye Captain," responded his crew.

Without hesitation they departed, the other two trios leaving ahead of Jayce as he contained the Stacked Hand within its container. As he turned back, he found Bjorn and Wicke both looking at him with expressions of concern. "What?" he

snapped. "Jayce..." Wicke said softly. He shook his head and stepped forwards. "Now is not the time!" he yelled. Bjorn caught his shoulder with his hand, forcing Jayce to stop. "Emotions will not bring her back. Focus your mind or you'll make mistakes," Bjorn warned. Jayce wanted to scream but he knew Bjorn was right. He tried to take a deep breath, but the stench of the smoke was overpowering. A moment passed and he began to feel his racing heart in his chest, his emotions settling. "Okay," he told Bjorn, meeting his gaze and nodding. "You're right." "Of course I am, you've told me the same enough times before. Let's get moving."

They raced through the streets, passing panicked civilians and both Navy and Marines trying to regain control. "It's the Rising Aces!" cried a voice as they passed. "They'll save us!" came another, but Jayce blocked them both out. "I guess not everyone thinks we're bad anymore," Wicke stated as they ran. Bjorn nodded in bemused agreement. "We're heading to the cathedral," Jayce warned across the communicators.

They rounded a corner just as the spires of the cathedral began to collapse, a wall of dust and smoke obscuring the large square surrounding it and blasting towards them. "Jayce!" Bjorn called out, grabbing Wicke and pulling her back behind cover as the blast consumed him. Jayce covered his eyes, walking forwards into the dust and debris. His foot caught something hard and metal, the smoke thinning just enough for him to recognise a metal helmet. He nudged it and it came loose, a fine white powder falling out from inside the empty helmet.

He carried on forwards, looking around in desperation for any signs of Caelie. The air stung his eyes and choked his lungs but still he pushed forwards. "Help!" came a weak voice from somewhere close. Jayce entered into Focus, spotting a faint haze of body underneath some rubble. He surged forwards without hesitation, grabbing chunks of rock and tossing it aside until a hand appeared, and then an arm, and then a face of woman covered in metal armour: a Paladin Knight. Her eyes widened as she saw him, the dust and smoke still thick around them. "You're..."

He ignored her, reaching under her arms and pulling her free. He readjusted his grip, carrying her in his arms to an area he believed free from any danger. "What happened?" Jayce demanded, leaning her against the wall of a house before handing her a healing potion. She glared at him, a mixture of frustration and relief covering her face. Without hesitation Jayce transformed Sola into a curved dagger, stabbing the blade into the rock next to her head. "What – happened?" he questioned. "I won't–"

"Where's the girl with the mask?" Jayce prompted. A spark of recognition appeared in her brown eyes, enough to confirm her presence at the least. "I-I don't know. Which one?" asked the Knight, a quick realisation that Jayce wasn't interested in her or the Church passing through her mind, followed by the further realisation that the threat from Jayce was genuine. "How many were there?" The Knight shook her head. "I don't know, but we killed one... they killed themselves when we discovered their bomb. The others came after, they tried to assassinate Cardinal Gregory."

"How long ago was this?" The Knight shook her head again. Jayce pulled Sola out of the wall, standing up from his looming position over her. "Get out of here and find someone to treat your lungs, the Navy are still docked," he warned, racing away from her. She called something after him, a begrudged thanks of some kind, but Jayce ignored it. The cathedral was a graveyard of those caught in the bombing or killed in the brawl afterwards, but the sounds of gunfire in the distance indicated it wasn't over yet.

Jayce looked around as he ran, but he couldn't see Bjorn or Wicke. "I'm heading towards the fighting," he called out, reaching for his communicator only to frown as he couldn't find it. "Dammit!" he swore. "She must have snatched it," he realised, scowling as he leapt and scaled a wall before leaping further onto the roof of a large row of houses. The smoke continued to burn his insides as he ran, a veil covering the entire island and blocking out the bright sun above, but - in seemingly an instant - it cleared as he entered a pocket in the haze.

Jayce dropped from the rooftop onto the cobblestone below, a large courtyard of a local Navy base stretching before him. The change felt almost ethereal, the sounds of violence and panic fading as he stood up and stared ahead in stunned shock. The sun was warm and bright, and the previously grey buildings around him were a clean and fresh white. A gentle fountain sat in the centre of the courtyard, water rolling down the arms of a dancing woman.

A chittering pain pierced his mind, breaking the illusion as he found a masked figure stood in front of him. She was small and skinny, wearing a ragged tank top and baggy trousers, a glow covering her throat and mouth, in a manner similar to Zeta's magic. A squadron of Marines lay on the floor, all writhing and clutching their heads as another masked figure - one far larger and more muscular - walked around slitting the throats of any Navy or Church caught within the illusion with a jagged piece of metal. "Stop!" Jayce yelled out, drawing the attention of both of them.

Their masks were almost identical to the design of Caelie's, but Jayce could see the imperfections from using a different material or process as to however Vexx's mask had been made; he could see the straps used to keep them on, something Vexx's mask had not needed. The colours were deliberately different: one green, the other red. "You are not invited!" declared the larger figure, pulling his blade free from his latest victim. Jayce surged forwards in an impossibly fast blur, slamming full force into his large body and sending him flying backwards across the courtyard into the shattered remains of the statue.

He then rounded on the other figure, grabbing her neck before she could react. "Where's Caelie?" he growled. She went limp in his arms, passing out from fright. He dropped her to the floor, rounding back on the other figure as he groaned and slowly got back up. The Navy building behind them burst into flames, another pair of masked figures emerging from inside in an almost celebratory manner. They immediately froze as they spotted Jayce and their fallen friend.

"Where is she?" he roared, commanding Luna into a sword and hovering the blade over the chest of the passed-out girl. A blue ring surrounded the body before a portal opened underneath her and she fell through the ground, dropping into the arms of the big masked figure. Another portal appeared, a similarly small figure as to the Mage stepping through. The group's leader was clearly a young girl. She had a large fur and feather cloak over her shoulders, a small and petite frame but with a somewhat muscular body. A more detailed mask covered her face: a flat blank face, with a flat nose and mouth caved into the ceramic. It sat on her face without straps. She looked at her crew, not paying him any attention.

"Caelie!" Jayce cried. She flinched, her head snapping towards him. Even through the haze he could see her eyes through the mask, a familiar hazel mixed with an unfamiliar gold. He stepped towards her, but two of the members of her group lit and threw a pair of glass bottles towards him. The bottles shattered, unleashing a wave of fire that forced him to look away. When he looked back, she was gone. "Caelie! Caelie!" Jayce screamed.

By the time Bjorn and the others found him, Jayce's voice had faded into little more than a worn gargle. "We need to go," Bjorn told him, eventually forcing his arms around him and dragging him backwards as Jayce continued to fight a battle he had already lost. "She's not here!" Bjorn yelled. Jayce tried to answer, but nothing came out. "Cae..." he whispered, before falling limp as his body and spirit gave out.

Seize the Seas Tales: Departure

“Leave it be,” scolded Corina Liu, as she and Damian sat in small café on the Isle of Sanctity. “It hurts,” Damian complained as he prodded a stitched cut on his forearm. “It’s only going to continue to hurt the more you touch it – regardless, I hope you’ve learnt a valuable lesson from it,” she continued, picking up her coffee and staring out towards the djinn city floating over the Capital, hidden within a giant cloud. “Yeah, don’t listen to you whilst fighting...” Damian muttered, immediately receiving a sharp kick in the shin in turn.

Corina shook her head as he scowled - for a boy with as much muscle as he had he had the sensitivity of a tiny child - he still had a lot to learn, but time was running out. Jayce was moving far faster than she had anticipated and the world was changing as a result of it. “Ow!” Damian whined, as he poked the stitching once more. She turned on him, but a loud thunderous roar deafened them both, the pair immediately looking back towards the Capital as the cloud above began to move, flying quickly towards the south. “What’s going on?” Damian asked, as other patrons all stared at the skies. “The end...” Corina muttered. “The end is in sight and the war has begun.”

Chapter 133: But Not Forgotten

Jayce awoke in the infirmary with a headache and an immediate feeling of confusion. The bed was far from comfortable but the blankets and pillows he had been given were soft and excessive. He was wearing fresh clothes and a drip had been hooked up to his arm. "Oh Gods..." he muttered, clutching his head as he sat up, before noticing Falconer sat by the door. "It is good to see you awake, Captain," he stated with a gentle and reassuring smile. Jayce did not feel reassured. "What happened? How long was I out?" Jayce immediately questioned.

Falconer got to his feet and stepped forwards, holding his hand out in caution as Jayce reached for the drip embedded within his arm. "Easy Jayce," he said. Jayce met his eyes, the golden crosses on Falconer's green eyes boring into him. "It has been four-" Jayce yanked the tube out of his arm and immediately tried to stand. "Four days! Why didn't Yuthura wake me?" Jayce demanded. Falconer placed a firm hand on his shoulder, forcing Jayce back down onto the bed as the world span around him. "You exhausted yourself – mentally, physically, and spiritually. You needed the rest, regardless of whether or not you agree." "Still-"

Falconer shook his head. "My friend, no. This is no discussion, as you could not make the choice yourself. You wore yourself out, Captain. Now, tell me. Was it her?" Falconer asked, his arm still locked onto Jayce's shoulder. Jayce thought back to his encounter outside of the Navy base. He pictured the mask that had once belonged to Caelie and the hazel and gold eyes he had seen behind them. He nodded. "Yes. It was her. I'm certain it was." Falconer released his grip. "Then it was worth it. Lean on me, and let us discuss with the others what comes next. We will bring her home."

"Ow!" Jayce yelped, as Yuthura injected him with a needle - his headache breaking and a feeling of invigoration spreading through his body. "Don't be a baby," she scolded, the others all looking towards her with poorly veiled expressions of fear. "So, you're sure it was her?" Bjorn questioned, as he sat in his usual seat around the living quarters table, with his arms crossed and chin on his chest. Jayce nodded. "She reacted to me calling out to her. It was her, I know it."

"Just her? No Demon?" Astris questioned. Jayce shrugged, his mind uncertain. "Honestly, I don't know. The more I think about... maybe. She could create portals, but I could see that being her magic. Her eyes... I don't know – it doesn't

matter. What does matter is it was her, I'm sure of it. So, what did I miss?" Jayce questioned. Astris and Bjorn looked at each other. "Not much, but the teleporting explains all of it. Wicke, is that something you'd expect in a Shaman?" Bjorn stated. Wicke shrugged. "Helpful..." muttered Zeta, getting a glare from Wicke.

"That doesn't matter right now," Jayce inserted. "Are we sailing, and where to?" "After their last attack it's likely that they'll lay low for a while. Hide somewhere and prepare for another go, but that's presuming they're sensible," Ordo stated. "They're not going to be sensible," Astris added. Ordo nodded in agreement. "They just lost a member of their group, they'll be even angrier, and knowing we're after them will add a pressure to the other members. They wouldn't want to lose their leader, after all. And we are most definitely going to take her away."

Jayce's eyes widened as he noticed a newspaper deliberately placed onto the table. Astris smiled to herself as she spotted his realisation. "They're going to attack the Capital," Jayce stated. Ordo nodded in agreement, stepping forwards and picking up the paper. "The Church have just finished a lighthouse they were building. They claim it's to 'illuminate the darkness of the current era' – it's nothing special, it's just a pretty lighthouse, but its proximity and size to the Church itself is a literal flame for these moths to fly into. It's no coincidence this was published now. The lighthouse had already finished construction when we passed the Capital. It's a trap," Ordo stated. The crew looked towards Jayce. "I presume we're already sailing in that direction?" he asked Bjorn. Bjorn nodded. "Of course we are. What do you take us for?"

It took only a few days to arrive at the Capital, and this time there was no questioning whether or not they would be welcome. Jayce had received a response about his request for entry into the Dungeon: it was a firm no, along with a not-so-subtle warning about pushing his luck. They docked the Stacked Hand, immediately containing the ship in its container before hurrying off into the city. "Stay hidden," Jayce instructed to Falconer through his new communicator, watching Wren's silhouette in the sunlight above. "Aye Captain," came the usual response.

Jayce turned to the others, all dressed in cloaks and keeping to the edges of the main street. Bjorn stuck out like a sore thumb, but even more so than usual. Jayce frowned as he led the way through the Isle of Majesty. The bustling streets looked sullen and grey, busy but without any life. Golems stood still on every corner, towering and commanding in stature and presence but their plain faces devoid

of feeling. Even the Paladins on patrol seemed on edge, deliberately giving the stone soldiers wide berths as they marched through the city.

Jayce rounded a corner, only to freeze and stare in shock. The Beast's Pen was boarded up, its doors closed with no life inside. "By the ancestors..." Bjorn muttered, stepping forwards and staring at the markings that had been painted on the wooden boards covering the cracked and broken windows of the old inn. "Baned," it read blankly in red. He shook his head and looked back at Jayce. "What's happened to this city?" he asked. Jayce didn't know.

"So much for that idea," Jayce stated, turning to his crew and thinking quickly. "Let's split up into two teams. Caelie's group must be here somewhere. They'll need time to place the bombs and that means a distraction. Most likely in the Citadel on the Isle of Duty. Ordo, Yuthura, Bjorn and Wicke, you head that way. Marisha, Thalia, and Zeta will come with me. Astris, I'm giving you the Stacked Hand. Find somewhere high to keep an eye and ear out. If we're wrong on their target, head to the group furthest away and bring the ship around for a pickup. Good luck."

"It's all changed," Zeta muttered, as they walked through the streets towards the Isle of Sanctity. Jayce nodded in agreement, his eyes glancing around for any Baned other than those in military uniform. He faltered as he stood at the end of the island crossing. "What's wrong?" Marisha asked quietly, stepping next to him as Thalia and Zeta carried on without noticing. "It really is different. It's... never mind. Don't worry."

Marisha looked around, before she looked back up at him with a soft and gentle smile. "No, a lot has changed – and definitely for the worse - but that's not it. Not really. The djinn castle has gone, so have the baned, and now there's all these golems – we're after Caelie, someone we thought we lost. Where is your mind?" she prompted. Jayce shook his head, and she grabbed his hand. "Think," she prompted again. He thought for a moment, before he let out a sigh and stepped forwards.

"It feels like only a day ago that Wicke and I arrived here, that we crossed this bridge to buy clothes and then saw the Church for what it really was. And in all that time, nothing has gotten better. I once told myself that the next time I crossed this bridge it would be to make things right. To avenge Xander and Caelie." "But things change, right? Not to say that anger was misplaced but – well – she's our priority; bringing Caelie home matters more than revenge, right?" Marisha asked. Jayce smiled and nodded.

"Yeah, I guess. I just... I just don't really know what our – my - priorities are anymore. I feel so tired and angry, and I-I don't want to feel that way. I don't want to be some juggernaut that tramples foes and kills and slaughters any who stand in his way, but... if a Sentinel stands in front of me, tries to stop us from getting Caelie back, I don't know if I could stop myself. And I just get this feeling like I'm on some edge, that I'm one bad day away from becoming the bad guy. And that if I damn myself, I damn all of you. My crew, my friends, my..."

"Family," she concluded. He nodded. "You know, it's funny because I think we've all felt that way at some point – at least, I have." She chuckled and brushed her hair behind her ear. "I'm terrified of becoming my mother. Becoming the snake that poisons and manipulates long before feeding. Because I am her. Or at least she was me - I think - at some point a long time ago. But, she didn't have you. And you're right, sometimes I do see a 'Pirate Lord' before me – a juggernaut of the seas, a living natural disaster. And a snake in your arsenal could make us both unstoppable. But we wouldn't be crew, I'd use you for power, and you'd do the same. That trust we have in each other would erode, and that trust is the thing I value most in our crew because I know that genuine trust is rare. It's something my mother doesn't believe exists. A contract requires an exchange, trust doesn't. It's faith. Faith that the person you trust won't betray you. Won't ask you to be the serpent, but will give the chance to choose whether or not to become it. So, if I started to embrace that side of me – started to sit on the imaginary edge – would you trust me?" she asked.

Jayce nodded without hesitation. "Then I trust you to make that choice if it comes. If you need to become that juggernaut, I trust that you'll remember us and that we're with you – evil and blood and all. And that that blood stains all our hands – not just yours. To most we're already the villains – Pirates - so get your revenge if you need it. But you're more than that, I hope. And those that follow you definitely are. Does that help?" she asked. Again he nodded, his eyes glancing ahead towards Zeta and Thalia as they both walked ahead without a care in the world. "It does," he said, his mind wandering to the menagerie of criminals he had collected and the danger they posed to the world if he led them astray.

They crossed the bridge, stopping in the middle of the main road and turning towards the Holy Palace. More specifically, Thalia stopped – her eyes wide and a grin on her face. "No," Jayce commanded, stepping in front of her and meeting her bloodthirsty gaze. He placed a hand on her arm, feeling her heartbeat thumping across her body. "We have a mission and - as much as I would like to go in there and burn it to the ground – not now. It would be a death sentence, for

all of us.” Thalia remained with her eyes locked on the Palace, but as Zeta mirrored Jayce with her own hand Thalia’s instinct was locked away.

The ground rumbled and a ball of fire lit up the sky some distance away. The four of them didn’t say anything – their bodies moved on their own, running towards it. It was only as Jayce leapt onto a roof that he realised the smoke was close to, but not from the lighthouse. “Something’s gone wrong, or maybe it was a distraction to lure them away!” Jayce yelled down to the trio racing along the main road.

Thalia barrelled through a small group of Paladins, much to Jayce’s frustration as they immediately looked towards him, as he ran along the roof in plain sight and the trio, as they carried on running along the road. “It’s the Rising Aces!” yelled a voice, Jayce scowling as he discarded his useless cloak. “Head to the blast site, I’ll head to the tower,” he ordered through his communicator. Marisha looked towards Zeta and Thalia, pointing to the pair of them and instructing them to stay together before she turned on the approaching pack of Knights and Initiates, spear in hand. Jayce forced himself to look away as a bolt of light sailed past his head. He slid across the roof, reaching for his communicator. “Bring the ship around,” he ordered, before dropping into a neighbouring street.

He continued to run, alarm bells ringing from the Holy Palace and civilians crowding onto the streets from various shops and homes. It made it easy for him to disappear, but made it harder to move. “Clear the way!” he ordered, leaping over a cluster of people with an enhanced bound before crashing into a Priest trying to maintain order. Jayce didn’t stop to help the fallen adversary, but as he looked around he realised he had lost his heading. He swore, desperately spinning around and looking to the skies for any smoke in the busy streets, before further swearing as it clicked that the smoke wouldn’t help him find the lighthouse.

Through a gap in the crowds he spotted a large group of figures covered head-to-toe in metal armour. One wore a set of bronze armour, another had a bucket-shaped helmet and black cloth. Metz. Baudricourt. Jayce surged forwards in a blur, using anything he could jump on to carry himself upwards to the long row of rooftops either side of him. He had lost Caelie once to them – he would not let it happen again.

“The Rising Aces are here,” Metz said with a smile, as he and Baudricourt ran through the streets with the ragtag group of Knights they had grabbed on route. “Good,” Baudricourt growled. “Perhaps we can finish what we started.” Metz

shook his head. "I'm all for it, but don't make it personal. The Elder's plan was the girl and her group. You know, the one you thought you killed." "Go to the abyss, Metz – I killed her. I know I did. But if not, then I suppose I can right that wrong – unlike you." Baudricourt chuckled. "Exarga will piss himself before running away again if he sees your ugly face."

The group of Knights around them froze in place before falling down one after another in a rattle of unconscious bodies. Metz and Baudricourt staggered, their hearts racing in their chests and bodies cold, as if death itself was staring down at them. They turned in an instant, looking up into the onslaught of pure and utter hatred crushing them. In the bright light of the day, Jayce stood over them, his shadow smothering them, his eyes cold and his scars burning.

His form flickered in their eyes, warping into a shadowy mirage of a monster: a demon - before he vanished. "Fu-" Baudricourt got out, before a force crumpled the armour across his chest and send him through the walls of a house into a neighbouring street. "Exarga!" Metz yelled, drawing his long curved blade. He surged forwards, twisting past Jayce in an attempt to get behind him and stab him in the back. Jayce didn't let him.

"Eurk," grunted Metz as Jayce grabbed his throat, stopping him with a single arm before slamming Metz down into the stone. Jayce kicked his sword away, stepping back as Metz groaned on the floor before he slowly got back to his feet, struggling to stand in one spot. "Cheap-" Jayce threw a heavy, Focus-covered punch into his helmet, bending the metal and knocking Metz off his feet again.

He lay dazed on the ground, spluttering as he spat out teeth and blood through his visor. Jayce leant over him, grabbing the red ribbon extending from the top of his helmet and yanking it off his battered face. Metz stared up at him in terror. "No-" he pleaded, before Jayce slammed a Focus-free fist into his face, before throwing another and another, finally stepping back as Metz stopped moving, a bubbling wheezing coming from him.

The Sentinel coughed and Jayce thought back to the smug grin he had held before, when he had cut out Jayce's eye and cut off his arm. A smug grin that now had been shattered. Jayce shook his head, looking down at his blood-covered hands. "It would be so easy to kill you. I want you to remember that, Metz. Remember how under-gearred you are to kill me. I'm sure a healer will patch you up but don't even think about coming after me."

Jayce turned towards the hole he had made in a nearby house, a loud roar coming from the other side. He started walking towards it, but he heard a faint scrape of metal, stepping to the side as Metz lunged at him blindly with a dagger. Jayce placed his palms together, willing Sola and Luna to combine into a copy of Ordo's greatclub before he swung with full Focus into Metz's right leg. Bone, blood, metal and viscera painted the street as Jayce obliterated the limb mercilessly. Metz probably would have screamed, but the instant trauma sent him straight into unconsciousness.

Jayce didn't give him another moment's thought, stepping into the house and walking through to where Baudricourt stood waiting. "You bastard!" he coughed, releasing a small splatter onto the floor as he stood wheezing, his helmet knocked loose. Jayce shrugged, willing Sola and Luna back into their liquid forms. "I've waited a long time to meet you again, Exarga. I'm disappointed, you launched a surprise attack like a coward."

"Metz tried to stab me in the back. He took my arm and my eye last time. I've taken his leg. You took my family from me-" Jayce stated, a cold numbness across his body. "Boo-hoo, Pirate. Or should I say Pirate Lord? Doesn't matter, I'll crush you and then I'll kill that little girl of yours again, before the rest of your crew. Like I promised." Jayce didn't answer and Baudricourt roared, surging forwards with his dark greatsword.

His heavy downward swing shattered the stone next to Jayce's feet, but Baudricourt was slow – predictable. Jayce leant onto Baudricourt's sword, staring straight into his eyes from an inch away as Baudricourt found himself unable to move his blade. He growled and swung his gauntlet at Jayce's face. Jayce released his grip and stepped to the side, kicking the back of Baudricourt knee and forcing him to kneel before backing away as he toyed with the Sentinel.

Baudricourt screamed with rage, swinging his blade wildly in large arcs as he pushed towards Jayce. Jayce willed Sola into Vexx's dagger, catching Baudricourt's colossal sword with the tiny blade an inch from his neck. Baudricourt's eyes widened, the rage turning into a terrified look of surprise. "And now you realise how far apart we are," Jayce stated. "You're not your Elder. You will never amount to anything more than a thug, a dog sent to hunt squirrels, but I'm not your prey. You're mine. You took something from me. I'm taking it back, with interest."

Jayce unleashed a silent, concentrated blast of unfiltered hatred onto Baudricourt, his entire body freezing in place as his instincts told him he was already dead.

Jayce stepped towards him with the curved, carving blade in hand. He ran the blade across Baudricourt's shoulder before he swept his legs, slamming him to the floor and once again disarming a Sentinel. Baudricourt screamed as Jayce placed a foot on the dent in his armour, reaching down and grabbing his partially severed arm before tearing it clear off his body.

Jayce threw the severed arm to the side, coldly siccing Sola and Luna onto the slab of meat to ensure it was unsalvageable. He then looked down at Baudricourt as his face quickly turned pale. "I owe you for giving me the chance to make things right. But don't get me wrong: cross me again, provided you survive, and I will kill you next time. Tell the same to Metz and your leader. The Church's days are numbered, and you should be afraid. Remember what it feels like to have pieces of you taken away. Remember it when you're alone. Remember it when you're surrounded by others. And remember I can take much more from you." A rattling of armour surrounded him as other Paladins arrived, all of them turning their blades towards him. "Use your eyes and think if it's worth it to trade your life for a second of my inconvenience," he warned, walking calmly away. None of them approached, none of them moved, none dared to speak in the presence of Pirate Lord Exarga.

The fire had spread fast, the flames leaping from building to building as it headed towards the lighthouse. Jayce scolded himself for taking so long with the Paladins as he ran. "Stupid waste of time!" he uttered, shaking his head as he focused on his objective, using Falconer to guide him. He emerged from a street, skidding to a stop and assessing the situation. Bullet holes scored the entrance and countless bodies lay around the tower – bodies of Navy, Priests, and others unlucky enough to be caught in the crossfire.

He raced towards the broken main door, dodging a spray of bullets and diving inside. The large masked member of Caelie's group lay face down on the floor. Jayce stepped over him, stopping as he faced a terrified pair of masked figures. "Fr-freeze!" one cried, holding a pistol. Jayce looked at the guards, before looking beyond at a figure stood by several large crates. She had discarded her mask – she was young, early to late twenties, with jet black hair and fair skin marked with tiny scars, like she'd been splattered with a face full of shrapnel. She looked towards him, a mixture of fear and excitement coming from her sharp eyes, both with the whites dyed green and the irises a muddled red. She held a pair of vials in each hand, and Jayce guessed the crates were full of explosives.

He looked to the two guards. "I'm after your leader, I'm not going to hurt her or you. Run before it's too late. It's over, whether you like it or not," he told them. The one without the pistol bolted past Jayce, but the gunfire around the building didn't suggest she made it far. The other dropped to his knees. "It wasn't meant to be this way..." he muttered. Jayce ignored him, the Alchemist looking at him with distinct curiosity. He met her gaze with equal interest. "You don't fit the others, but it's not my problem," he stated coldly. She tilted her head and grinned madly. "Oopsie, I've been found out," she cackled. Jayce ignored her, walking towards the spiral stairs leading upwards. "Don't blow anything up whilst I'm still here," Jayce ordered. She didn't answer.

Powder lined the stairs leading upwards, trailing all the way from the crates to the top of the tower where he found the masked leader crouched on the floor with her head in her hands. "Caelie," Jayce said softly. She immediately leapt to her feet, lighting a piece of wood wrapped in cloth and dipped in a flammable liquid. "Woah there," he said, holding his hands up as she held the flame towards the powder. "It's me, Jayce. I'm here, I'm real. I've come back for you," he told her. She backed away, fear radiating from the eyes in her mask. "Please, Caelie, it's me, put it down, let's just get out of here." She looked down at the flame and then back at him, and shook her head.

"Has anyone got eyes on the killer?" Alara asked through various communicators, as the Sole Survivor sat docked in the harbour of the Capital, the Isle of Sanctity burning in front of them. Riley lay on the flat roof of Alara's quarters, her rifle in hand as she scanned the island, finally setting her Focused Gaze on the lighthouse where two figures stood talking. "Commander, I see them!" she yelled out.

"Have you got a shot?" Alara questioned. Riley stared through her scope - she recognised Jayce and, as Alara had theorised, the figure that looked just like Caelie. "I do - top of the lighthouse - but Jay- Pirate Lord Exarga is there, talking to her. She's alone other than him," Riley warned. Alara lifted her binoculars. It really did look like Caelie back from the dead and she seemed to be settling, readying to give herself over to him. Alara sighed. Orders were orders. "Take the shot."

Jayce sensed the bullet before it arrived, lunging towards the masked leader and shoving her gently. But he was just a moment too late. The bullet caught her mask, cutting across it and shattering it rather than being a clean shot through her head. There was a loud rumble from below as the girl in front of him

staggered backwards towards the edge of the stone tower, the force from the shot rattling her brain. The base below him exploded in a loud and fiery blast, the tower tilting and the girl tumbling unconscious over the side.

Jayce raced forwards, diving after her without hesitation. He reached out towards her limp body, flames surrounding them as they fell towards the shallow water below and the rocks littered amongst it. He grabbed her ankle, pulling her into him before he grabbed her head and pulled her into his chest, angling his body to take the impact before there was a crack and his vision went black.

Jayce groaned as his vision slowly returned, a heavy weight pressing down on his sore and bruised chest as he lay on a wooden floor. His vision was blurry, and the light was bright, apart from a scattering of shadows overlooking him. His vision cleared as he looked up at Wicke, Bjorn, Marisha, Astris and Yuthura. "Ow..." he complained, trying to sit up only for the heavy weight to remain pressing down on his chest. "Thought we'd lost you there for a moment, Captain," Bjorn stated with a soft chuckle, his fur dripping wet. Jayce grinned. "Me? Never."

He looked down, a wet figure lay across him. She had long chestnut brown hair, a skinny frame with a small bit of muscle and relatively broad shoulders. Her fur and feather cloak lay wet and discarded to the side. Slowly, she looked up at him. Her eyes were upturned slightly and had a yellowish-hazel colour, mixed with a golden sparkle that seemed to move across her irises. Freckles dotted her nose and cheeks. Her face was skinnier than he remembered, more pointed, and he wasn't used to seeing her crying, but in an instant it faded – replaced with a big smile of relief. She opened her mouth but seemed to struggle to find her words.

He answered for her. "Caelie, you're alive," Jayce cried. She burst back into loud wailing tears, but as he reached for her she leapt back. In a quickly unnerving sight for all present, her crying stopped and a white ooze replaced her tears, before it swirled and formed a blank mask with its eyes closed. "Caelie?" Jayce questioned, getting to his feet as the others stared in shock. Two pairs of crescent-shaped black horns emerged from the top of her head, along with two sharp, pitch-black eyes that bore into Jayce. "Finally," came a voice not belonging to Caelie, a golden liquid dripping down from the black eyes and leaving trails across the mask-like face. "Finally we meet, Exarga."

Seize the Seas Tales: Paladin

Arthuria stood in horror as she watched and felt the explosion come from the lighthouse. Smoke billowed into the sky and the noise was deafening, but eventually the fireball faded. She shook her head as the Paladins, Priests, Navy and Marines around her surged forwards towards the wreckage. There could be nothing left, no-one could have survived an explosion like that, she rationalised. No-one who could cause such destruction deserved to survive something like that.

It was less than an hour before she received a letter summoning her to the Paladin's sect, and she wasted no time heeding the command from her Elder. "You called, Lady d'Arc?" Arthuria questioned, standing in front of the Paladin Elder as she stood in her quarters with a small escort of female Knights. "Leave us," Jeanne ordered, the Knights initially hesitating before following out her command.

She waited until the door was shut and her antimagic field was activated before she turned and looked at Arthuria. Tears brimmed in her eyes along with a face Arthuria had never seen on her before: fear. "Metz and Baudricourt have been hurt, badly. They've been healed, but their wounds were... severe. Exarga destroyed their limbs, he... it doesn't matter. I thought you should know. A meeting has been held..."

"It is with great shame and worry that I find myself before you all," the Pope stated to the huge crowd before him, as he stood on a large balcony on the upper floor of the Holy Palace. "I have always feared a day like this, a day where evil would dare to show itself in the bright holy light of the day." He took a deep breath, his hands clasped behind him as he rubbed his rings, trying not to smile. "We find ourselves at a crossroad, caught between our grief and our righteous anger."

"I want you to return to my side, properly, as a Paladin of our Order once more," Jeanne told Arthuria, stepping towards her and taking her hands. "Now?" Arthuria questioned. Jeanne nodded. "After today, I need people I can trust more than ever. This attack... it's a catalyst, something that the others have been waiting for. You have done everything I have asked of you and more, and I know there's more you have to do. I give you my blessing to continue acting as a Sister, a Handmaiden, but I need you back in your armour."

"This attack was planned, not by a small and sadistic terrorist organisation, but by a Pirate Lord and his crew!" declared the Pope. "A Demon in the flesh who assaulted and brutalised our holiest of Paladins: Sentinels Baudricourt and Metz. A fiend who has killed, butchered, raped and pillaged our fair holy nation for his own ill gains. By his command, this organisation, this portion of his crew have burned our homes, trampled the lives of our peaceful island, and destroyed a holy beacon of peace and prosperity!"

"Lady d'Arc, what's going on? I've never seen you this way before," Arthuria questioned. Jeanne shook her head. "Your armour is over there, put it on and go and see your mentors. Metz needs his friend, and I need to prepare for what comes now," Jeanne stated, turning away but keeping one hand in Arthuria's. "Arthuria," she said softly. "There are few I trust more than you. Can I keep trusting you?"

"He has consorted with monsters: Vampires, Sorcerers, baned, murderers, assassins, infidels, and has no depth to which he will not stoop to corrupt and manipulate the Emperor's holy citadel. And what's worse is he is far from alone in his treachery and sacrilege. Even here he has allies. Traitors and deceivers willing to manipulate our great nation's warriors. The Marines support him, led by his own parents!"

"Of course you can, Elder – Jeanne. I'm here, always," Arthuria told her. Jeanne nodded appreciatively, releasing her hand and stepping away. Arthuria turned towards an armour stand behind a paper wall – her armour. "It's been so long, my friend," she whispered to the cold metal, touching it with a gloved hand. She looked once more towards Jeanne for reassurance. The Elder nodded to her. "Put it on, Arthuria."

"Traitors and betrayers within our own empire, corrupting the Emperor's pure will. Our holy texts teach us of the bindings and vows of flesh and blood, it is impossible for Pirate Lord Jayce Exarga to have not come from their own corruption. These Marines," he growled, "claim to be our saviours. Nay! They are heretics, fiends, liars! Only the might of our Navy remains true and loyal, holy and pure!"

Arthuria placed her winged helmet onto her head. "The armour suits you," Jeanne told her. "It always has." Arthuria lifted her visor, smiling appreciatively. "I've dreamt of this day." The Elder stepped towards her, reaching out and placing a hand on the side of Arthuria's face. "Me too, my knight in shining

armour. But for now, you must go. Return to the Sentinels, I shall see you there, for your latest mission, Sentinel Pendragon."

"But even the Gods are merciful, and a Demon's corruption can only seep so far. Admiral and Vice-Admiral Exarga and their Marines could still prove their loyalty to the Gods and the Emperor - prove my fears wrong. And I pray they do. But, it is with a heavy heart that I, Pope Alexander Borgia, call for a holy crusade – a war on the scourge plaguing our seas. I call upon the heavens themselves to bless our fleets, to burn out the wolves amongst our midst, and to grant our beautiful nation the holy fire it needs to destroy the Pirate Lords and their wretched brethren. As a servant of the Gods, the Emperor, and the people's will – the Church declares war on the Pirates of the seas and its army of the damned! I declare war on you, Jayce Exarga!"

Chapter 134: Belial

Jayce folded his arms as he stood in front of the Demon. The others in his crew had all immediately leapt back - most expecting a fight, a few staring in fear, Thalia grinning. "Your name, if you don't mind?" Jayce questioned, glancing towards Thalia with warning. She turned her glare towards him before letting out a sigh and shaking her head. "Boring!" she exclaimed, turning and striding away below deck.

The white-faced Demon seemed to frown as he watched the exchange, his black eyes boring into Jayce with distinct curiosity. "Belial," came a singular response. "Right, let me get a few things clear to begin with: you are not the first Demon I've met, I want Caelie back, harm any of my crew and we'll find a way to erase your contract," Jayce stated bluntly. The Demon burst into laughter, a mixture of a deep monotone broken up periodically by Caelie's genuine laugh - a discordant fusion of uncomfortableness for Jayce. "Then that makes this simple," stated the Demon.

"Her memories of you hold little other than great respect and admiration. I hope this to have been earned." Jayce heard a rumble of cannon fire in the distance, his attention immediately shifting. "This will have to wait. What's the situation?" Jayce asked Bjorn, the large baned unsettled by the Demon but similarly unconcerned by any threat he proposed. "We're heading north-west, trying to put some distance between us and the Capital. You weren't out long, don't worry. I'm thinking Caedom, through the Storm."

Jayce nodded in agreement. "Good idea, laying low with this one on board is our new priority," he stated. "Get to work people, let's lose our tail. Belial, Caelie, stay with me - we need to talk." The others nodded, giving curious and questioning glances to the Demon before heading off to fulfil Jayce's command. Bjorn remained and Jayce met his gaze. "There's going to be consequences, the Empire won't take that attack well - and they know we were there," he warned. "Yeah, agreed. We'll see what happens, but I think I need to meet with the other Pirate Lords."

Bjorn headed off to switch with Falconer, leaving Jayce alone on the main deck with the curious Demon. "I want her back," Jayce told Belial. "I need to speak to her and then I'll speak to you." The Demon's face contorted into an angry snarl. "You dare-" Jayce stepped closer to Caelie, looking down at the Demon in her body as he towered over them. "I have what you want: I know where Pursan is. Do not get this wrong; you are not here as a guest - you are a stowaway in the

body of my crewmate. I will have her back, and you are not in control. We will talk and you may get what you want, but that is only if Caelie wants me to help you. Bring, her, back, now."

The Demon stared back at Jayce before eventually he looked away. The white face and horns melted away, dripping into nothingness, Caelie then looked back up at him. "Caelie," he said softly, a loud splash spraying water across the deck as a cannonball landed next to the ship. She smiled, lifting a hand up to her throat whilst placing her other hand on his chest. "Jayce," she said quietly back to him. Another splash came close, and her smile turned into worry.

"How are they gaining?" Jayce called back, frustrated by the interruption. "We're being cut off!" Bjorn yelled back. Caelie stepped back and looked around before she raced to the edge of the ship and looked over the side. She then turned back and slammed the side of her fist onto her palm – as if she had an idea. She looked towards Jayce. "If you have an idea go for it. I trust you, okay?" he said gently. She nodded, heading to the mast and beginning to climb towards the crow's nest.

"Falconer, give me a run down," Jayce ordered through his communicator, as Falconer took to the skies. "A small fleet, including a Rear-Admiral's flagship. Marine and Navy. Those behind are falling away, however two ships are incoming from the north-east," came the response. Jayce headed to the edge of the ship, taking a look for himself. "Damn," he muttered, both warships getting too close for comfort. "Plan?" Bjorn called. Jayce looked to him, uncertain what to say. A fight was not what he wanted, and all the Marine ships had to do was delay the Stacked Hand until reinforcements arrived.

A whooshing sound drew his attention back to the ocean, a pair of bright blue colossal portals appearing in-between the Marines and the Rising Aces. One ship passed through, its speed too great to turn in time. The captured Marine ship was released on a direct collision course with the other, the pair of warships turning quickly in desperation to avoid crashing. Another portal then swiftly appeared in front of the Stacked Hand, an image of a clear horizon visible through it. "Jayce?" Bjorn questioned.

Jayce looked up, Caelie was stood in the crow's nest with her arms forwards – the portals of her own making. "Take us through!" Jayce ordered, the ship passing through before re-emerging back into the ocean. Falconer and Wren dove through the portal moments before it closed behind them. Jayce raced to the edge of the ship, looking back to see the pursuing fleet far behind. Another portal

appeared and the gap increased again, and again, and again. Caelie then disappeared from sight, portalling down to the main deck before laying on the grass in a panting heap. "You okay?" Jayce asked her. She nodded, sweat covering her face, before giving a thumbs-up.

With the immediate danger dealt with, Jayce called the crew back together for a meeting, the group convening inside the living quarters and breaking out the drinks. Given Thalia had never met Caelie, Jayce ordered her to steer the ship, until several sudden lurches indicated that was a bad idea and Astris took over. Caelie stuck to him like a long-lost shadow, never leaving his side, but with a distinct look of nervousness coming from her as the others reacquainted themselves to her through him.

She remained silent and smiling, nodding to and hugging each member who came and spoke to her, but Jayce quickly spotted a slight tremble in her hands. "Right, uh - there'll be plenty of time to properly catch up," Jayce told his crew. "Caelie," he stated, gesturing towards the door and leading her away. The second the door shut behind them, she let out a sigh of relief. "It's a lot to come back to," Jayce told her. She nodded in agreement before she looked down and shook her head. "Dreamed of... back," she said quietly.

He smiled, glad to hear of it. He led her towards the stairs and down to the deck below. "The ship's changed quite a bit since we lost you, but your room is still yours. We didn't touch it really, so it might need some dusting and a bit of tidying," he warned her. She looked up at him, her eyes glistening before she picked up the pace and headed straight to her door – giving a few of the new rooms a curious glance on the way past as she familiarised herself with the names of her neighbours.

She paused as she stood outside her door, her hand hovering over the handle. Jayce kept a short distance back, watching as she processed her feelings. She hadn't changed much: she looked more mature, that was for certain, and she was now seventeen, but she hadn't grown much in height – an easy image of her younger self settling over her current self in his mind. He smiled, still in disbelief he had gotten her back.

She eventually pressed it down and opened the door. Her legs gave out as she stepped inside, dropping to her knees as silent tears streamed down her face. It was exactly as she remembered. "Home..." she whispered. Jayce smiled, stepping in after her and kneeling next to her before placing a hand on her head. "You are home, Caelie. I'm sorry we lost you. I'm-" His voice cracked and slowly

he looked down. She leant into him, shutting her eyes and resting her head on his chest. "Not your fault."

They stayed in her room for a while, dusting and tidying as much as could be done before they eventually made their way back upstairs, heading to Jayce's quarters. He handed her a pen and paper, sitting her down on his bed before getting in his chair. "There's a lot to talk about. A lot to catch you up on. But... Caelie, I'm sorry about your group." She nodded appreciatively, a sad expression passing over her before she let out a deep sigh. "Friends... followers," she said. "Did you know them long?" Jayce asked. Caelie shook her head, tapping her temple with her finger. "Belial's idea. Not me."

"To what end? Why all the killing and the bombings?" Jayce asked. Caelie again tapped her temple and then pointed at Jayce. "So you... find me." "Caelie... a lot of people died. You could have found other ways." She shook her head, her expression hardening. "Evil people. Deserved it. For Xander..." Jayce let out a sigh, he couldn't really disagree and, given what she had been through, it was almost fair. "But still," he rationalised. "It was wrong Caelie - there were better options." She didn't answer.

A knock came from the door and Wicke stepped inside, nervously glancing from Caelie to Jayce. "Jayce... it's bad. The Church has declared war on the Pirate Lords - on you. They've claimed the attack was planned by you." Jayce leant back in his chair, slowly raising his hands before resting them on his head. "Fuck," he stated. Wicke stared at him. "That's not good," he added. She glared at him. "Is that it?" she asked in disbelief. He stared back at her, his eyes wide in genuine shock. "Right, uh, okay. Um... I'm on it," he told her. She wasn't reassured.

Wicke glanced from him to Caelie, only to flinch as she found Belial watching in bemusement. Jayce let out a long sigh, turning away and beginning to draft a letter to Kitty. "Bring Caelie back, I'm not ready for you," Jayce told the Demon. "No." Jayce glanced back, looking from Belial to Wicke before back to Belial. "No?" Jayce questioned. Wicke shook her head and slipped out of the room. The Demon folded Caelie's arms. "You overestimate your value, human."

A blue portal opened up underneath Jayce's chair, his body dropping in an instant. Jayce grabbed onto the edge of his desk, half-hanging into the portal as he watched his chair fall into the ocean. Jayce glared at the Demon, his grip awkward and difficult to use to pull himself out and the drop quite irritating to deal with. "Fine," Jayce stated. "Let's talk." The portal changed destination, a

hole opening further along inside his room. Jayce let go, dropping to his feet next to his bed.

"You don't like me, I respect that," Belial began. "I've not been in this plane long, but you humans have hardly changed across the centuries. You fear that which you do not understand." Jayce shook his head and folded his arms. "No, I'm not afraid of you. You're quite literally the least of my problems at the moment and I do not have the patience to deal with you right now. So talk, and let's trade."

"Hmph. Very well. Caelie has assured me that you are who I need to aid me. I don't see why, but that's my problem to get over. You spoke the name of another within my council: Pursan. This is not a name I would expect a mere human to know, so I believe you have met. Where is she?" demanded the Demon. Jayce shook his head. "That is information for me to give to you, not for you to demand."

"Caelie will not return unless I allow it. She slumbers until I awaken her, not the other way around. Give me what I seek," clarified Belial. Jayce glared at Belial, the Demon calm and relaxed on his bed. Jayce sighed. "From what I understand: you have a pact with her – a trade has been made - but I find it hard to believe that you are in control of her body. How and why?" Jayce questioned, slowly pacing back and forth. "She sought revenge, no matter the price."

Jayce scowled. "Godsdammit!" He shook his head - it was exactly the sort of naïve thing she'd do. "Then you understand your position and hers." Jayce turned and glared at Belial. "I do, and as such I know the extend of our deal. My terms are clear. I will take you to Pursan, and I will assist you in finding others of your kind for as long as Caelie wishes me to aid you," Jayce stated. Belial stood up and walked to the edge of the bed, meeting Jayce eye-to-eye. "And your terms?"

"I want Caelie back. You will switch control over to her. She has full autonomy over her body: it will be between the two of you to arrange your stay in her care." The Demon took in a long inhale before letting it out as a hiss. "Do you want to see your brethren again?" Jayce questioned. Belial growled, revealing a mouth full of sharp teeth. "Very well," he stated, holding up a finger before making a cut in Caelie's hand. He placed his thumb into the wound, covering it in blood. "Your arm," he requested.

Jayce extended his right arm and Belial drew a three pronged trident on his wrist. The blood burned a glowing red before it faded into a red tattoo. "Our terms are agreed. Until you have completed your side of the deal she is mine. Failure will end in death – you have been warned." Jayce looked down at the tattoo, nodding in acceptance. "Very well. Now go away, I have a letter to write." The mask melted away and Caelie reappeared, a small white mark remaining on her cheek as a reminder.

Caelie hardly left Jayce's side for the rest of the day, but she was no longer the child she had been before, and Jayce was grateful she had grown out of her need to join him in the evenings. Still, he couldn't help but worry slightly as she smiled and said good night, heading off to her own room. She had hardly reacted to the deaths of her entire group, and there was no guilt over the deaths she had caused. Caelie had grown cold.

Caelie let out a sigh as she stood outside of her bedroom door – the ship was quiet, surprisingly so after an overwhelmingly loud dinner, and she didn't know whether that was a good thing or not. "They're all gone..." she thought, leaning her head against the door and looking down. "They were always going to go, they were tools to get what we needed," stated Belial into her mind. Caelie shook her head. "They were more than tools, they were my fri-"

A sharp pain pierced her mind, and she clutched the side of her head. "Why are we following that freak?" came a voice belonging to neither her nor Belial. She recognised it: Lynda. "It was better before she came along," continued the memory Belial was projecting. "Maybe, but she gives us a chance to make a real change. To be heroes like the Pirate Lords," stated Muta, his voice deep. A scoff echoed across Caelie's head, her hand clutching the other side of her skull. "We're not going to be heroes if we keep following her, we'll be dead," stated Orive.

"Enough," Caelie whimpered, the memory ceasing. Silence returned, but inevitably a voice filled it. "Tools," Belial stated. Caelie shook her head. "They were nothing but street trash before you. They would have died with or without you, but this way they served a purpose: getting you here." Caelie shook her head again. "Friends," she said out loud. A growl of frustration filled her mind. "Freak, monster, inhuman," came a cacophony of their clipped voices. "Not a monster!" Caelie stated.

A cold shiver passed through her; eyes were watching her. Belial silenced, feeling them through her. Caelie glanced down the corridor, a pair of glowing red eyes

watching her through the darkness. Footsteps began to approach, a pale figure emerging into the low light. "Are you okay?" Astris asked, stepping next to her and turning on a light. Caelie squinted as her eyes adjusted. Astris was only just taller than her, but she carried a far stronger weight of maturity with her. Her red eyes seemed to vanish, replaced with one that was white and the other that was black. Both held concern.

"We're fine," Belial said in Caelie's head, but Caelie shook her head and looked down. Astris smiled softly, reaching past her and opening Caelie's bedroom door. "Okay, I'm probably the worst person to talk to – everyone other than Thalia knows you better than me - but if I can help, I'm here, okay?" Astris offered, gesturing inside. Caelie smiled and stepped into her room, walking to her old bed and sitting down upon it.

"Do not engage or I will take control," Belial threatened. Caelie glanced away from Astris. "No," she said quietly. Astris tilted her head before she realised what was happening. "Belial, come out – partially," Astris commanded. Caelie's face melted into Belial's. "That's not what I said. Partially," Astris repeated. Belial glared at her. "That's not possible." Astris shook her head, pulling her pistol out of its holster. "No, it is. You just aren't brave enough to release your control."

Belial looked down at the weapon. "You are all insane," he growled, fading away before reemerging on Caelie's neck. She looked at Astris in surprise. "I have some experience dealing with troublesome patrons," she said with a soft smile, putting the pistol away. "So, tell me what's wrong. The both of you."

Seize the Seas Tales: Sentinel

Arthuria looked down through her visor at the trinket in her hand: a large gold and silver orb covered in runic etchings. She shook her head; she hated lying, she used to be bad at it, but here she was doing it again. "All for the Elder... for the Empire..." she muttered quietly, the Paladin Knights next to her both looking to her for confirmation or any potential orders. She ignored them, simply waving her hand in a silent command. The heavy stone doors in front of her grinded open and she stepped through.

The chatter inside quietened as she entered, all eyes falling onto her. She walked straight into the middle of the round chamber, stepping into the middle of the ring-shaped table before walking straight to Elder d'Arc and slamming the artifact down. "I have returned, Elder," she stated, Jeanne looking up at her with a false look of surprise. "I have done as you asked – the grail is yours and with

it, a danger purged from this world.” Arthuria stepped back, taking off her helmet and holding it in her arms before, looking respectfully at the five Sentinels present. There was an array of expressions: relief and respect from Sentinels Dunois and Pasquerel, irritation from Sentinel Dauphin, disinterest from Cauchon, and outright anger from Sentinel Gilles de Rais. Arthuria paid little attention, looking back at Elder d’Arc before kneeling.

“Welcome back Paladin, you have been missed, Pendragon,” stated Dunois. Arthuria glanced up and nodded to him. “Indeed,” added Rais, “Your consistent ability to serve remains strong. Good girl,” he stated with a hint of distaste. Arthuria kept her face blank, clenching her fist. “Stand Paladin Pendragon,” commanded the Elder. Arthuria obeyed, standing tall. A small smile flickered at the edge of Jeanne’s marble expression.

“You have arrived at the perfect moment, perhaps it was ordained – I presume our fellows would say,” stated Pasquerel, drawing her attention before looking to the Elder for permission. Jeanne nodded to him, the others sitting forwards in their chairs, apart from Gilles de Rais. “Your actions and devotion are, and have been, continuously commendable – even through your greatest of trials,” Pasquerel stated. “I have no doubt in my mind you are already aware of our... situation. We are at war, and two of our own have been brutalised.”

“I have already seen them myself,” Arthuria inserted, nodding in acknowledgment. “Rather than declaring your presence and ingratiating our Elder?” Dauphin chided. Arthuria turned and met the accusation personally and without fear. “My greetings are paid in full, but I was not made aware of any distinct urgency. I went to visit our injured, to find out and assess our situation – a situation that I note was not handled, despite every Sentinel being present in the Capital. Did it take too long for you to find a hole in your belt? Is that why Exarga escaped?” Arthuria returned.

“Enough,” Elder d’Arc declared quietly, preventing any further conflict as Dauphin turned crimson. Pasquerel cleared his throat. “I’m glad to see your fire has only grown. We need that more than ever. We are at war. Now is not the time to be petty, but the time to bring about a greater unity. There has long been discord amongst our Knights, growing internal factions that can now be united under a single purpose: the elimination of piracy.”

“Get to the point, Pasquerel, or I will become as silver-haired as you by the end,” stated Cauchon. “Very well. I propose in celebration of Paladin Pendragon’s dedication and successful mission that she be promoted to our ranks. Sentinel

Pendragon will then have the honour of leading the charge to the home of the Pirate Lords, thereby fulfilling our duty as part of the Covenant,” Pasquerel stated. Arthuria tried not to frown. The title was all she had wanted, but Pasquerel had painted her first duty as if it was a chore – or something even worse.

The others seemed to notice as well. “I agree with her promotion,” stated Dunois. “But is she truly to lead this mission alone?” A chuckle came from Dauphin. “The fleet is large, our armada all encompassing – I see nothing more fitting for her than to lead our Knights in their role as babysitters. Enjoy, Sentinel.” “All in favour then?” Pasquerel questioned. All but Rais lifted their hands. Jeanne stood up, slowly walking around the outside of the table before joining Arthuria in the middle. Jeanne drew her sword and Arthuria knelt, the blade tapping her shoulders. “Arise, Sentinel Pendragon. Take your seat amongst us.”

Chapter 135: God of the Storm

The confirmation for a Pirate Lord meeting came almost instantaneously, bringing a quick sense of relief to Jayce's mind – now knowing that they were all back on the same page. Still, the messages he received held a poorly veiled level of accusation and clear anger – even from Kitty. With little other options he buried his feelings on the matter deep down. It didn't matter if he had been set up – they wouldn't care, and the world didn't either. War was finally here, and somehow he was at the centre of it.

Jayce was almost grateful to see the Storm once again, the skies darkening and the heavens above unleashing rain and lightning in a continuous onslaught. It calmed him, distracted the storm within him with the one outside. When the time came for a meeting, he would have to take charge. He had no choice. Alara was out there, his mother and father as well, Damian, Corina, Ottar... the war would affect them all. He hoped Alara was okay, but he knew without a doubt that she would be in the front of the fleet sent to hunt him. His mother as well. The Church had seen to it. So he would see to it that it was their biggest mistake.

"Bjorn!" called out Thalia, as she emerged from below deck in minimal clothing, closing the hatch behind her. "Huh?" he called back, her words lost in the wind and the crashing of the skies and the seas. She sighed, stumbling her way towards the stairs before clambering her way up to him. "What's up?" he asked her, his body drenched, even under the layers of water-resistant clothing. "A fantastic storm, right?" she stated, a big grin on her face as the Stacked Hand dropped with a crash. He scowled, shaking his head.

"Anyway," she added, "I want us to stop off somewhere on the way. Could we?" "Depends where. Why aren't you asking the Captain?" he questioned. Thalia glanced back towards Jayce's quarters. He had practically sealed himself within there. People could go in, sure, but he had little to say, and spoke almost like he was possessed when he did. "He's busy," she stated. "Anyway, he's planning for a war – and I don't want to sit on the side. None of us do. You're next in charge... somehow."

"Thanks," Bjorn grumbled. "And no, I want nothing to do this mess, this isn't something fun. It's not a misadventure – the Empire wants us dead. They have a thousand ships, and a hundred times that many soldiers. Reign in your excitement - this is a going to be a bloody mess and it'll be a miracle if we live to see the end of it." Thalia's smile only grew, drawing a frustrated sigh out of Bjorn. "Where do you want to go?" he asked.

"We're going where?" Jayce questioned as he sat down at the dinner table. "My home," Thalia stated, taking an entire leg of lamb and placing it on her plate. "Yo-your home?" he questioned again, looking towards Bjorn. Bjorn simply nodded back. "There is something I wish to do before we meet my grandfather, before we go to war. I want to make amends with the Storm Maidens," Thalia stated. "What did you do to them?" Wicke asked with a mouthful of food. Thalia looked down in something almost akin to shame. "I don't want to talk about it." "I'm sure a small detour won't make a big difference, but it'll have to be short," Jayce stated. Thalia nodded in appreciation. "Thank you."

It was some time before they arrived at their destination: the Heart of the Storm. The island itself was a huge mountain, long and extremely high, shaped almost like a body on its side. An endless cloud seemed to stretch around it, unleashing a constant barrage of lightning onto the dark rocks below. Jayce glanced nervously towards Thalia as they came to dock next to the island's only pier. "This is it?" he questioned. She nodded. "Okay, well this is your thing, so take the lead." She looked back at him with surprise before she smiled appreciatively and walked to the edge of the ship.

Almost immediately, as soon as the main group disembarked, Jayce found himself on the receiving end of a sharp weapon. He stared down the heavy axe pointed at his face, meeting the glare of a very tall, and very muscular, woman. "Why have you come to this sacred island?" she asked, various metal bands adorning her arms and exposed legs, a leather and metal skirt around her waist, and a breastplate across her chest. A pair of light blue lines painted her face. Jayce glanced past her, several others stood nearby, all in similar clothes and wielding large weapons, all with similar markings. "We-" Jayce began.

"Not you," she stated, her eyes locked onto Thalia, an expression of clear anger coming through. "I've come back to make things right," Thalia said softly, stepping forwards next to Jayce. The axe changed direction, pointing straight to her, but, unlike Jayce, Thalia did not approve of threats of any kind. She grabbed the weapon between its twin blades, pulling whilst slamming her palm into the chest of its wielder. The tall woman was disarmed in an instant, the others all stepping forwards to assist her until she held up a hand to stop them. "You haven't changed, Stormheart," she stated, folding her arms as Thalia held the weapon.

On closer inspection, Jayce noticed a variety of gemstones embedded within the weapon. They were slotted in, and he guessed they could easily be removed.

"You're Clerics," he realised, looking towards the Storm Maidens gathered in front of him. The foremost Maiden glanced towards him, a hint of recognition coming to her eyes. "And you're Pirate Lord Exarga. Why is it that you have come?"

"It's as she says, Thalia has come to make amends," he stated. The Storm Maiden shook her head. "Impossible," she stated, looking directly at Thalia. "You haven't changed, not in the slightest. I still see that violence within you, a storm untempered. You have no strength of will and without it you lack the wisdom to follow the tenets of our Storm Lord. I will not let you destroy our temple again!"

Jayce looked towards Thalia with a look of surprise, that on second thought wasn't that surprising. "Of course you destroyed the temple," he said with a soft chuckle. She shook her head. "That was a long time ago, surely-" Thalia attempted. "Not long enough to forget your transgression. You are not welcome, nor will you ever be welcome. Leave, please." Thalia's face fell, and to all their surprise she nodded in acceptance, turning away and walking towards the ladder on the Stacked Hand's hull. She stopped at the bottom, looking back. "I am sorry. Truly."

Thalia reached into her bottomless bag and pulled out a large coin purse, throwing it to the Storm Maiden. "Tell the Priestess that I still remember her words. I carry it with me, and... it's true, I can't control that storm within me, I doubt I ever will – but I'm trying to," she said softly, turning away and beginning to climb. The Storm Maiden looked at the coin purse in her hand, a ridiculous volume of wealth inside. "Wait! Thalia, wait!" she said with frustration.

"I can't accept this, you know we can't," she stated, as Thalia dropped back down onto the pier. Jayce smiled, as they stood next to each other – the tension fading into something bittersweet. "No amount of money could replace the history you destroyed and the Thunderaxe you stole. Where is it?" demanded the Storm Maiden. Jayce flinched as he thought back to Thalia's original weapon, now somewhere at the bottom of the ocean thanks to him. Thalia looked towards him, the Storm Maiden similarly glaring.

"Uh, look, um, I don't quite know how this all works, but Thalia's trying here. Please take the money, to at least buy her a chance to make things right. Is there not some trial she could take, or... anything?" Jayce probed. Thalia looked back at the Storm Maiden, the Cleric letting out a sigh before tying the purse to her belt. "Although you are barred from the temple... it is your birthright to take the

trial. Find the entrance, follow the call, retrieve your blessing. Then please go.” The Storm Maidens turned and started to walk away, leaving the group confused and alone on the pier. “Trial? What trial?” Jayce asked Thalia, drawing her out of her stunned expression. She smiled slightly. “The trial to become a Storm Maiden and receive the Storm Lord’s blessing.”

With a quick realisation that the visit to the island was not going to be as forthcoming as they had hoped, a large portion of the crew departed – leaving behind Yuthura, Jayce, Wicke, Bjorn, Caelie and Thalia. “How does this trial work?” Yuthura asked, her arms folded and eyes glancing occasionally to the sea stacks not too far away. “I don’t really know, but can you feel it?” Thalia asked in turn. “Feel what?” asked Wicke.

Jayce frowned as Thalia shut her eyes and went unusually quiet. One by one the others mirrored her, and then Jayce also shut his eyes. He could hear little more than the howling of the wind, the crashing of the ocean on the island, and the periodic rumble of thunder far on the horizon. He entered into Focus, the waves of his emotions and thoughts crashing around inside his head before he stilled it as he imagined a single droplet splashing and calming the waters. His senses exploded into overdrive, but he willed and discarded the ones he did not need until his eyes opened and he found Thalia staring at him.

She smiled and nodded, walking to the edge of the pier before crouching down and placing her palm on the stone of the island beneath her. Jayce followed and copied her: a faint, pulsating thumping passing through his palm, like a slow heartbeat. “What is it?” Jayce asked. Thalia shook her head and shrugged, standing up and looking back at the others. “We’re going on ahead, try to follow.”

Thalia erupted into cyan fire, racing off towards the island’s peak. She Focused on her legs, kicking into the ground to leap impossible distances, but she kept glancing back as she journeyed forwards, ensuring that Jayce was nearby. Eventually she stopped in front of a huge circular door embedded within a stone face, hunching over and panting as a drizzle soaked her body. Jayce caught his breath as well, glancing back to see if anyone else could have possibly kept up with them, but a swirling portal appeared next to them and those that had fallen behind quickly stepped through. A twinge of disappointment crossed Thalia’s face before she forced it away and stood up straight.

“Any reason why you two ran off like that?” Yuthura questioned. Thalia ignored it, stepping to the side without thought as Wicke tapped her waist and silently

instructed her to move. She then immediately frowned: since when did she let anyone command her to do anything? "What does it say?" Bjorn asked, drawing the group's attention to the large door. An array of spirals and markings had been carved into the stone portraying an image of a large person kneeling with the world on their shoulders at the bottom, and a crack in the star-filled sky marking the top half. The world had a handprint on it, and sat in the direct centre of the giant door, with several runes surrounding it.

"A blessing of she who carries the skies," Wicke stated. Yuthura read the etchings around the outside of the door. "These are all names. I'm guessing of those who have already gone inside. But it doesn't say how to open it." Thalia picked Wicke up by gripping her shoulders and placing her to the side before she pulled a gemstone out of her pocket and began to chant. Wicke opened her mouth to complain but electricity began to crackle and spark across Thalia's body, and she quickly changed her mind. Thalia placed her charged hand on the handprint, channelling the electricity through her. A moment passed before the door began to twist and turn, eventually rolling away to the side to reveal a chamber within. "Open sesame," muttered Jayce as Thalia stepped inside, the others following closely.

Several unlit torches lined the entrance. Wicke ignited one with her magic, painting the stone chamber in an orange glow. The walls were bare and carved into a hemisphere with a small pedestal in the centre; a hole sat in the middle of the pedestal, a slot perfect for one of the torches. "I'm guessing this goes here," Wicke stated, lighting the other torches before placing hers in the slot. It clicked but nothing happened. "Never mind," she muttered, taking it back out. Thalia looked at the lightning still coursing through her body, before she picked up a torch of her own and the flame turned an electric blue. The walls erupted into colour, hidden paintings emerging in her particular light. "Woah," Wicke stated. "Place it in the hole." Thalia nodded in agreement, doing just that. The flame quickly grew, lighting up the entire chamber.

"What am I looking at?" Jayce asked, taking a look at the images but letting Yuthura and Wicke take the lead. There were six distinct paintings: each leading into each other in a clockwise direction around the room. The first showed a world split into two, the top half showing a winged lizard, the bottom a pair of humans. A large circle surrounded the world, itself in two parts as well: the bottom showing a goat skull in a murky cloud, the top an eye with four feathered wings.

The next image expanded out the world, showing a rolling field of green with a towering giant walking across it, their shoulders above the clouds. The third had the giant crouched down, watching over a tiny village full of beings that looked like they were made of clay – a semi-liquid structure to their bodies. The fourth had the lands on fire, the giant felled by a dragon-like creature almost a quarter of its size. The clay people knelt around the body, their skin more solid and covered in magical glyphs.

The fifth image showed the original world, now with the feathered eye gone and the goat skull surrounding the world, with the dragon ruling the world. The final image showed a shattered, flooded land with a giant stood inside the silhouette of a much larger one. The giant's back was shown in the image, their head hung low and a broken weapon by their feet. The heavens sat above them, an iridescent expanse of waterfalls and floating islands.

Jayce turned his attention away from Wicke and Yuthura towards Caelie. Belial stood in her place, his eyes observing the paintings. "Tell me what I'm seeing?" Jayce asked him, a fast scowl coming from the Demon. "A crude interpretation of the past," came Belial's answer, drawing Wicke and Yuthura's immediate gaze. "Go on," Jayce instructed. Belial shook his head, stepping forwards. "You need to know little more than the truth: we Demons rule the heavens – and have done so for millennia. Our enemies are no more."

"You stole it," Wicke guessed. Belial turned towards her, shaking his head. "We won it. That is all that matters. Let's leave this place, there is an uncomfortable stench." Jayce glanced back to Thalia, a pouch sat in her hand. "Have you done what you needed to?" Jayce asked. She nodded, taking a pinch of blue powder from inside and marking her face with two lines. "Let's go," she stated.

They returned back to the dock, finding a Storm Maiden waiting for them. "So you have succeeded," she stated. "I suppose that was inevitable. The Priestess is waiting for you, all of you." She began to walk towards a set of stone stairs, leading further up the mountain but in a different direction as to where the group had gone before. "I'll get the others," Bjorn stated. "Go ahead, we'll catch up," he instructed. Thalia didn't hesitate, following immediately after the Storm Maiden.

Before long they arrived at a large stone temple built into the side of the mountain. Electric blue torches lit up the entrance, where a pair of Storm Maidens stood guard. They watched the Rising Aces approach, but did not stop them from entering. The entranceway held a large basin full of water, a spiral roof sat above

it, a steady stream of water falling down from it in a twist. Beyond the entranceway was a cave leading inside the mountain. Thalia took the lead, guiding the group onwards.

The cave broke apart into several pathways, but one path went down, compared to the rest that went upwards. Thalia took them down, the pulsing across the island getting louder. "What's that noise?" Wicke questioned, finally beginning to sense it herself. "I have one really far-fetched idea, and I'm not sure I want to be right," Jayce stated. The cave continued to descent, eventually concluding in a large circular room with a large decorated stone disc as its floor. The stone was significantly lighter compared to the dark grey stone present across the island.

An old woman stood in the middle, watching the group as they descended to meet her. She was tall, but hunched over from age, with muscle still distinct behind her wrinkles. Her skin was dark, her head shaved, with a metal band lining her temple. She held a large and heavy staff, a battleaxe attached on one end. Like the other Storm Maidens she had blue paint across her skin. She looked directly at Thalia. "It was against my wishes that you have come back, however the Storm Lord seems almost relieved by your return. The omens are on your side, Destroyer, and I do not know why. But as a humble servant of the Gods I will follow their command. Do not make me regret this," she stated.

She lifted the staff, slotting into the stone floor before twisting. The platform lowered, creating a spiral staircase continuing downwards. "Go ahead," instructed the Priestess, looking from Thalia towards Jayce. "All of you." She retrieved the staff and then left. "Thalia, do you know what's down there?" Jayce questioned. She shook her head, taking a deep sigh and stepping downwards once more.

It did not take long for the cave to open up, the Rising Aces walking cautiously into the heart of the island. The air itself seemed to pulsate, a low blue light illuminating the darkness and the occasional spark of lightning floating across the mist that permeated through the caves. Eventually the rushing of water filled the air, a waterfall blocking their path. Thalia walked straight through it; Wicke manipulating its movement with her magic.

Once past the water, a deep raspy breath overtook the background noise, and to all their distinct surprise, they found themselves shadowed by a colossal being laying underneath the mountain. She was colossal, her head as large as the Stacked Hand. She was vaguely humanoid, but her skin was the colour of the

night skies with stars scattered across it. Her long and loose hair was an electric blue and lay mostly within the sea she was partially submerged in.

"My Gods," Jayce exclaimed, he and his crew face to face with the nearest thing to one. "A Giant? They're real?" questioned Bjorn. She seemed asleep, her eyes shut and breathing slow. Her skin was scarred with old wounds, the majority of her body hidden behind stone and water, but her upper chest and head visible to the crew. Her right shoulder held a sickly green colour, a deep trio of cuts carved into the skin and a purple ichor slowly oozing out onto the rock next to her.

Yuthura stepped forwards, immediately making her way to the wound, but Jayce forced his attention away towards Thalia as she strode towards the Giant's head. "Storm Lord!" she yelled, the breathing halting. A deep inhale occurred followed a long exhale, and slowly the eyes of the Giant opened. She turned her head, looking directly at Thalia. The eyes were white, with large purple irises that stared intently at her, before they were quickly drawn away and Caelie stepped past Jayce.

"Demon," rumbled the Giant's voice, the translator in Jayce's necklace struggling to work. "I know you," followed her words, the rumble sending an immediate, unfathomable wave of fear across the entire group. She was colossal, there was no possible way they could even hope of harming her – any more than a fly could hope to harm them. "Belial, the Gatekeeper. Have your kin finally come to end my suffering?"

"Sharhunna, the Storm, how fitting to find you buried here. I suppose the rumours of your defeat were true," Belial returned, the tiny Demon facing her with no fear. The Giant cracked a weak smile. "Indeed, yet Separ's poison has not taken me yet even from all this time under the earth. My old enemy, why have you come?" she asked. Belial looked towards Jayce, before shaking his head and looking towards Thalia. "Your follower brought us here. I assure you, the war is long over. We lost."

"My kin succeeded without me?" she asked, a glimmer of hope and disappointment crossing her face. "No, none compared to you. After the Angels fell to us, the Dragons slew you. But... the cost of victory was a large and slow reparation," Belial stated. Sharhunna's face fell, and she shut her eyes, before a faint smile returned. "I am relieved to know the universe's curse came to haunt to you. I take it this is why you're on this realm?"

“Unfortunately so, but also because we were betrayed by Separ and his...” Belial spat onto the floor, shaking his head. “It matters not. I stave of the pull of my Mother, and I fight to find my king. Wherever he has gone.” Sharhunna nodded. “With all that is due, I respect your kind as the ones who won – even the Dragons fell to their greed, but I find it relieving that you too are on the road to your destruction.”

Belial nodded. “Earnt, truly. So, old enemy, as my respect to you and as the last of the true Giants do you wish your suffering over?” Belial asked, holding out a hand. “Wait!” Thalia called out, interrupting the pair and standing between them. “Child,” said Sharhunna softly, her eyes looking towards Thalia. “Please, you have guided so many like me before and we – I need your guidance more than ever,” Thalia begged.

Jayce glanced at the others of his crew, all watching in stunned silence apart from Yuthura as she analysed the wound of the giant, and Belial as he watched his old enemy. “I have never offered anything other than the power to guide yourself,” stated Sharhunna. “Seeing as you are yet to realise this, and are a new spark, I presume you are Thalia? The Destroyer?” Sharhunna asked. Thalia nodded, albeit with an expression of guilt.

The Giant stared into her, and Thalia felt her entire body tense – preparing to fight. A smile appeared on Sharhunna’s tired face. “My daughter,” she stated. “I feel my rage born within you. I am sorry to have placed the Storm inside of you, but I see that you have made it your own. Why are you here? Is that power not enough? Or is there something more that you seek?” she asked. Thalia looked down. “We are about to face a war, a war for survival and for freedom – a war like yours. How can we win, when even the world has turned its back on us? How can I protect my friends, rather than just being... just being a Destroyer?”

“Child, look behind you.” Thalia turned and looked at the crew around her. “One cannot carry the world on their own shoulders. It is shared, trusted. Trust and create the allies that your enemies cannot, and should that fail...” The Giant’s stare turned cold and deadly. “Destroy it all.” Thalia nodded. “You have what you need to win, regardless of what enemies you face. I wish I could do more for you, but your battles are not mine and my time has long passed.” The giant turned away and looked up at the roof she had stared at for centuries.

Yuthura stepped away from the wound, walking over to Jayce. “Well?” he asked. “I don’t know. The poison is similar to the Church’s, it’s Magical. Tempest could dispel it and then perhaps I could absorb it. Otherwise it wouldn’t take much to

finish her off." Jayce met her gaze, looking for the answer she wanted from him. "You can't absorb a Demon's poison, if it's strong enough to take her down what will it do to you?"

"I will be fine, the Willow's poisons are remarkably nastier – I have everything I need to endure it... probably." Jayce met her gaze and she nodded. "Who else could say that they revived a giant? Imagine if she fought by our side." Jayce let out a sigh and eventually nodded. Yuthura beckoned Tempest over, the pair standing by the wound and getting to work. "What are you doing?" Belial asked Jayce. "Treating the injured," he answered.

Yuthura pulled out an array of syringes from inside her bag, injecting them one after another into her body as Tempest dispelled the Magic on the poison. She then reached out and touched the Giant's shoulder, chanting and pulling the poison into her body. Yuthura dropped to her knees and immediately retched out blood. "What the hell is she doing?" Astris demanded, appearing next to Yuthura and readying to help. "No!" Yuthura yelled, stopping Astris. "I'm fine!" she fought. "Do not help, you will die and will have not made a difference."

"Jayce?" Astris asked, looking towards him. He shook his head, trusting in Yuthura as she fought through the agony. Blood oozed out of her pores, her skin a sickly green before slowly parts began to clear up and the poison dissipated. Yuthura then crawled forwards, taking a deep breath before placing her hand back on the Giant. The wound began to change colour, and a fullness returned to the Sharhunna's body.

"Doc, enough!" Bjorn ordered, pulling Yuthura's hand off the Giant. Yuthura tried to fight it but found herself unable to. "Get her back to the ship," Jayce told Bjorn, passing over the Stacked Hand. "That was stupid of you to let her do that," Bjorn told him. Jayce glanced towards the Giant, a genuine look of surprise on her face. "What have you done?" she questioned, watching Yuthura, Bjorn and a few others leave. "Cured you," Jayce answered. "Thalia is right, we have a battle that seems unwinnable coming up. We could use your help."

The Giant looked towards Belial. "You told me that Separ dethroned your King, Baal was untouchable. How was this done?" she asked the Demon. "The price of renting the domain of another stopped being paid. The tax became too high and Separ had an entire religion using his Magic. We were dragged out." "How many remain of your hundreds?" Sharhunna asked, an expression of hunger similar to Thalia's coming across her face. "Fifty or more."

“Then I apologise humans, I have my own chance for battle. But daughter I will not leave you without my blessing. Achieve your dreams, and maybe we’ll meet again. I would leave if I were you,” warned the Giant, the island beginning to shake as she began to move. Jayce’s eyes widened as he realised what was about to happen. “Belial!” he commanded, the Demon creating a series of portals to get them out of the tunnels.

Jayce raced past the Storm Maidens as they fled their temple, stepping out into the rain as the entire mountain cracked and collapsed before the colossal body of Sharhunna emerged from the remains, towering over the island. Slowly she reached up, touching the sky with both arms, a shimmer surrounding her fingers before she tore open a hole in the sky, a plane of floating islands, rainbows and waterfalls visible beyond. She reached in and began to climb before disappearing with a boom of thunder across the sky.

The Storm Maidens turned and stared at the Rising Aces in sheer disbelief. The giant expanse of clouds surrounding the island beginning to fade and the endless Storm finally calming. “What in the abyss did you do?” asked the Priestess.

Seize the Seas Tales: Boons of the Tall

Any friendliness the Rising Aces had created vanished instantaneously, but the sheer shock of reviving and releasing a Giant that had been the sole creator of the entire weather pattern of the Storm granted a long enough chance for the crew to leave without a fight. The colossal waves had calmed, the rains had settled and the thunder and lightning in the distance had ceased. The Rising Aces had actually killed the Storm, and with that their journey west grew much easier.

Even with several days having passed, Yuthura was still recovering. Her mental state was fine, but her body was extremely exhausted: taking the poison from Sharhunna had taken a toll and the entire crew knew it. Thalia knew it most of all: Yuthura had claimed it wasn’t for her, but she knew better than to believe that. Even as a potential weapon the risk hadn’t been worth it. Yet Thalia couldn’t figure out why she had done it.

She took a deep breath as she stood outside of the infirmary. There was no one on the ship that scared her – likely no one on the world that truly could scare her – yet of all the people on board Thalia had no dream of ever getting on the Doctor’s bad side. Regardless, she didn’t knock, simply testing the handle before walking inside. “Yes?” Yuthura questioned, as she sat in her chair, running tests

on herself. "Are you busy?" Thalia asked with a cautious and respectful tilt of her head.

"Very contained of yourself - you could have still knocked. No, I am able to listen, if you want to talk," Yuthura stated, before doubling over into a heavy coughing fit. Thalia grimaced and looked away. "Don't pity me, I made the choice myself." "You shouldn't have done it. We – they could have lost you," Thalia stated. A faint smile emerged on Yuthura's face. "Don't do that. There is no they, there is we. You said so yourself in that cave, to your Goddess herself. You're one of us, whether you're brave enough to admit it or not."

"Fine. We could have lost you, for something that gave us nothing." Yuthura shook her head. "It gave me the chance to heal a Giant, a God-like being akin to the True Vampire. I'd say there's very little that could have stopped me. Regardless, Thalia, say what you want to say. I won't tell anyone, I promise." Thalia faltered before she looked down at Yuthura. "Thank you," she said softly. "You're welcome."

Thalia didn't stay long after – she didn't like the kinds of feelings she experienced from conversations with people like Yuthura. Instead, as the evening had already come and gone, she went and got drunk before heading to bed. She lay in a stupor, the world spinning around and the emotions and feelings of the last few days flowing in and out of her – locked safely away from the rest of the world. "What blessing have you given me?" she thought, imagining the realm of Heaven on fire as the Storm Lord took her revenge.

When the morning came, Thalia bumped her head on the frame of her door: her eyeline just a little higher than it had been before. She smirked. "So be it, I'll be your storm."

Chapter 136: Discussions of War

It felt like a lifetime, yet also no time at all, for the Rising Aces to arrive at Caedom. Jayce let out a sigh of relief as he spotted the familiar ships of the other Pirate Lords; they had come as he had asked – perhaps there was a silver lining after all. He glanced across the city, it was busy, bustling and with far more ships than Jayce was used to. “It looks like people have fled here hoping for answers,” Bjorn suggested as he brought the Stacked Hand in to dock. Jayce nodded. “Then I guess it’s time to see if I can give some.”

“Kitty, we’ve arrived,” Jayce said softly into his communicator, thinking of the one he had given her. “I’m coming,” came her response, the words cold yet brimming with anger. He let out a sigh, it was unlikely he’d have any friendly faces in Caedom, and he now had to convince others to fight alongside him – rather than let them hand him over. She was first: without Kitty there was no chance.

“I’ll get us resupplied,” Bjorn reassured. “I’ll then drop the Stacked Hand off with Astris before I head to the Banned District and get us some allies. Win over Crach and all baned will fight alongside us. You can do it, Jayce,” he said, as the pair of them stood watching over their crew as they disembarked. “I hope so,” Jayce returned. “I know so. And if not, and it’s just us, then I know you’ll come through for me. For all of us. I’ll see you on the other side, Captain.”

“The plan?” Astris questioned as Jayce found her, Caelie, Wicke and Thalia waiting for him. A flash of green marked the arrival of Kitty as she crouched on a stack of crates nearby. “Bjorn will resupply then he’ll give you the Stacked Hand - help him out then come to the hall. Wicke, any Mages you could go to build support?” he questioned. She nodded. “Please do so, I’m counting on you.” “On it, good luck!” she responded, looking towards Astris before the pair of them headed off. Jayce looked towards Thalia and Caelie. “You two with me. We have work to do.”

Jayce turned and walked towards Kitty, but she immediately folded her arms and looked away. “Kitty-” he attempted. She glared at him out of the corner of her eye, a clear warning to watch his next words carefully. “I’m sorry,” he said simply. She turned her head slightly and looked down before letting out a sigh. “You’re an arse, Jayce Exarga. I-I don’t even know where to start with you.” “It’s happened, Kitty – it was always going to happen. You know it as well as me.”

"Yes I do, but why did it have to be you? They're planning on throwing you to the wolves, you know that, right?" she questioned. Jayce nodded: it was the most logical thing they could do. Who would want war with the Empire, after all? "Yeah, it makes sense, and if that's the case then fine. I'll fight alone if I have to." "You're an idiot. A stupidly smart idiot - how could you let them use you like this?"

Jayce glanced back towards Caelie as she stood watching nearby. Kitty let out a sigh. "Of course... Fuck! I hate you, Jayce. Really, really, really hate you right now, argh! How have you conned me into believing in you again?" she lamented, pacing back and forth with her hands on her head. "Because if it had been-" "Don't...! Just... don't. I'm glad you got Caelie back, but this is... the end of everything Jayce. War is bad for us all and I don't think we can win."

"I disagree. We stand a chance, a small one, but a chance - but only if we unite. You don't need to decide now, just please hold off your decision until I've spoken to everyone. Please, Kitty?" he asked. She sighed and nodded, turning and returning to her crates before sitting down. "Let's get this over with," she stated. Jayce nodded appreciatively, before looking back at Caelie. "Belial, here's as I promised."

Caelie's expression changed in an instant, the white mask of Belial taking over. The Demon strode forwards before stopping in front of Kitty. Kitty's face changed as well: her pupils turning into slits, a pair of curved green horns emerging from her temples, cat ears emerging within her tabby-coloured hair. Her eight tails flitted behind her, and whiskers emerged from her upper lip. Belial immediately kneeled. "Duchess," he greeted.

Pursan smiled. "Prince Belial, I'm relieved to see you," she returned, leaning back, and kicking her legs slightly. "And you Pursan, there is much to discuss." "I do not believe so, if anything I would say your presence here answers far more questions I have, than I have gained. The only question that matters, therefore, is where is our King? Where is Lord Baal?" Pursan questioned. Belial shook his head. "You are the first I have seen, or heard of. We should work together to search this world for the others, they must be here somewhere."

Pursan shook Kitty's head. "No, there are bigger things I have to worry about." "What could possibly be more important than finding our King?" Belial questioned in disbelief. "My host has dreams which are currently at risk. She takes priority. Exarga stands the best chance of finding the others, accept your new position. I'll find you if I learn anything else." Belial opened his mouth to

speak but Pursan faded away back into Kitty. "Sorry," she stated, standing up and otherwise ignoring the Demon. "I'll meet you there," she told Jayce, nodding to Thalia before heading off.

Belial created a portal underneath the crate Kitty had been sat upon, the box falling from the skies before crashing onto the pier. He then turned and looked at Jayce. "You have done as I asked," he said dejectedly. "Our terms are complete, the body is hers. You spoke of helping me find the others, is this still true?" Belial asked. Jayce nodded. "As long as Caelie wants me to help you, then I will." "I... appreciate it." Belial then faded away and Caelie returned with a very curious expression. Jayce shook his head. "Don't worry. Come on, let's go."

It took very little time to arrive at the Pirate Lord Hall and, as Jayce had been warned, the others were waiting inside. As he pushed open the doors, silence fell across the room - all who were present around the table, and those on the overlooking balconies, all turning and looking at him. "Thank you for coming," Jayce stated, walking over to one of the three empty seats and sitting down. "We're not here for you, we're here to decide what to do with you," stated the Governor, as he leant forwards in his throne.

"That I'm already aware of," Jayce returned, glancing towards Thalia and Caelie as they took positions in the shadows behind him. "However, even if you hand me over, it doesn't solve your problems. The Church have made a choice, one which they decided a long time ago. They want us gone. They want anyone who can stop them from seizing power gone. And that's not going to change anytime soon. They chose me to get to my family, to target the Marines and give themselves a chance to alienate the one thing stopping them from full military integration."

"Doesn't sound that bad. The Marines are a pain, who's to say we wouldn't want that?" questioned Ruyn Masse – the Fleet Sinker. Jayce glanced towards him, before then looking at Crach Leòmhann Cridhe – the Baned King. "Perhaps for you Ruyn, but the Church are targeting more than just Pirates and Mages. The Capital is empty of baned!" Jayce declared, staring straight at Crach – a tension appearing on his brow. "If they seize power, it won't just be the Capital where the baned are persecuted. And after they're gone, and so am I, and so are the Mages," Jayce stated, looking towards Mirabelle Delyth – the Mistress of Magic - before failing to find Zoya. "Then who's next? Do you think you'll be safe?"

Murmurs swirled around the rafters of the room. "Most of us are already at war – whether you like it or not!" Jayce stated, standing up and looking between

Crach and Mirabelle. "Now I'm not going to beg for help, and if you do decide to kick me out, then fine. Strigon had his chance to help me, and suffered the consequences for not doing so and I'm not going to apologise for sending that scumbag fleeing for the Frontier. But we have a chance, a real chance to win--"

"You've spoken enough," Crach declared. Jayce shut his mouth and sat back down. There was nothing more he really could say – he'd made his points, and it was up to those who had reason to trust him to convince the others. "You have weakened us greatly, Exarga. And now you have brought war to our doors. You are right: we have to fight, it is inevitable, but I'm not sure I trust someone like you to fight by my side," he stated, standing up and reaching outwards. A huge black greataxe flew out of the shadows into his hands.

The Governor drew a golden pistol and Ruyn drew a large sword from across his back. Mirabelle remained seated, uncertain what to do, but Kitty leapt across the table and snarled at the others – her Demon form emerging. Caelie and Thalia similarly appeared next to Jayce, Thalia staring her grandfather down, and Caelie ready to get them out of there. Jayce remained seated, his attention towards Mirabelle. She glanced behind her, looking to the shadows where her own people stood. Jayce smiled slightly as he saw Tim Kane.

"Enough!" Mirabelle screamed, standing to her feet. "This is not the time, and I don't want to have to clean up corpses. A fleet is coming here! And it could come at any time." She looked towards Jayce. "Explain it all, how has this happened?" Jayce looked towards one of the empty seats. "Strigon refused to help me cure my crewmate. He was threatened by her because she was made to be his replacement."

Jayce then looked towards Caelie. "I thought I lost Caelie, when we fought against the Church with the Marines to stop them getting a weapon to turn anyone they wanted into their pawn. I found her again, the Church tried to stop me getting her back – that's why we were in the Capital. As Captains we are moulded by our people, we trust ourselves to them and they trust themselves to us. Would you not turn your back on the world for them?" Jayce questioned.

Crach stared at Thalia, genuine disbelief in his eyes as she looked back at him. Slowly he lowered his axe, noticing the Storm Maiden markings she had made on her arms and face. "You went back?" he questioned. Thalia nodded, lowering her own weapon. "We did. My Captain took me there," she stated. Crach turned his attention back towards Jayce. "Lower your weapons, Delyth is right. Exarga

is right." Crach sat back down, his axe fading back into shadow. "You've grown, grandchild. I'm pleased to see it."

"Exarga, you said you had a plan - what is it?" Crach asked, Kitty remaining where she was as the others took their seats. "I do, but I have to ask - where's Zoya?" Jayce questioned. The others looked around, waiting for someone else to answer, but nothing came. "Has she been here at all?" Jayce asked. The others shook their heads. "We were going to wait for her, but you arrived," said Mirabelle.

A deeply uncomfortable thought came to Jayce's mind, followed by an immediate other. "What's stopped the Empire from coming here before?" Jayce questioned. "There are countless traps and early warnings placed along the routes, let alone the difficulty of travel here for a fleet," Kitty answered. Jayce looked to her. "Who set them up?" he pressed, his heart racing nervously in his chest. "I did," answered Mirabelle, bringing a reprieve of relief to Jayce. "Myself and Zoya."

The ground rumbled and the building shook. "The hell was that?" the Governor questioned, the Pirate Lords getting to their feet and looking around. Another explosion rumbled the room, and a hole opened up in the roof. "We've been betrayed!" announced Crach, his thoughts immediately grasping what Jayce had been dreading. "To your ships!" he declared, turning and rushing to the doors with his people following closely behind.

The others began to rush off, but Jayce caught Kitty. "Stay alive, get out of here. We can worry about what comes next once we've escaped," he told her. She nodded. "Good luck, don't die!" she told him, placing a hand on his arm before leaping upwards and exiting through the hole in the roof. Jayce turned towards Caelie and Thalia. "Don't stop until you've reached the Stacked Hand. I'll be there," he ordered, sending them on ahead as he followed Kitty through the hole in the roof.

He stood on top of the roof, his eyes wide and heart pounding as he stared across the city of Caedom as it burned with fire. A fleet of at least forty ships were scattered across the bay, laying siege to the city as they fired barrage after barrage against the countless ships that were docked and the buildings that made up the city. Amongst the fleet of Navy ships, Jayce spotted at least fifteen Marine warships - all flying the colours of the red fleet. Amongst them he spotted the Sole Survivor, Alara's ship - she was here.

Several Imperial ships had docked, their crews waging war against any they encountered. Jayce watched as another building collapsed as it was bombarded, before turning his attention outwards. The fleet had not yet blocked off the exits, but they were opening fire on any ships that began to move – regardless of who was on them. “Captain?” came Falconer’s voice through Jayce’s communicator. “I’m here, everyone get back to the ship and prepare for battle – we’re getting out of here and we’re taking as many people as possible with us.” Jayce looked back towards the Sole Survivor. “Please, Alara, make the right choice.”

Seize the Seas Tales: Responsibility

“This whole thing is screwed up, Alara, all of it,” stated Riley, as they strode through the very busy corridors of the Imperial Citadel. “Voice down, Riley,” Alara warned, her eyes glancing towards the various Navy around them, all equally staring back with suspicion. “War? Against... you know who,” Riley stated, hurrying to keep up with Alara. Alara glanced towards the red coloured door they had been heading to. “Wait here,” Alara ordered, knocking before entering.

The Red Admiral’s office was a mess and Admiral Exarga was no different. Alara shut the door behind her and locked it before standing to attention. “Admiral,” she greeted, drawing the immediate furious glare of Cassandra. “What?” she snapped, prompting a flinch from Alara that immediately disarmed the Admiral as she sat down defeated in her chair. “Sorry,” she said softly. Alara shook it off, still remaining at attention until Cassandra gestured for her to sit.

“You called for me, I... how can I help undo this?” Alara questioned. Cassandra let out a sigh and leant back in her chair. “We can’t. They’ve got us, properly got us – Jayce gave them all the ammo they needed to throw doubt onto the Marines. We’ve not been around long enough to survive a direct attack. Especially as Admiral Truth and I are the face of the Marines, and regardless of what Jayce believes – his actions impact me. The Church loves Truth, but we’re vulnerable regardless. I’ve got a meeting with the Emperor and the Fleet Admiral, but... it’s bad Alara.”

“What can they do, we’re an official branch of the Navy – they can’t just-” Admiral Exarga cut her off with a simple look. “They can and will, potentially with mass incarceration - or worse. There’s only one thing that we can do.” “Go to war,” Alara confirmed. Cassandra nodded, covering her face with her hands. “That stupid idiot,” Alara stated, drawing a faint smile from the Admiral. “He’s just a patsy. He could have made it harder for them, but... doesn’t matter.

I'm assigning you and a large portion of the red fleet to this assault force. You'll sail west with the Church and will crush the Pirate Lords. Prove to the Empire we're still necessary."

"What about-" Again Cassandra cut her off, shaking her head and looking towards the door. "The Ursus Ultra will be joining you, but we'll stay behind to coordinate. I need you to do your duty, where I cannot. Am I understood?" Alara looked down. "Admiral... I-I," Alara attempted before her words failed her. "I know, but there's no choice left. Just get it done, and you'll have more than earned Captaincy. Please, Alara."

Alara left the Admiral's office silently and she didn't say anything until she and Riley had left Navy Headquarters and were walking back to the dockyard, where the Sole Survivor sat waiting. "We do our job. That is all," Alara told Riley. "Even if...?" Riley questioned. Alara simply nodded. "Shit... I'm sorry." "Don't be. He was warned. It's on him to stay alive. We can't regret doing our duty."

To Alara's further frustration and surprise she found Witchford stood next to the Stacked Hand with a Bishop. "Commander Vanathur, it took you long enough," said the Priest. "The others of the fleet are already preparing to move, if we don't leave soon we'll have to catch up – and I do not want to push our crew anymore than we have to," he stated. Alara looked towards Witchford for clarification, but the Bishop tutted. "Is that how you greet a superior officer, Commander?" questioned the Bishop, handing over a piece of paper – her orders.

Alara read it quickly, doing everything she possibly could not to show a reaction. She put the paper away and stood at attention. "My apologies, Sir. I had not realised the Church were being put in command," she responded. He nodded. "A foolish mistake, I'm sure, and one you won't make again, should you wish for a fruitful career in our Empire. Regardless, this is your ship, so please do make me at home. Refer to me as Bishop Pius. I look forward to meeting the rest of my crew. Especially now that I reassigned that vermin."

Alara's face twitched. "Come again?" she questioned, glancing from the Bishop to Witchford. "Come again, sir?" he corrected, looking down at her with a clear look of disappointment. "Come again, sir?" Alara corrected. He nodded, turning and walking towards the Sole Survivor. "The baned. I reassigned it to Truth's fleet. I'm sure it will do its role well there. Some of the golems I've brought on board will more than suffice as expendable muscle. Anyway, Commander – let's move. We have heretics to hunt."

Alara looked towards Witchford as he stood in shame, and then Riley as she stared at the Bishop with pure and divine hatred, her hands ready to draw her weapon. “No,” Alara mouthed. “He’ll be fine,” she lied, her mind immediately thinking back to all the stories Wulf had told her about the Baned Butcherer. “I’ll come back for you, Wulf,” she thought, looking towards the Citadel – once a bastion of hope and order, now a prison of servitude.

Chapter 137: Invasion

Jayce leapt off the roof of the Pirate Hall, heading immediately in the direction of the concealed Pirate Lord bays. Smoke and screams filled the air as the city of Caedom continued to burn under the assault of the Empire, but he shut it out – his mind focusing on his best next step. He raced through the streets, past panicked bystanders and Pirates heading to action. This was his fault - the Empire was here because of him. He had to make it right.

Jayce spotted the Stacked Hand amongst the cluster of Pirate Lord ships, but he noticed not all of his crew were present. “Exarga, your plan?” questioned Crach, forcing Jayce’s attention away from his crew and towards the Pirate Lords and their crews. “My plan?” Jayce questioned, surprised by the question and the fact that people were looking to him for answers. “Right,” he said, catching himself. “We need to escape this place – it’s the red fleet, that means Admiral Exarga is coming personally.”

The name brought out a distinct expression of unnerve from the large group. “They’re targeting any ship that leaves the docks, we need to protect the others and give them a chance to get out of here,” Jayce stated. Ruyn and the Governor both immediately shook their heads. “This is ridiculous,” stated Ruyn. “If you want to die for others then go ahead, I’m not wasting my life.” He turned and headed to his flagship with his crew, the Governor similarly heading to his own.

Jayce looked towards Mirabelle, Kitty and Crach. “We’re staying,” Kitty declared, the others nodding in agreement. “Get out there and draw the fleet’s attention. We need to take their fire away from the ships and we need to secure our exit before it’s sealed off,” Jayce instructed. Crach nodded, turning and heading to his ship. “I’ll round up the Mages, show the Empire why we’re not something to mess with,” stated Mirabelle. Jayce glanced towards Tim, who nodded to him. “Good luck,” he stated, heading off with Mirabelle. Jayce turned to Kitty and her Delivery Kats. “We’re going to ensure there’s an exit,” he told her. She nodded. “We’ll hold it as long as we can, but this is not a good environment for ships to battle it out,” she warned. Jayce nodded in agreement, a smile creeping onto his face. “That’s exactly why we have the edge.”

“Who are we missing?” Jayce asked, as he got on board the Stacked Hand. “Wicke is out there with Ordo and Yuthura. Bjorn still hasn’t come back from the Baned District,” Astris stated. Jayce hesitated as he thought about his next orders. “We need to go, Jayce. They’ll be fine. We’ll pick them up before we leave,” Astris told him. Reluctantly he agreed, not that he had much choice as Ruyn blasted his

way out of the bay, eliminating any chance of a subtle emergence. "I have the helm!" Jayce declared, taking the wheel of the Stacked Hand for himself. "Get us moving!"

In a rapid breakout, the Pirate Lords left their bay into the warzone. Ruyn Masse sailed straight out and forwards with his colossal flagship, barrelling through a Navy ship too close to the city before - with a large purple zap - he teleported away. The Governor followed close behind, unleashing a shower of fiery cannon balls on the surprised fleet before he made his way straight to the nearest exit, even slamming another Pirate ship trying to escape out of the way. "Bastard," Jayce muttered, following closely behind the Great Seacat into a hail of cannon balls.

"Tempest!" Jayce yelled, a bubble surrounding the Stacked Hand as the djinn raised his shields. "Now might be a good chance to use our main cannon," Marisha suggested from the main deck. Jayce looked towards the colossal weapon: it hadn't been tested yet due to warnings of volatility from Tempest, and Jayce didn't want to waste the minimal amount of cannonballs the djinn had specially made for the weapon. The materials to fix the cannon and make more special cannonballs were too expensive and difficult to obtain at the moment. "No, not now," he stated, "Alara could be collateral damage."

An array of brilliantly coloured bolts, beams and balls launched from the city, painting the enemy fleet in fire, ice, and lightning. Several smaller ships moved forwards, deliberately sacrificing themselves to protect the larger warships as they got into position, before firing off a continuous barrage in retaliation. It had worked, their attention had turned to the city, freeing up the ships that could still move. Crach's fleet surged forwards to put further pressure on the enemy, charging the enemy in direct personal combat and forcing them to accept a potential beatdown or to break ranks and move outwards.

Jayce and Kitty set their eyes on the exit from Caedom furthest from the fleet. The Marine ships had placed themselves around the majority of the others, sealing the exits and guarding the presumed incoming arrival of the Ursus Ultra. Yet, the furthest exit was still relatively unguarded – until Jayce witnessed a ship waving a white flag sailing towards it. The fleet unloaded their cannons, massacring the noncombatant crew and, Jayce could only assume, their countless civilians on board.

"Captain," Astris called up, standing with Thalia and Caelie. He realised what they were after. The Stacked Hand could shoot back, but it was missing its main

weapon: Wicke. "Go," he told them, Caelie opening a portal and the trio heading through to personally assault the enemy fleet. A huge blast of lightning descended from the skies onto one of the Navy warships, the ship splintering into pieces as Thalia went on the assault.

"Jayce, can you hear me?" came Wicke's voice through his communicator. "I'm here," he responded, moving the Stacked Hand to shield a smaller ship. "We're going to need a pickup, we're pinned down. Is everyone there?" she asked. "No, Bjorn's out in the city somewhere," he returned. An explosion blasted a nearby Navy ship into ash and splinters, forcing Jayce to look away - back towards the city. It lay in ruins, smoke obscuring the height of it, fires consuming the lowest of it.

"Bjorn, are you there?" Jayce called out, a deep sense of worry passing through him. "Still alive," came his response. "We're fighting back, but there's Paladins." "Link up with Wicke, we'll come and pick up whoever we can. Stay alive." "Will do." Jayce looked towards the countless ships battling and fleeing, the entire battlefield a chaotic mess. He searched through it all for the Sole Survivor: Alara's ship still sitting back amongst the other Marines.

Alara couldn't stomach it. The pain, the misery – the pointless death the Church and Bishop Pius were forcing her and her crew to participate in. It was senseless, and stood against everything she ever thought she stood for. These weren't all Pirates, or even Mages, the majority of the people here were civilians, and Pius and the others were making her and her fellow Marines do their dirty work. Another fleeing ship came their way, once again pleading for mercy. She grit her teeth and looked down. Orders were orders.

"You may open fire. Burn those heretics out of our pure world," ordered Pius coldly, as he stood next her by the helm. A quintet of golem guards had been deliberately placed across the main deck of her ship, each overseeing the main gunnery stations, and an additional pair flanked the Bishop – a deliberate show of strength and an attempt to intimidate her. "Commander," reinforced the Weapon softly, as he stood behind the pair of them.

Alara faltered, Witchford watching her from below as he waited for her orders. Another Marine ship opened fire, followed by another pair. They didn't miss and Alara saw no point in adding to the already critical damage. "I gave you an order Commander. I will not tolerate any more hesitation. These are criminals. Devils who attacked our Capital – this is their punishment, as dictated by not only the

Emperor and your Admiral, but by the Pope himself. Open fire, or you will be relieved from duty," ordered Pius.

Alara looked up, looking out towards the city of Caedom. Jayce had said he'd show it to her someday. This was not how she had imagined or ever wanted it to be. She frowned, spotting three Navy ships departing the city. The middle one seemed larger than the other two, and of a different design: a prison ship, she realised. "I thought we weren't taking prisoners?" Alara questioned, pointing to the ships with her glaive before noticing several others. "Ah, those. All part of the grand design, Commander. In our new Empire, even the baned will have their uses," Pius stated.

If there had been one thing Alara had noticed about Pius, it was that his ego was overwhelming and, paired with his cultist devotion, he was ever ready to rave about the Church and its future. "It's quite brilliant you see-" he started, only to falter and realise what she was doing. "You're a smart girl, very clever, but your insolence is not charming." Pius looked outwards towards a Marine ship breaking ranks and moving forwards to try to rescue survivors of the sunk vessel. "A new target, and your last chance."

"Sir, those are-" she attempted. He ignored her, stepping forwards past her and holding onto the railing. "They are traitors. Follow my orders, Commander, or you will be detained." Alara's crew looked towards her in desperation, but she looked towards the Weapon. He stared in disbelief, and with the faintest shake of his head she made a choice. Alara stepped forwards, carrying her glaive through the back of the Bishop in an upwards sweep – hoisting him into the air for her crew to see.

He gasped in stunned surprise, slowly looking back down at her over his shoulder as his blood painted the deck. She met his eyes with her own utter hatred. "Go to hell," she told him. His body then slipped further down the glaive's large blade, and he went limp. Alara kicked the base of her glaive, dropping his corpse to the floor with a crunch before she immediately dropped her weapon and held up her hands, the golems across the ship moving to attack her.

"Stop!" ordered the Weapon, the golems freezing in place on his command. She looked at him, the only remaining factor on the ship that could or would question her decision. "These are people. People no different from us. Innocent people who have done nothing wrong other than live outside of our Empire, and by their

own choice. Are we just going to stand back and watch them be murdered?" she questioned, holding her hands out and offering for him to shackle them.

The Weapon looked down at her, and then at the corpse she had created. He picked up her glaive and presented it to her. "At your command, Commander," he stated, turning his back on everything the Empire had made him to be. She nodded, taking the glaive and looking down at the body. "He fell overboard after a stray shot!" she concluded to the crew. The Weapon nodded in agreement, picking up the Bishop and throwing him into the waters before he looked at the golems. "Hold onto Bishop Pius' body," he ordered the stone statues, the golems following his command and leaping overboard.

"Helm, put us in front of the fleet, protect those civilians!" Alara ordered, making a decision that for the first time in a long time she actually felt good about. The Sole Survivor began to move, following her command to move in front of the fleet, but to her distinct surprise and great relief, her ship wasn't the only one that moved. She glanced outwards, finding the familiar and reassuring sight of the Stacked Hand amongst the chaos. "Please see us," she muttered.

The Imperial fleet began to move, the Marines pushing forwards, not to lay an additional assault but to seemingly interfere with the others gunning down anyone trying to leave. The Sole Survivor was at its lead, bringing an immediate smile to Jayce's face. "She made her choice!" he laughed. "We're getting out of here!" Jayce yelled. "Wicke, prepare for a pick up. Kitty, lead the way to the exit!" he ordered, getting an immediate acknowledgement from Kitty.

"Jayce, we haven't found Bjorn!" cried Wicke into her communicator as she, Ordo and Yuthura led anyone they could find towards the few remaining ships in dock. "I'll go!" Ordo yelled, turning and beginning to move only to be pushed out of the way of a golden beam of light. "No," Wicke cried out. "We need you!" she stated, pointing towards the Paladins encroaching upon them. Ordo met her panicked expression before glancing towards Yuthura as she shook her head.

"Bjorn! Bjorn!" Jayce called out into his communicator, receiving no response. Caelie, Astris and Thalia reappeared on the main deck through Caelie's portal, all of them injured and exhausted but looking to him for further orders. "I can't reach Bjorn," Jayce stated to Astris, as she stepped up on to the aft deck. Her eyes widened and she looked towards the burning city. "What about Wicke and the others?"

A huge beam of light lit up the sky from one of the docks. "There!" Jayce stated, angling the ship towards a pair of civilian vessels leaving the docks. "Did you find him?" Jayce asked through his communicator, handing the wheel to Astris as he spotted Ordo, Yuthura and Wicke on one of the ships. Caelie opened a portal for them, the trio stepping through before Jayce got his answer as he saw their expressions. "Bjorn! Bjorn! Bjorn, please come in!" Jayce begged, receiving no response.

The Imperial fleet had had enough, the warships that had been holding back and bombarding the city beginning to move forwards towards the Marine ships blocking their path. "We need to go now!" Astris called out. Jayce looked back to her, unable to say anything as he prayed for Bjorn to answer. "Jayce!" she stated, almost pleadingly. A hand placed itself on his arm and he turned, meeting Marisha's direct gaze. Tears streamed down her face, and she shook her head. "We need to go!" she told him. "He's alive, he has to be, but we can't do anything for him here. We need to go before it's too late!" she cried.

Jayce looked down, his eyes beginning to water, but she placed a hand on his cheek. "He would do the same for you," she told him. "We'll find him, I know you will." He shook his head and looked towards Astris, his entire being telling him to stay and find Bjorn – but he knew Marisha was right, and she was the last person who would ever leave Bjorn behind. "Get us out of here!" he ordered. "Wicke, signal everyone!"

The Stacked Hand lurched as Astris span the wheel, guiding the ship towards the exit and the rapids beyond. They sailed through huge pieces of wreckage, a fleet of others sailing behind and ahead of them as the survivors of Caedom fled for their lives. Jayce ran to the back of the ship, leaning on the railing and looking outwards to the city on fire. "Bjorn, if you can hear me. We'll find you, I promise. Stay alive, we're coming back for you!"

"I know," came a singular response, as the Stacked Hand tilted and rode the rapids away.

Seize the Seas Tales: Strained Connections

Arthuria still wasn't sure of everything that had been bestowed upon her. The title of Sentinel had been everything she had ever wanted: she was now, for undeniable certain, the Elder's closest. She was in her inner circle, her round table of personal knights. Yet the title felt empty; her ceremony had been brief – her

duty: to sail with the fleet and lead the holy crusade, felt almost like a punishment. Or a reason to get rid of her.

For what was the first strike in the war against the Pirates, she was the only Sentinel going. Doubts filled her mind completely as she roamed the Palace, making her final preparations. Was she purely meat for a grinder? No Church leaders were going, and it was just the Red Admiral who was sailing the fleet. Something didn't feel right. Something didn't add up. She was certain, somehow, this was going to go wrong.

She abandoned her armour as soon as she reached her quarters, slipping out and back into her identity as Handmaiden Sister Arthuria, heading immediately to find Mai Lu Mina. The Demon girl sat waiting for her, as if she'd known she was coming somehow. "Sentinel," she greeted with a broad smile, that brought deep discontent to Arthuria. "How did you know I was...?" Arthuria questioned, following Mai Lu's gesture to sit amongst the many pillows. "Your blood," stated a mixture of Baal and Mai Lu. "Meaning?" Arthuria pressed.

The girl picked her nose, flicking a splatter of blood onto the floor in an unfortunately all-too-familiar manner. The blood spread out into a series of lines that Arthuria immediately recognised as the layout of the Holy Palace. "Did you really think he wouldn't know?" Mai Lu asked with a soft giggle. "Baal sees all he needs to." Arthuria made an immediate personal note to never let Mai Lu come close to her with anything resembling a wound.

"I see. You're right, I am a Sentinel now, I just had the ceremony," Arthuria clarified. Mai Lu nodded, her red and pink glowing eyes staring straight at her, making Arthuria question which being she was talking to. "You're leaving?" Mai Lu asked. Arthuria nodded. "For a few months and then we'll be back." "You came to say goodbye?" the little girl asked. Arthuria nodded again. "Why?" "Why wouldn't I?" Arthuria returned, surprised by the question before being more surprised by her answer.

"You spied on us, it was all for your Elder," Mai Lu said almost mournfully. "I... I did," Arthuria admitted. "But I did..." Arthuria sighed. "I enjoyed our time together. It was fun and..." Mai Lu dove forwards, placing her head into Arthuria's chest as she embraced her. "I don't want things to change," she said quietly. "But it's all changing." Arthuria didn't know what to say, simply hugging the child back. "What do you mean?" she asked, sensing Mai Lu and Baal knew something she didn't, likely a lot that she didn't. Mai Lu released her grip, taking Arthuria's hands and looking up at her. "Don't trust anything."

Arthuria found herself pondering the words all the way to the Sister's convent. The Demon child had not elaborated further, and after Baal took her over he had immediately sent Arthuria away under threat. She shook her head as she walked, the streets were busy, active, but entirely militarised – there were no casual citizens walking around, and any citizens that were present had their heads down and were hurrying to their destinations.

Pirate Lord Exarga had brought fear to the Empire, he had caused all of this, but Arthuria couldn't help but think back to when she had met him. Jayce Exarga had donated a lot of money to the orphans, and he hadn't seemed that bad. She shook her thoughts away, thinking back to Metz and Baudricourt as they had lain in hospital beds – both brutalised by him, both unwilling to even discuss it. "It doesn't matter, does it," she lamented, walking up to the doors. "This is what the Church wants. This is what the Elder wants..."

"Why are you here?" questioned Athena, as she, Meredea and a few other Sisters stood in the locker rooms with Arthuria. "I wanted to thank you, all of you, for looking after me. You are my Sisters, and I wanted to ensure that, if I don't come back, that you knew that," Arthuria laid out. Meredea stepped forwards and pulled her into a tight hug. "Of course we knew that, and you will be coming back, Sister." Arthuria held her tightly, not wanting to let go as she felt the deep fear inside of her start to bubble up – her body trembling slightly.

"Just stay alive, that's all you need to do," reassured Athena, as she looked down at Arthuria and took Meredea's place. "Whatever comes after, we have your back. You can trust me on that. I'm not letting anything happen to you," she stated. Arthuria nodded, smiling appreciatively as another warning came into the back of her mind. "Is something coming?" Arthuria questioned. Athena's face went blank before she cracked a smile and laughed. "What? No, of course not."

Arthuria finished her goodbyes as night began to fall, she then made her way up to the roof of the convent and waited for her final goodbye. It didn't take long before she saw a silhouette in the brightness of the moonlight, a broomstick hovering in front of her. Morgana had dressed up, she looked almost like the other Daughters of Shade but Arthuria could still see her immaturity. Her long black hair floated in the wind, her round ears sticking out between the strands, and her pale skin almost white in the moonlight. Her golden eyes, usually wide and friendly, held nothing more than anger.

Arthuria felt her body go cold, a deep realisation passing through her. "Sentinel," greeted Morgana. Arthuria looked down. "Morgana," she said softly. "It's good

to see you." Morgana remained floating on her broomstick, but she folded her arms and crossed her legs. "Take it off, Sister," she instructed. Arthuria nodded, reaching up and uncovering her eyes. As she looked up, where Arthuria had been expecting anger, she saw tears.

"How could I be so stupid?" Morgana questioned, a few tears falling away into the wind before she wiped her face. "Morgana, I-I'm sorry. It wasn't about you." "Yeah, I know," Morgana stated, her golden eyes meeting Arthuria's. "It was just your job. Your duty to your Elder. I understand," she said completely defeated. "Were you not doing the same?" Arthuria questioned, going on the offensive. "No, no I was not. I thought you... I... you were my friend. But I guess that's on me."

"Morgana, I'm sorry, but I did – I-I do care about you. I really do." Morgana shook her head. "You never have, the second things become not about you I'm discarded. It's always the same. Like mother like daughter, I suppose." Arthuria frowned, confused as to what Morgana was talking about. Morgana seemed to realise as well, a genuine look of disbelief crossing her face. "Sister," Morgana said, shaking her head.

Arthuria stared at her, until a horrified realisation crossed her mind. "You were looking for me. All this time... You're my sister?" Arthuria grasped, thinking back to the three siblings she often dreamt about: her older Sister Elaine, and her two half-sisters Morgana and Morgause. "Yeah... I am, but I guess I was right after all – you never cared enough to remember me," Morgana said sadly, looking away. "Morgana, I- you left."

"Don't you dare say that! I never left! You're mother kicked us out and father followed her demands because she was his wife. Your family took everything from us, me and Morgause! My mother worked herself to death because of you." "Where's Morgause?" Arthuria questioned, thinking back to the silver-haired baby. "I don't know, as I told you so long ago, I had no reason to stay, and they were better off without me – one less mouth to feed."

"Morgana, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, I didn't know what happened to you. Father left us after he... after he cheated again. Elaine left when he was caught and I..." "I don't care!" Morgana cried. "Boo hoo for you. You lied to me! Used me!" "I didn't know you were my sister!" Arthuria returned. Morgana shook her head in disbelief. "Why didn't you say anything, surely you knew?" Arthuria questioned. "No, somehow I didn't. I should have known – it was the most obvious thing in the world, but somehow I just... hoped you weren't. I loved you,

adored you, dreamt of you. You were like an actual sister to me, the only person I believed actually gave a damn about me! But you were just using me..."

"I am your sister, Morgana. And I'm so happy to know that you are mine. Please, just wait for me to get back. We can talk from dawn to dusk, for days on end if you need to – I'm here. I care about you – you were just..." Arthuria pleaded. "A gullible fool for you to use," Morgana completed. Arthuria shook her head. "No, you are clever, and you've risen to your position on your own merit. I chose you because of that – because, yes, you were a good source of information, but because I knew you would obtain what you were after."

"Which is what? To become a Witch, to get power and glory? Arthuria, I would have left if you asked me to. In an instant, I would have. I just wanted to feel cared about, respected. You pushed me further towards them. Well I've got it now, and I'll have so much more once the Queen finds out about you and your Elder," she threatened. Arthuria shook her head, noticing Morgana's eyes flick towards Arthuria's concealed sword. Arthuria threw her staff away and held up her hands. "If that's what you want to do then fine. I won't stop you. But you know what they're like down there. And something is about to happen. Something evil and corrupt."

Morgana shook her head and floated backwards. "Morgana, my life is in your hands, but I will be back, and we'll talk then, I promise. Just please don't seal yourself away with them. If they give you a chance to become a full Witch, don't do it – lie, stall, whatever you have to do. Don't let them change you into one of them. If we want to we can leave, run away together and never come back. Just wait for me." Morgana stared at her and then forced herself to look away, flying into the night whilst leaving behind a trail of tears.

Arthuria dropped to her knees and held her head in her hands as an identical wave of emotion emerged. She sat in the coldness of the night for a while before she forced herself to stand, wiped her face and put her blindfold back on and then retrieved her staff. It was now Morgana's choice to make and Arthuria more than deserved whatever she decided. She stood tall on the rooftop, looking out across the horizon. "Elaine, Morgause, wherever you two are, I hope you're safe."

Chapter 138: Picking Sides

"Good luck, stay alive," stated Sentinel Jean de Metz, as he stood on the pier in front of Arthuria. She looked up at him and smiled. He had cut his messy sand-coloured hair short, and his green eyes looked tired and sad, but he looked good. Handsome as always. "I will, Sentinel," she stated, smiling widely as she finally stood as his equal. "You better, I still need to take you out to celebrate... If you see Exarga, don't engage. He's too strong, stronger than maybe even the Elder." Arthuria looked down at Metz' metal leg, a consequence of his encounter with the Pirate Lord. "Understood, wait for me to get back as a hero. Then you're paying for dinner," she told him. He moved slightly, leaning forwards just an inch, before he hesitated and stepped back. "See you on the other side, Arty."

Arthuria watched him leave, a small smile remaining on her face and her ears burning hot until he disappeared out of sight. She then turned and glanced towards Proctor Gujin, the old man standing nearby as he too waited to send her off. "He adores you, you know," he stated bluntly, hobbling over to her. She scowled and shook her head. "Shush." He bellowed with laughter before patting her hard on her back, her armour rattling. "It's a shame that you're leaving so soon after just coming back. We have a lot to catch up on."

"Agreed, we'll talk when I get back," Arthuria promised. He didn't look so sure, glancing towards the various other ships being loaded. Arthuria frowned: a large majority of passengers seemed to be new Initiates and Squires, all with mostly female Paladin or Knight escorts. "I've really been given the bottom of the barrel, haven't I?" Arthuria questioned. Gujin looked at her before beckoning her closer. "Keep your wits about you, more is going on than meets the eye." He stepped back. "I'll prepare my best cheese for your return, and maybe I'll finally give that rust bucket suit of yours an upgrade!" he promised, following with a loud and hearty laugh. She nodded appreciatively before turning and boarding her ship.

"We're going in!" Arthuria declared to the experienced Knights and Paladins sent with her. "What of the Squires and Initiates, should they not be participating in this glory?" questioned Paladin Marshal. He was a large man, and an experienced fighter that carried weight to his words. Of every Paladin on the mission, he was the one who had questioned her the most and would be her replacement should she fall. "No, their glory comes from being here, but those children are not ready. The twenty of us will be enough. The others have their orders."

Their ship practically rammed the pier they were heading towards and Arthuria leapt over the side, using her Focus to brace her fall as the others clambered down. Athena had been right, Focus was a tool that the Order were fools not to train with, magical items only went so far. "Forwards!" she ordered, drawing her blade from its borrowed sheath and charging forwards into the burning city. She immediately faltered: she had been expecting Pirates and killers, but the corpses around were women and children – civilians caught in the crossfire.

A scream for help drew her attention towards a burning building, and she saw several others begin to move to assist, putting away their blades. "What do you think you're doing?" questioned Paladin Marshal. "We are in enemy territory, all around us are Pirates and heretics. Leave them, let them perish to their own misguided ways," he ordered. Arthuria's eyes widened, a small group of survivors stumbling through the smoke towards them. It looked like a family, two parents and a little boy. "Please," choked the man, his clothes torn and face bloody. Paladin Marshal stepped towards them with his sword drawn.

"Paladin, wait!" Arthuria called out, but Marshal cut them down anyway. Arthuria stormed towards him, her heart racing in her chest. This was a massacre of civilians, they weren't the enemy. "I ordered you to wait!" she yelled. He turned and looked down at her. "Were you going to tell me not to?" he questioned. "They were civilians!" she returned. He nodded in resigned acceptance before shaking his head. "So, you were. Listen up!" he called out the large group.

"Your ideals are warped and broken Sentinel," he declared, levelling his sword towards her. "We are here to hunt down the enemies of the Church and execute them. There is no mercy. All are our enemy." He turned to the Paladins around them. "You have been twisted and warped by the traitorous Elder into becoming lesser than yourselves. We are Paladins! Holy crusaders sent by the Gods and the Pope himself! Do you disagree, Sentinel?"

"Marshal, who has told you this?" she questioned, backing away and gripping her sword as she shook her head. Immediately several Knights pressed themselves to Paladin Marshal's side, leaving the others confused. "The Elder has betrayed herself, and all who stand with her are traitors to the Empire! It's a shame, Pendragon, you're spoken highly of, but I guess none are safe from the Elder's manipulations. Execute her and any who stand with her!" ordered the Paladin. "Yes sir!" declared his squad.

"Knights, to me!" Arthuria declared, entering into Focus and rushing forwards. The minority of the Knights around her that had not gone to the Paladin's side rallied to her, but Arthuria didn't need them. She targeted Paladin Marshal first, leaping using her Focus as she chanted a Divine Smite, a glowing golden aura surrounding her shoulders, eyes and sword. She struck downwards, piercing his body through a parting in his chestplate before a burst of holy energy eviscerated any miniscule chance of survival he had.

The other Knights backed away in horror after witnessing the immediate demise of their leader, following their training as they all began to ready their spells. Arthuria pressed forwards, chanting as she used her Focus to cut through the partings in their armour – severing limbs and heads in singular precise strikes. With the enemy's attention on her, her loyalists struck from behind and the battle was over in an instant.

She panted as her Focus broke, she wasn't used to fighting in her armour – or even fighting at all. "Sentinel, what just happened?" questioned one of her Knights. Arthuria shook her head. "I don't know, but we've been betrayed. The Elder must have foreseen this, that's why we have so many Initiates and Squires with us. This is my order to you: find survivors and help them. A message has been sent and further bloodshed is unnecessary – these people are not our enemies."

"Take the Initiates and Squires and wait for the Elder to send out a message to return. I will take the fall for this. Do not return to the Capital until you receive orders from myself or Elder d'Arc. Am I clear?" she questioned, looking over the group. "Yes, Sentinel!" they clamoured, rushing off to fulfil her orders. Arthuria turned and looked over the corpses around her. "Just what is going on?" she asked.

It was days of frustration, worry and anger before Jayce set his eyes on the ocean at the edge of the Rockies. The second they had crossed onto the rapids, there had been no way for them to go back, so - as much Jayce had wanted to go back to rescue Bjorn - there had been no choice but to carry on. Instead he'd been left to stew, along with the rest of his crew, in his grief. With a crash they dropped from the rapids onto the ocean, the fleet sailing with them doing the same before they all weighed anchor and convened together.

"Thank you for coming," Jayce stated, looking towards Kitty, Crach and Mirabelle and their closest followers, as well as the few of the other Captains as they all stood on the deck of the Stacked Hand. "Thank you for not leaving," he

added, getting a few nods of approval back. "I don't even know where to begin... Caedom has fallen, we've lost so many... so much. But all this has been coming for a long time now. The Church has craved power and are now primed to place themselves within the military, especially since some of the Marines helped us to get away. They have declared war on me - on us - and I'm planning on fighting back, but I need your help."

Jayce looked towards Crach. "You've fought the Empire before - I'm placing the Stacked Hand and its crew in your care, Admiral," Jayce stated. The others all looked towards Crach, but the old lion baned shook his head. "I'm an old man, Exarga. And I fought and lost. This war is yours, and it is your turn to lead. So no, Admiral Exarga, I pledge my kin to you." Jayce looked to the others who all nodded in agreement. "You led us out of there," Kitty stated. "We follow you." Jayce let out a sigh. "Thank you. I'll do my best."

"So what is your plan?" Crach asked. Jayce stepped into the middle of the ring of leaders, his crew floating around and observing. "They've taken the baned, and have been taking them for a while. Until we know where and what they're doing to them then there's no point fighting - there's too many hostages, and I can't risk the life of my crewmate that they took from me. Nothing can be done until we find them, until I find Bjorn - wherever they've taken him."

"I'm going to speak to my mother. The Marines sided with us, and I doubt the Church will take that well. I'll find the baned and then we'll go from there. For now, find allies and lay low - stay near the Capital. Crach, Kitty, Mirabelle, speak to the others and try to get them on our side - we'll need all the help we can get. We can do this. I know we can." The others nodded in agreement. "You'll know when it's time, I'll call for all of you."

Alara sat in her reclaimed quarters milling over everything that had happened. She couldn't get the smell of smoke out of her hair, and she could only imagine the body count caused by the attack. It had already been a little more than two weeks, but she still couldn't stop thinking about it. "Commander?" questioned Witchford as he stood by her door. She looked over to him. "Sorry?" she questioned. "Commodore Tarka wanted to relay that we'll arrive at the forward base within the hour. Admiral Exarga has summoned all Commanders, Captains and above for an emergency meeting," he informed. Alara nodded appreciatively.

As he turned to leave, she stood up. "Witchford, did we do the right thing?" she asked. He looked back and nodded. "Without a doubt in my mind." She smiled

weakly before rubbing her face. "Yeah, I thought-so. Thank you, Witchford." "Commander, you made the right choice - if it wasn't you it would've been Riley, or Brett, or Soner. Maybe even myself. Maybe the Weapon. We are at war, but I think the sides aren't as black and white as we initially thought."

Alara stepped out onto the deck of her ship a little while later and immediately looked out towards the ocean, watching the rest of the fleet sail onwards with their prisoners as the Marines turned away and headed to the forward operating base. She summoned her main squad: Witchford, Riley, Brett, Soner, and the Weapon. They all looked to her, nodding in respect and reassurance as she stepped towards the edge of the ship, before dropping off the pier below.

The Marines had docked at a small island consisting of little more than a crater. The island had no name, like most of the Salvation Islands, and it had no locals or plants. It was a barren rock with high walls that served as the perfect hideout for the base. Alara glanced towards the unsubtle Ursus Ultra docked in the distance. It stood alone, the sun setting on the horizon behind it as a shining beacon of the dwindling Marine strength.

A series of rifles were immediately aimed in her direction, drawing her attention forwards with sharp alarm, but she quickly noticed all of the rifles were aimed at the Weapon. "Commander, why is he still alive?" questioned another Marine Commander manning the first line of defence. Alara frowned, she hadn't had much of a chance to speak to the other Marines due to their proximity to the rest of the fleet and the speed they had been travelling, but she quickly recognised the others were disembarking without their designated 'Weapon'. She turned and looked at him. "What were your orders?" she asked him immediately.

"To eliminate rogues within the fleet should they fail to follow orders," he stated almost ashamedly. "To kill me?" she clarified. He nodded, the others looking to him with alarm. "Then I have all the more reason to thank you for siding with me," Alara told him. "You're not some mindless weapon, don't forget that." Alara turned to the Commander and his Marines. "He's with me, part of my loyalists. I vouch for him."

The Commander nodded, the guards lowering their rifles and allowing Alara to pass forwards. As they continued forwards Riley hurried to Alara's side. "Did you know that about Weapon?" she asked quietly. Alara shook her head. "I had my thoughts, but I didn't think it was to that extent. For so many Marine ships to have joined us, it means they all killed their Priests and Weapons. We've started a civil war, and we didn't even realise."

They passed through the guarded hole in the crater wall, stepping into the forward operating base as dusk fell, heading immediately to the central tent where the others had gathered. Alara found herself as one of more than thirty commanding officers, all looking towards Admiral Exarga as she stood leaning over a large table with a map of the New World upon it. Alara nodded to her Marines, leaving them behind as she stepped forwards and walked straight up to Cassandra. "You're here, good," said the Red Admiral quietly, with a soft smile. "Let's get this underway."

"Alright, listen up Marines!" she declared, silencing the tent. "I have had multiple conflicting reports as to what happened. Commodore – enlighten me." Alara looked towards a short woman with long grey hair. "To be blunt, Admiral, a shitshow. The fleet targeted civilians and our people were threatened by the Church representatives with them to commit atrocities. I'm ashamed to say some did." Tarka then looked towards Alara and another nearby Captain, an older woman with short dark hair and piercing grey eyes. "Osiris and Vanathur were the first to move."

Admiral Exarga looked towards Captain Osiris, a nod of acknowledgment spreading between them. "You only joined us recently, care to explain?" Admiral Exarga asked. "Those bastards wanted me to gun down ships that had surrendered. I said no. They then fell overboard and drowned whilst my crew and I went to rescue survivors." Cassandra looked towards Alara. Alara nodded back. "I killed the Bishop on my ship, the Weapon on board then supported me. Admiral, are we at war with ourselves?" Alara asked.

"All of you here were forced to make a choice: to stand in line or to risk everything and fight for what you believed in. Everyone who stood in line is not here, and there is a reason for that. During your absence, the Emperor has fallen silent," Admiral Exarga declared. A wave shock spread across the tent. "It is my belief that in our absence a coup has occurred, and the Emperor has been kidnapped by the Church. There have been attacks on senior Marine staff, and the only sightings of the Emperor have been from his throne room, with the presence of the Pope and other Church leaders. We are–"

Alara tensed up, as did several others around her, before she dove beneath the table as a barrage of bright bolts of light tore up the tent, catching a few Marines too slow to react. Alara formed her glaive and raced out the other side, stepping out into the night and immediately spotting several cloaked figures overlooking the base on the crater walls. Alara turned her glaive around and aimed before

firing a pair of bolts of energy out of her staff at the attackers. Two went down, the others beginning to retreat.

Alara glanced over as Admiral Exarga stormed out of the tent, a colossal axe in one hand before she reached out and another appeared in a flash of red lightning. Cassandra leapt forwards to the crater wall in a single bound before she smashed it apart and pursued the attackers. She returned moments later, dragging a corpse and with blood across her uniform. She immediately strode back into the remains of the tent before throwing the body onto the table with a crash. "We are at war with the Church," she stated, the uninjured members in the room all looking towards the easily identifiable body of a dead Priest that laying on the table with varying degrees of shock and acceptance.

The tent entrance moved, and Jayce entered the area with Ordo and Astris. Alara's eyes widened, and several Marines put their hands to their weapons. "Jayce?" Alara questioned in disbelief. He looked at her with weary eyes and smiled. "Hey, Alara." Jayce then looked towards his mother. "Thanks for the invite," he clarified, easing the tensions. "Marines, listen up. We've had our differences, but now is not the time to fight each other. Admiral Exarga and I met earlier today to discuss all that has happened. We have formed an alliance with one goal in mind: the destruction of the Church and their removal from the Empire."

"Admiral, you can't be serious?" questioned Commodore Tarka. Ordo cleared his throat. "Oh yes, Tarka. We are all serious in this. The Church has long been a thorn in the Empire's side. With their influence they tried to assassinate me, and the other Old Dogs – they succeeded with some," Ordo stated. He looked back towards Jayce. "You may have noticed the Church rounding up baned in Caedom," Jayce stated. "They've captured them, and others across the Empire, taking them somewhere. They took my crewmate and may have taken yours under the disguise of a reassignment."

"Wulf," Alara realised in horror. Jayce looked to her and nodded. Astris stepped forwards. "I was one of you, I can vouch for Jayce's character if needs be – Commander Vanathur can vouch for mine. The Empire are using human souls to power those golems. We don't know where from but each of those statues contains a human soul inside – probably a baned, or a citizen that was kidnapped. A weapon was also made, one that targets Pirates and Marines, but not Navy. Whether you like it or not, this has been planned for some time. The Emperor must be rescued, only he can exile the Church for good," she stated.

"Commanders," Admiral Exarga stated. "Go to your ships and to the communications centre and send out Marine operation code: two-three one one-eight." The Commanders all nodded, apart from Alara who Admiral Exarga silently commanded to stay. "Yes, Ma'am," they stated, hurrying off to fulfil their orders. "The plan of action is simple," Admiral Exarga stated. "We have the current element of surprise."

"Jayce, Vanathur, you two are to determine the location of the baned captives and free them. Once done, you will then make your way to the Capital where we shall launch an invasion to free the Emperor and reclaim the Empire. The rest of you are to split into groups of three and to travel to several designated safe places. You are to rescue other Marines on route, before they are captured or executed. You are then to wait for further instructions," Admiral Exarga ordered.

"And what are you going to do Admiral?" Ordo questioned, drawing the eyes of the room. "Save my idiot husband, and those boots we left behind," she declared, much to Ordo's approval. "Get moving, we have no time to waste!" The room sprung into action, heading off to follow out her orders until only Jayce, Alara, Astris and Ordo remained. Admiral Exarga headed straight to Jayce and held him in a tight embrace.

"Next time don't lie to my people to curry favour. I've missed you," she told him, before holding him at arm's length. "This is all your fault, you know that don't you," she scolded. Jayce rolled his eyes. "I will hold the Empire back until you return. You know your role – be the hero that saves the Empire. Find the baned." "I'll find them, you find Dad," he told her back. She smiled and nodded before releasing him and turning to Alara. "Cut through the middle, I'll sail with you. They're almost certainly in the Mysts somewhere. Philip will find out where for you." Alara nodded, the Admiral walking towards the edge of the tent before stopping. "Hurry, both of you. For all our sakes."

She then disappeared, leaving the four of them alone. "We'll meet you back at the ship," Astris stated, grabbing Ordo's arm and dragging him away. Alara and Jayce immediately grabbed each other in a tight embrace. "You idiot," she told him. "Me? I was right - all this time I was right. I told you so," he stated. She glared at him before she noticed his expression. "They've taken Bjorn," he said quietly. "And Wulf," she admitted. "I'll arrive first using the main routes. We'll be waiting for you to pull us out. Okay?" she asked.

Jayce nodded, kissing her before stepping away. "When you arrive, make the world shake. Make them know they messed up by screwing with us," Alara told

him. "Wouldn't have it any other way. After this is over, we need a real talk."
"Agreed. But let's worry about surviving this first. Don't die, Pirate."

Seize the Seas Tales: Prisoner

Bjorn looked around at the cargo hold he had been shoved inside. There were countless other baned around him: prisoners that the Empire had swept up. They had targeted the baned from the start, killing any with them who weren't baned themselves, before dragging them away to prison ships. He held his necklace tight in his hands – the Navy had stripped him of practically anything other than his underwear, and it had only been due to his quick thinking that he'd kept it.

He let out a sigh, sitting back against the wall as the remaining prisoners were loaded in. One tried to escape, only to immediately be cut down by the golem guards – the screams of fear and the commotion keep the others in line. There was no point, they were stuck and at the mercy of the Empire. "Bjorn, if you can hear me. We'll find you, I promise. Stay alive, we're coming back for you!" came Jayce's voice into his head.

"I know," Bjorn answered, hoping Jayce would hear it, but no response came. He looked down at the floor as one of the guards looked towards him with suspicion. He couldn't let himself stand out, if they recognised who he was then it was likely all over - either that or they'd use him against Jayce. He had to hold out, no matter what. His crew, his friends, his family would be coming for him. "I hope you're safe," he prayed, Marisha's face coming into his mind as he thought about the Rising Aces. "I love you, and I'm sorry for leaving you the day I told you."

Chapter 139: Hell

Bjorn had long lost count of how many days had come and gone by the time he was finally moved off the ship. They had kept him fed, watered and mobile – for reasons he still couldn't figure out. All of the baned on board had been looked after, other than those used as warnings to show what the consequences for disobedience were: they had met quick and blunt ends. They marched the baned off in groups, shackling them together and blindfolding them with sacks over their heads. Bjorn tried his best to see through the gap in the bottom, but he saw nothing other than the edge of a grave; the walk somewhat hilly, but nothing extreme.

He heard the creaking of a giant pair of wooden doors, felt old rotten floorboards beneath his feet, and smelt must and mould. The creaking persisted above him, as if he had entered the base of a tower, and before long he was pushed towards a set of stone stairs leading below ground. He couldn't fault their strategy: keep them unaware of where they were and it becomes significantly harder to plan an escape. It was frustrating, but he still had faith in Jayce coming to get him out. A few days, that's all he had to survive – a few more days.

They descended down the stairs a little more before reaching a landing. It was at that point that they were allowed to take off their hoods. A few gasps echoed around as the others took in their surroundings. They were stood on a platform above a huge seventy-metre pit. To their immediate left was a thin stone staircase leading to a wooden walkway. As the others backed away from the edge, Bjorn stepped forwards, looking down.

The bottom was an open court full of machines and large storage containers. He struggled to see it properly, but he vaguely saw figures chained to the walls – hooked up to the machines. "Step back!" ordered a Navy guard, a large squad of them guarding the stairs leading upwards. Bjorn took one last glance, the left wall of the pit was lined with seven wooden walkways, each marked with a large white floor number. He stepped back, turning and glaring at the Navy.

From his left, down an additional corridor, came a smaller group of figures – all dressed in red and purple robes with hoods covering their heads. They parted, stepping aside to line the corridor as a tall, bald woman stepped forwards. She wore similar robes, but hers were far more ornate – decorated with strips of black and gold along with - what looked like - bones. Her face was tattooed, her white skin marked with black dots on her hairless eyebrows, a black triangle leading down her forehead onto the bridge of her nose and patterned markings covering

her skull. She had numerous studded piercings, and her eyes looked almost dead: blank and glazed over. She immediately focused her attention onto Bjorn.

"Take the others to their cells," she instructed, her accompanying Warlocks utilising the Navy to escort the other baned. Bjorn found himself alone with four Navy and the high-ranking Warlock. "Why am I still here? I think you have the wrong guy," Bjorn attempted, gambling that she didn't know who he was. "Oh, I do differ, Bjorn – of the Rising Aces," she immediately clarified, unlocking his chains with a simple gesture. He swore silently, glancing towards the guards and the exit as he calculated his odds of escape.

"High Master, if I may-" intruded one of the Navy – his markings identifying him as a Lieutenant. A whisper filled the air, Bjorn immediately recognising it as magical chanting. "Run," he warned the Lieutenant, who stepped back in stunned fear. In an instant, a large black claw grabbed him and threw him over the edge of the balcony, his screams ending with a sudden halt. "I hate interruptions. Which is why, Bjorn, you should be grateful that I have taken this time to see you," stated the High Master, a trio of extra eyes sitting above her own – all of their pupils marked with a red V.

"I don't know you, and I don't care, but I assure you – your death will be worse than his," Bjorn threatened. She grinned fully before bursting into a cackle. "Of course, I would hope for nothing less. My replacement will have earned it. But until then, you're in my care. I want to know personally how you find your permanent residence, so over the next few months – years, I hope you'll indulge me with a conversation or two. I'm honoured to play host to arguably the most prominent baned of this decade, and I can't wait to see what results we obtain together." Bjorn felt his body go cold, an uncontrolled shudder passing through him that brought great delight to her. "Farewell," she told him with a soft wave, a rifle guiding him away.

He was led over to the wooden walkway before he was instructed to wait. A few minutes later a pair of Warlocks came to take over. They ensured he walked ahead of them as they led him to a nearby set of stairs leading down. He counted each paired flight, stopping before the end of the staircase on the seventh floor. He was then led back out onto a wooden walkway before immediately inwards towards a cellblock.

He passed several cages, each packed with anywhere from eight to ten baned, before he was told to stand against the wall as one of the Warlocks opened his cage. "Get in," he was ordered. Reluctantly he obeyed, the door slamming shut

behind him. He turned and watched them walk away, looking at the thick metal bars as he immediately questioned if they could be bent or manipulated. "Don't bother," said a defeated voice from behind him. "Everything has been tried already."

Bjorn turned around, taking a glance at his cellmates – all were unsurprisingly baned, but amongst the few clothes that they did have, he recognised Marine and Navy uniforms. Three of his cellmates were young, far younger than the others – late teens at most: a fox, a panda, and a badger – they were most definitely not military and had pushed themselves defensively to a corner. Of the other six, three were wolves – one with completely black fur that reminded Bjorn of Wulf – another was a shaggy boar, a ram, and the last was an old puma.

"I recognise you, did you serve?" asked the baned puma – sitting up from one of the only benches in the cell. "Long ago, Navy – aboard the Seafarer," he answered. "Bjorn?" questioned the black wolf, turning around and looking at him in disbelief. "Wulf? The hell are you doing here?" Bjorn questioned, stepping forwards as Wulf got to his feet with a groan – the pair grasping each other's forearms. "I got reassigned, and dragged away here, the same as pretty much the rest of this floor," Wulf said with a grumble. "You?"

"Caedom was burnt down and we were brought here," Bjorn answered. Wulf's expression immediately dropped, a glimmer of hope fading from his eyes. "Damn... so much for a rescue," he muttered, sinking back down to the floor. Bjorn shook his head and looked out of the cell. "Do you know where we are?" he asked. "The Necropolis. We're underneath the city of the dead. Welcome to hell," Wulf answered.

"How do you know?" Bjorn questioned, leaning against the bars of the cell. Wulf glanced back at him with a tired expression. "How do you think? We overheard those Priests say it. They're not exactly shy about speaking in front of us." Bjorn shook his head. "Warlocks. They're Warlocks, not Priests," he corrected. Wulf shrugged. "Don't particularly care, Bjorn. Priests, Warlock – Church, all the same."

Bjorn decided not to press the conversation any further, his mind immediately drawing in on the skinny – sickly – frame that Wulf had. "Wulf, how long have you been here?" Bjorn asked, looking at the others as they observed him. "Weeks, months – I don't know anymore and I'm not even the one who's been here the longest," he said glumly. Bjorn stepped forwards, placing a reassuring hand on Wulf's shoulder. "I'm sorry." Wulf shrugged his hand off.

Bjorn glanced over to the other baned, frowning as he looked at the three young baned and the others who were all military. "I get these lot," Bjorn stated, gesturing towards the Navy and the Marines. "But who are you three?" he asked. The badger, the fox and the panda all looked at each other before the smallest of the three - the fox - shot to his feet and stepped forwards. "You, big guy, are Bjorn? Bjorn of the Rising Aces, of - uh - Pirate Lord Exarga?" said the fox, a rather curious casual accent coming through. "Yeah, answer the question," Bjorn responded.

"You really don't recognise us?" the fox questioned in feigned disbelief. "We're almost as famous as you! It's us - the Beastly Boys!" he stated proudly, the other two standing up and posing behind him. Bjorn glanced towards the old puma. "They blew up a few buildings after stealing magical items," he clarified. Bjorn looked back, a faint recognition of some passing news articles coming to mind. "That only happened... a few times," muttered the badger.

"Right, so criminals as well," Bjorn stated, shaking his head as they threw his theory as to why they had been grouped together out of the window. "Bossman, we have names," stated the fox. Bjorn gestured for them to go ahead. The fox puffed out his chest. "The name's Fenn. I'm kind-of like the leader." The larger badger immediately stepped forwards and put him in a headlock. "Leader my ass, you just like to talk the most, brother. Call me Wam, big boss Bjorn." The third and final largest member put both of them into a tight squeeze. "Ohno," grunted Fenn. "What?" Bjorn questioned.

"The last ones called Ohno," Wulf clarified, the three boys immediately beginning to fight one another. "Left to right, the wolves are Boot and Channing. With the horns - Amos, the tusks - Nago, finally the old man is-" "Kamal. Not sure I appreciate the inclusion of 'old', Lieutenant," said the baned puma. Bjorn nodded in acknowledgment to all of them. "I wish we were meeting under different circumstances," Bjorn stated, quickly realising Wulf had the highest rank from the way the others were looking to him.

A loud banging came from further down the corridor, the other baned in Bjorn's cell all backing away to the far wall. "Chow time, get back or they won't feed us," warned Channing. Bjorn followed the others, waiting and watching as a small group of Navy walked past with a large trolley. They opened the door, the Navy at the edge pointing their rifles towards Bjorn and the others before they placed a large metal feeding bowl on the floor. The gruel inside was grey and wobbled like jelly as it was placed down. The door was quickly closed and the trolley

moved onwards. "The hell is that?" Bjorn questioned, the three Beastly Boys rushing forwards and scooping a handful out of the bowl before retreating. The others stepped forwards with a little more grace, indicating for Wulf and Kamal to go first before looking towards the newcomer - Bjorn.

"It's food," Wulf stated. "Enough to keep us going, just about." Bjorn shook his head. "I'll pass. I got fed this morning on the way here. You need it more," he stated, looking at the thin bodies around him. "You shouldn't hold out," stated Nago the baned boar. "We're fed each day, true, but that's no guarantee. Don't sacrifice yourself for us, or only those brats will eat. And they get the most anyway."

Wam glanced over, the other two boys not paying any particular attention. He caught their eyes and nodded in silent appreciation. "So why us?" Bjorn questioned, resigning himself to eating the slop they had been given. "This floor is trained baned. Marines, Navy, Pirates... those of us who can fight," explained Kamal. "We think that the floor above is also military, a while back there was a coded message send down from above. They banged the food bowls to make noise. So they took away the bowls as punishment," stated Boot, the smallest of the wolves with a torn right ear and no tail. "Above that is civvies." Bjorn nodded in simple understanding. "Below?"

"Incarcerated prisoners," Wulf clarified. "We're here to be bled, so get comfortable with that idea. They take our blood for some fucked-up experiment. The others on our floor said they saw several metal containers being brought down one time; baned were inside. Apparently one of Crach's generals from the Blood Wars and some others that were supposed to have been executed." Bjorn felt his hairs stand on end. "Which one?" he questioned. Wulf shook his head. "No clue. Rest up – today's extraction day."

It was several hours before anyone came to their cell and by that time Bjorn had obtained all of the information he could. Warlocks patrolled the floor in pairs, he couldn't yet tell if it was the same pair, but they made their way around in a semi-consistent pattern. Feeding occurred once a day, and their blood was extracted every four days, according to his cellmates. Those that were ill or dead were taken away.

Their escorts were multiple armed Navy, as well as a few Warlocks, and the cells were opened three at a time, with the remainder left behind to wait their turn. All of the baned were then marched out to the overlooking platform before taken down a set of the stairs to the main floor. Bjorn was surprised by the lack of chains

but the sheer volume of armed bodies around him bluntly quietened any thoughts of escape. A large blood splatter had been left on the stone floor where Bjorn presumed the Navy guard had landed, but the corpse was nowhere to be found.

“Inmates, to the walls – arms and legs in positions please,” stated a Warlock in the centre of the room, next to a series of levers and buttons. Large vats connected to tubes filled the area around them, each in turn connected to a series of spider-like devices above the rows of built-in wall shackles. Watching the others, Bjorn took a position next to Wulf, begrudgingly placing his ankles and wrists to the shackles. They closed automatically, his body stood in an X. “Well done, please keep quiet for the sake of the guards. Scream for my sake,” said the Warlock with a sinister chuckle. The Warlock hit a button and moved a lever, the device above Bjorn extending two pairs of spindly, needle-tipped arms that hovered in front of his body. “Don’t give them the satisfaction,” Wulf warned. Bjorn’s eyes widened as he looked at the ends of the needles – they looked like they belonged on the end of a drill. They then began to spin before burying themselves in his body. He screamed in pain.

It felt like a lifetime before the device moved away from his flesh, but Bjorn could tell from the clock on the wall that it was only twenty agonising minutes. He felt exhausted, but as soon as the restraints were released he was immediately told to move. A loud thump drew his attention down the line: a baned bear lay on the floor. Almost immediately a pair of golems were ordered forwards and he was picked up, dragged ahead of the group towards the stairs under the watch of a Warlock. “Where are they taking him?” Bjorn questioned quietly to Wulf. Wulf simply shook his head.

On the way back to their cells, Bjorn spotted the small fox baned – Fenn – swaying from side-to-side. He looked ready to collapse and the others hadn’t noticed. Without hesitation, Bjorn moved forwards, walking next to him before, with a pained groan, placing a supporting arm across his body. “What are you doing?” Fenn questioned weakly. “Just stay quiet and walk, you’re almost there,” Bjorn reassured, escorting the young baned all the way back to their cell. His brothers took over as soon as they saw him, waiting until the cell door slammed closed and was locked before helping him to the floor.

Fenn’s body glowed green before falling away as he slipped into unconsciousness. He was a young, fair-skinned, red-headed, skinny boy, somewhere around eighteen from the strands on his face. Wam looked over to

Bjorn as Ohno made Fenn comfortable. "Thanks, boss," he stated. Bjorn nodded back, glancing over to the others as they found various positions across the cell – themselves drifting off to sleep in order to recover.

It wasn't long until he and Wulf were the only two still conscious. "Is it like that every time?" Bjorn asked quietly, activating and deactivating his communicator out of a created habit. Wulf glanced over and nodded. "Sometimes it's worse, sometimes it's better... It's been a while since they've taken anyone," he said mournfully. "They're coming for us, Wulf. It won't be long and we'll be out of here." Bjorn met Wulf's gaze – his eyes hollow and devoid of hope. "Don't count on it. We're forgettable. We're just baned."

Wulf turned over as Bjorn tried to think of a response that would help, but nothing came in time before he saw Wulf's baned form fade away. Bjorn's gaze lingered for a while, staring at the pale, skinny form hidden beneath the dark fur. His long messy hair was almost white, a patchy beard covering his jaw. He shivered as he slept, or shuddered – Bjorn couldn't quite tell. With a long and pained sigh Bjorn looked away, looking out towards the corridor as the guards made another pass. "I know you're coming, I'll be waiting," he said quietly, before shutting his eyes and drifting off to sleep.

It was surprising how quickly Bjorn became accustomed to the walls around him. The first four days passed by in a blink, the pain returning in an instant as he found himself back in the leeching machine. He then found his heart racing as the days ticked away once more, the knot over his heart tightening more than it ever had before as he counted down until the pain returned. Yet, to his surprise – it wasn't as bad the second time. He leant against the walls of his cage, his body in pain – the others groaning around him, but an unusual certainty came over him, carrying through the night as he slept off his wounds.

"You're not still hopeful," Wulf questioned, sometime in the morning, the night's rest erasing the wounds of the previous day. Bjorn glanced over to him, his legs crossed and a calm about him. "They are coming. I truly believe that Wulf. If not Alara then Jayce, Marisha and the others. They'll crush this place and all of the bastards within it. I know they will," Bjorn declared, drawing the attention of the others in the cell. The three boys looked to him, the initial disguise of hope they had put on when they first saw him long faded away. "If you say so," Wulf stated, sitting down next to Bjorn and mirroring his meditative position.

"I don't get how you look so calm?" Wulf questioned, looking to Bjorn. Bjorn shrugged, relaxing his body as much as he could – every muscle that he could

recognise and feel. "What's the worst that can happen to me?" Bjorn responded with a small smile and a weak chuckle. "You've gone insane," Wulf stated. Bjorn shook his head, shutting his eyes. "Are you going to hurt me?" he asked. "No, of course not."

"Then I have nothing to worry about. This cage is our home, inside here we are as safe as we can be." Bjorn laughed in enlightened realisation. "I've never had that before. Even on the Stacked Hand I always felt I needed to be ready for action at a moment's notice. I could hardly sleep at first - it took a while before I got used to Jayce and the others, but even then - we always had an enemy, some danger waiting for us. Not here. We're stuck, truly stuck. So why fight it?"

Wulf stared at him; Bjorn had actually become insane. "Right, sure whatever." Bjorn shushed him, embracing every feeling he had before guiding it out of his mind and replacing it with nothing other than the steady thump of his heartbeat. It felt strange. Even as he relaxed as much as he could, he could still feel the knot over his heart. The knot he had always felt, like a tensed muscle he couldn't relax. Until finally, with a long exhale he felt it loosen.

Wulf's mouth fell open as the baned form of Bjorn melted away, replaced by a huge, dark-skinned man with long and knotted, dark brown hair. He had a relatively large and pointy nose almost hidden by a thick beard. "Bjorn, wake up," Wulf told him. Bjorn glanced over, his form unchanged - his brown eyes staring at him in confusion. "I'm awake. Can I relax without you interrupting?" he questioned. "Bjorn," stated Boot, "look at yourself, brother."

Bjorn looked down, his eyes widening as he saw his skin and hair on his chest that wasn't white. The knot tightened and his baned form returned. "Damn," muttered Wulf, a spark of hope fading away. "Can you do that again?" asked Kamal. Bjorn's voice had escaped him: for the faintest of moments he had actually transformed back to his original body. "I..." He looked at the others, all looking at him with hope and curiosity. He relaxed as much as he could, their curiosity and hope fading away as he sat and meditated - trying to figure out how he had done it. Until finally the knot eased once more and his body transformed.

"By the ancestors..." he muttered, his eyes wide as he clenched the knot and transformed before undoing it once again. "I've got it. I know how we can get out of here."

Seize the Seas Tales: Investigator

"Give me good news," Alara stated as Riley entered her quarters, the Mysts stretching out around them as they sailed quickly east. "I can't guarantee it," Riley stated, handing over a bound stack of papers. Alara wasted no time cutting the papers free, immediately throwing them across her floor and scanning them. Riley knelt down next to her, looking over at the transcripts – each detailing requests for supplies, all to numerous destinations.

Her eyes widened and she snatched a single sheet of paper from the floor, reading it intently over and over again before she showed it to Riley. "Food? To the Necropolis? And that much of it?" Riley immediately questioned, verbalising Alara's exact thoughts. "That's it!" Alara stated. "That's where they're keeping the baned, it has to be!" she stated, lunging towards the door before stepping out into the open air. "Set a heading for the Necropolis!" she ordered.

It was sometime before she set her eyes on the island, its single central red and jade pagoda standing tall amongst the rings of walls. A pair of Navy ships sat in dock, immediately bringing a sense of relief to Alara – the Necropolis, a strange place to station a Navy warship, let alone two. "You have your orders," Alara told Witchford. He stared at her in disbelief as she stood amongst her friends and crew in little more than a dive suit and with the only bottomless bag Jayce had given to her strapped to her waist. "I have to protest Commander, you shouldn't go alone."

She shook her head, both Navy ships leaving dock and heading in their direction. Her Helm immediately and wordlessly angled the Sole Survivor to move in a wide arc past the island. "I have to right this, and we can't risk a full assault. Not until Jayce arrives. I will get proof of whatever they're doing, find Wulf and Bjorn, and I will wait for you. But I'm not risking any of you, not for this. Not when I let them take Wulf."

"Commander, two minutes," warned the Helm, cannon fire thundering in the distance. Witchford locked eyes with Alara and then nodded. "Go find them," he told her. Alara smiled, glancing towards Riley, Brett, Weapon, Soner and the others. "Good luck, don't do anything I wouldn't do," she told them, stepping to the edge of the Sole Survivor and waiting for the ship to lurch to the side as the wheel was span away from the island. She rolled with the lurch, tumbling overboard and diving deep, before swimming underwater towards the island.

She took it slow, waiting for as long as she could before slowly surfacing to take a short breath with the smallest part of her head exposed, each time moving closer and closer to the island. She couldn't afford to get it wrong, and she didn't - eventually dragging herself out of the water and finding a place to change and dry-off. With a sigh, a Navy uniform, and a camera, she turned her attention back to her mission. "I'm coming, hang on a little longer," she stated, heading towards the lone tower.

Chapter 140: Espionage

"Hang on, Bjorn, first things first – how in the abyss are you doing that?" questioned Wulf, as he and the rest of their cell all stared at Bjorn as he switched back and forth between his baned and human forms. "Can you all feel that knot over your heart?" Bjorn questioned, remaining in his baned form. An echoing of yes and no bounced around the cell. "You mean to say that's not normal?" questioned Nago, the baned boar. Bjorn shook his head. "I'll have to ask the others when we get out of here, but all I'm doing is relaxing and tensing that."

"What knot?" questioned Fenn, the other two youngsters also looking confused. "Over your heart there is a muscle. Try to settle yourselves and find it," Bjorn advised, a smile spreading across his face as Wulf and Channing both transformed. Wulf met Bjorn with a pair of stunned green eyes, his entire face in disbelief. "I-I don't believe it. I'm cured, I'm free," he said, in a true feeling of relief and joy. Channing sat down on the floor, holding his head as tears dripped from his ragged beard.

Bjorn stepped to the edge of their cell; the Warlocks were coming. "Change back!" he ordered, Channing and Wulf both staring at him in horror as they realised why. Wulf changed immediately, but Channing shook his head as he found himself unable to. Instinctively he lay down and shut his eyes, the Warlocks glancing towards him but otherwise moving onwards. "Too close," muttered Bjorn, turning back to the group. "Focus on that knot, try to tense and untense it. That's all it is. I don't know how or why – I always thought it was just normal anatomy, but it's not: it's ours."

It didn't take long before all apart from the Beastly Boys could freely transform. "It's okay," Bjorn reassured, crouching next to Wam and placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder as he sat on the floor tucked into a ball. Ohno punched the wall in frustration whilst Fenn paced back and forth. "You're young, barely familiar with yourselves, it'll come with time and an environment where you're not caged like a beast."

"What if it doesn't?" questioned Wam defeatedly. Bjorn couldn't believe it, in the course of minutes, his biggest problem had faded away – replaced by his greatest asset. "Boys, look around you – for most here this is the first time we've ever had this gift. Be grateful. You're young – it will come to you. Until then, I have a job for you." The three baned all looked to him. "Can I trust you to follow orders?" "Yes, boss Bjorn."

Bjorn turned to the others as they transformed back and forth. "There will be a limit to how many times we can change," he warned. The others all looked to him, stopping in their baned forms as they immediately grasped the danger of being trapped as a human. "We have a chance to get out of here, and not just us – everyone," Bjorn stated, quietly. "Boys, watch the corridors – warn us if they come around," he ordered. The Beastly Boys moved immediately.

"The guards change four times a day," Bjorn stated. "Four pairs of two that rotate every three hours. It's always the same eight, until we get drained. Sometimes they switch around, but during that block of four days – they don't change. Wulf, can you use Focus?" Bjorn asked. Wulf shook his head, the group spreading out as Ohno gestured that the guards were coming. Once they had passed, Bjorn looked back to Wulf. "Ordo said I can't until I worked out how to change forms." "Same thing he said to me. We have three days until our next extraction. I want us to learn Focus in that time. Then we'll act."

Three days passed in a blur, the group training themselves as best as they could as they prepared for their next stage. A rush of water built up Bjorn's mind, exactly as had been described over and over to him, before he quietened it with a single ringing droplet – the waves falling still. He still wasn't used to it, and it was frustrating how quickly he had grasped it. "How long was that?" he asked, as it faded away and was replaced by a wave of exhaustion. "Two minutes, roughly," stated Kamal, the other members in the cell concentrating in turns on their Focus – apart from Fenn, Wam and Ohno who all stood watch. "It'll have to do," Bjorn stated, getting to his feet as he heard cells being unlocked down the corridor.

The pain wasn't any better the fourth time around, but with an end in sight it was certainly easier to stomach. He waited until the cells slammed shut behind them, and the extra guards departed, before picking a visible spot at the edge of the cell and laying down in a heap. "Whatever happens," Bjorn stated quietly. "Don't give up." Wulf knelt next to him, placing a hand on his shoulder and leaning in close. "The same goes to you, we'll be waiting for you to get back."

"Guards!" Wulf cried out. "We need a doctor!" It took a pathetically long time for the Warlocks to appear, their faces mostly hidden behind their hoods but their eyes visibly apathetic. "Another one," said the taller Warlock with a long sigh. "What happened?" questioned the other, gesturing for the group to get back from Bjorn. "He's been sick since he arrived, and has been getting worse. It might be contagious," lied Boot, with a detestable growl.

Bjorn let out a groan before transforming back into a human. "Damn!" growled one of the Warlocks, unlocking the cage. "Grab that one!" ordered the other, summoning a pair of golems. The stone soldiers weren't exactly gentle as they dragged Bjorn out, the cell locking behind him. "Let's get this over and done with," stated the taller of the two Warlocks, leading the way as the golems dragged Bjorn forwards after them.

He was dragged up three floors worth of stairs before being taken across a platform and through a carved out corridor. All the while, Bjorn feigned unconsciousness, tracking the path he was taken along and listening to the mutterings of the Warlocks escorting him. "Why's it always on our shift?" grumbled the shorter of the pair. "Quit complaining. Just do the deed, it's your turn," said the other as Bjorn was dragged into a room with a strong acrid smell. Something was bubbling and hissing and he felt himself being dragged down into a large bowl of sorts.

"Don't take long," ordered the taller Warlock, walking back the way they had come as the golems dropped Bjorn to the floor. "I'll take as long as I want..." muttered the other. Bjorn began to mumble, loud enough for the Warlock to hear. "Still got some life to him, good. Wake up!" he goaded, stepping forwards and moving to kick Bjorn. Bjorn's eyes snapped open and he grabbed the Warlock's leg with a Focus enhanced grip.

Bjorn drove an elbow in and through the bone, snapping his leg before grabbing the Warlock's stunned head and wrenching in an unnatural angle. His body went limp and Bjorn leapt to his feet, chanting quickly as he recited one of Wicke's spells. Unfamiliar black tattoos spread across his body before he fired off a pair of freezing rays, the golems freezing solid before Bjorn transformed and shattered them with ease.

A moment passed as he stood frozen, listening for any alarms or signs that he had been heard, but nothing passed other than the familiar scream of pain in the background. He silently pumped his fist before crumbling and crushing as much of the golems as possible, spreading them across the room as if they were random debris. With most of the evidence gone, he turned his attention towards the Warlock's corpse in the centre of the room.

He lay in the centre of a large device: a quartet of pillars topped with steaming cauldrons, surrounding a stone bowl of sorts with a small grate in the bottom. Several bronze pipes led to the cauldrons, presumably to refill whatever was inside them. Bjorn stepped forwards, glancing towards the console controlling

the machine before stripping the Warlock. Bjorn transformed back into his human form before donning the robes, covering his head with the hood before stepping to the console. A series of buttons sat before him, but to his immediate relief, a list of instructions had been stuck to it.

Following the guide, Bjorn pressed a bold red button, the cauldrons tipping over and covering the corpse with a strong smelling orange liquid. The corpse melted away to the bone in seconds, leaving behind a pool of melted bones and flesh. Bjorn stared at the display in disgust before he cautiously stepped forwards. His eyes widened as he stared at the body, a small red crystal cradled within the ruined chest of the Warlock. "By the ancestors," he muttered, carefully reaching down and retrieving the stone. "So this is how they get them," he realised, holding the soul stone in his palm before putting it in his pocket. He shook his head, stepping back to the console and burning away the rest of the corpse with a press of another button. With his job complete, he turned and left the extractor behind – hurrying quickly down the way they had come.

Bjorn shut his thoughts away, walking calmly and certainly back to his floor. He wasted no time in locating the other Warlock. "Took you long enough," stated the taller Warlock as Bjorn approached, his back to Bjorn. He then seemed to falter as he heard Bjorn's footsteps, his eyes widening as he turned and found Bjorn's arms reaching outwards to him. His eyes remained wide as they stared at the back of his hood, Bjorn catching his corpse and carrying it quickly towards his cell. The other baned around him all came to edge of their cells all trying to figure out what was going on. "Shut up, and get back!" Bjorn growled at them, stopping outside his cell and finding the keys. He unlocked his cell and threw the Warlock inside.

"You did it? You actually did it?" questioned Kamal in sheer disbelief. Bjorn nodded. "Wulf, change fast. The next rotation is due to happen soon. The rest of you, put his body at the back," Bjorn commanded, before stepping back out into the corridor. Wulf threw on the robes and took everything inside the Warlock's pockets before he locked the cell behind him. "Part two," he stated to them, Boot and Channing nodding in acknowledgement and getting ready.

"They're using this place to farm soul stones," Bjorn clarified, glancing towards the few golems stood silently along the corridor. "What?" Wulf questioned, looking up at him with alarm. "They have some... machine that melts away the bodies. The Warlock's corpse gave me this," Bjorn stated, showing Wulf the crystal. "I'm guessing red is bad?" Wulf asked, looking it over before handing it

back. "From what we know, red means the soul was disturbed before it was obtained – brutal death, torture, and so forth. They don't use them in golems because they become erratic."

"So surely they only get red from us – what's the point?" Wulf queried, stepping closer to a golem. "I don't think they do. I think this place is designed to crush us, spiritually – to make more cores for their golems," Bjorn theorised, looking intently at the frozen statue. "Show us your core," Wulf ordered the golem. The golem reached to its chest, prying open a hole and revealing a blue stone inside. Wulf grabbed it and pulled it out – the golem losing any and all traces of function. "They listen, so that's good," Wulf stated. "Let's do the rest whilst we wait."

It didn't take long for the floor's golems to be deactivated, but Bjorn and Wulf quickly noticed the audience they had gathered – the countless baned around them all looking towards them with curiosity. "You want out?" Wulf warned. "Get back, shut up, and wait!" he ordered, the baned backing away and stopping their hushed requests to get them out. "They're going to ruin the plan if we're not careful," Wulf stated. Bjorn nodded in agreement, his heart racing. "Just one more step and it becomes easier."

Their replacements arrived not long after, but they seemed on edge, as if they'd grasped something was off. "Why are the golems deactivated?" questioned one of the pair, a short angry woman, as they stormed over towards Bjorn and Wulf. "The stones were requisitioned, something about an experiment," Wulf lied. The pair of Warlocks looked at each other, their tension easing. "Well that's a nuisance," muttered the other Warlock, holding out a hand for the keys.

The short woman looked up at Bjorn, her eyes narrowing. "I don't recognise you," she stated. "When did you arrive and why have you replaced the others?" "Earlier," Bjorn stated. "They've gone back to the Capital to carry on their work." She scowled. "Lucky bastards." She held out her hand for the keys that Bjorn carried. He handed them over and stepped past her, looking to Wulf and nodding. She pocketed the keys and turned to face them. "Don't–"

Wulf and Bjorn stripped the bodies before passing the clothes over to Boot and Channing, along with a blade that they had found in the female Warlock's pocket. They then shoved the bodies inside the cell. "We'll get rid of them once the floor is secured," Bjorn stated. "Rinse and repeat until we've replaced all of the guards." Wulf gestured for Kamal, Amos and Nago to step out of the cell, the three of them nodding to each other before stepping to separate cells and waiting for the doors to be unlocked.

“You,” Bjorn ordered, pointing to an older cat baned and gesturing for him to step out. Kamal stepped in and the door was locked behind him. “What’s going on?” questioned the cat baned. Wulf made his choice, taking an ox baned out of Amos’ new cell before Boot took a fellow wolf baned out of Nago’s. Each cell was locked once again. “You three, get in that cell – we’ll explain everything.” They glanced at the Wulf and Bjorn, confusion, fear and hesitation crossing their faces. “Just do it,” Wulf ordered.

The three entered the cell, and Bjorn stepped in with them. They immediately noticed the corpses, looking to Fenn, Wam and Ohno with alarm. “Bossman, we’ve got this,” stated Fenn, nodding to Bjorn. Bjorn stepped out and locked the cell, turning to Boot, Channing and Wulf. “Don’t make any more swaps until the next pair of guards arrive, take it slowly and choose your replacements wisely,” he instructed. The pair saluted and Bjorn turned to Wulf. “We have just under three hours, let’s get moving,” Wulf stated.

They made their way back towards the walkway before heading up the stairs as far as they could, back along the narrow stone steps to the platform overlooking the entire prison. A few Navy guards stood in position, but they looked almost fearful as Bjorn glanced towards them – a few flinching when he nodded to them. Bjorn thought about saying something intimidating, but he decided against it – a Warlock wouldn’t pay them any attention, so neither should he.

They carried onwards down the corridor Bjorn had seen on his arrival, passing a few Warlocks heading out to do their duties who didn’t pay Wulf or Bjorn any attention. Bjorn’s heart raced in his chest, but Wulf seemed completely relaxed. “Chill out,” he whispered to Bjorn. “The hard part is over.” Bjorn let out a long exhale, steeling his nerves as the corridor opened up into a large hall connecting to several antechambers.

The smell of food bombarded them immediately, a large kitchen sat to the side was stocked with an array of fruits, vegetables, cheeses and cured meats. They looked at each other. “Food first,” they agreed. It was simple, but tasted like nothing Bjorn and Wulf had ever had before – the food of the Gods would have paled in comparison. They ate their fill, drawing an eye or two until Wulf let out a chuckle. “Something about the extractor just makes me ravenous,” he declared. A few nods of approval came his way and the eyes disappeared.

With their bellies full for the first time in a while, they looked around the room – looking for anything resembling a map. Nothing stood out so Bjorn took a gamble, spotting a somewhat meek-looking Warlock reading a book at the edge

of the large room and heading over. "Do you still have your map? I've lost mine," Bjorn stated. Although he was nowhere near as big as he would have been in baned form, he was still far from small. The Warlock gulped. "Uh, we're not supposed to--"

"I know, doesn't mean I don't want one. Give me yours and I won't report it," Bjorn threatened. The Warlock hesitated, looking Bjorn up and down. "Help me... progress and it's a deal," he offered. Bjorn folded his arms and leant forwards. "Be blunt, who?" he questioned, sensing the request wasn't going to require clean hands. The Warlock stood up and tilted his head towards one of the doorways. Bjorn followed closely, glancing back to Wulf who was following from a distance.

They emerged into a large library, filled with large heavy stacks laden with countless books. They walked along until the small Warlock faltered, glancing down a row. "Him," he said quietly, glancing towards a larger man looking at a book. "Done," Bjorn stated, walking straight along the row and stepping past the Warlock. "That one wants you dead," Bjorn warned to the Warlock. The large man looked at him with bemusement before looking back towards the small Warlock. "Does he--"

Bjorn grabbed and wrenched his neck with a sharp burst of Focus, dropping his body to the floor before walking back to the Warlock. "What have you done? What about the body?" he questioned in a quick panic. Bjorn shrugged, holding out his hand. "Your problem, not mine. Use your gifts, prove you've earned this." The small man swore and handed over a ragged piece of paper covered in sketches. "May the Goddess guide you," he mumbled, stepping towards the corpse.

Bjorn waited until he was stood next to the body before with a heavy shove of Focus he toppled the stack onto the pair. The Warlock letting out a quick cry for help before he was crushed. Bjorn stepped away immediately, moving around the stacks before joining the quickly forming group of investigators from behind. "What happened?" questioned a more senior Warlock as he stepped through the group. No one spoke up, the stack quickly righting itself as the Warlock used his magic, the bodies quickly getting revealed. He let out a growl of frustration. "What have we said? Not in the library for this exact reason. Someone dispose of their bodies, and clear out!"

Wulf glared at Bjorn. "What?" he questioned, stepping down one of the rows and looking at the map more closely. It was marked with a series of red crosses, spots

that Bjorn guessed were good chances to eliminate a rival, but it showed the layout of the prison. "They've got a golem press here," Bjorn stated, memorising it quickly before passing it over to Wulf. Wulf then pocketed it and looked around. "This isn't a short-term set up, they've been here for some time." "Let's see what we can find. Stay close, and watch your back."

Bjorn took his time exploring the library, watching the others around him just in case they tried to do to him what he had just done, but he quickly began to relax, faltering as he found books on ancient history, magic rituals, and something called therians. The book lay open on a table in the middle of the library, a previous reader having abandoned it, but an array of sketches decorated the area around it – all displaying images of baned. He frowned as he picked it up, skimming the contents as quickly as he could. It spoke of soldiers who had undergone modifications, warriors that use magic to transform into forms of beasts. "Therians? The baned were created as soldiers?" Bjorn questioned, closing the tome and taking it in his arms as he turned and headed off in search of Wulf.

Wulf had left the library: there was only so much to find in books and there were bigger priorities. A laboratory had been marked on the map and he wanted to know what they were doing with his blood. The large metal doors were unlocked and no one questioned him as he stepped inside. The stench of blood was immediately all-consuming, filling his lungs to the point where he felt like he was drowning in it.

He shook it off, pressing forwards past dissecting tables into a room full of vats filled to the brim with blood. A Warlock taking stock glanced towards him before turning back to his work. The sound of chanting and loud cracks of energy drew his attention onwards into a large circular room. Green torches painted the room in a spectral light, but a glowing pentagram illuminated the floor in a bright red. A Warlock stood in the centre of the room, her exposed back to Wulf. Markings covered her pale body: patterns and runes painted in blood.

A bolt of purple lightning cracked down onto the floor in front of her, a gargling screech echoing around the room from something in front of her. Wulf stared in horror, looking to the empty vats of blood around the room, the pile of decayed human corpses – still covered in dirt, to the jars of embryonic monstrosities littering a large table. He turned and backed away. They were making monsters using the blood of baned.

Bjorn found Wulf sat by one of the tables with his head in his hands, he was shuddering slightly. "Hey," Bjorn whispered, sitting near to him. Wulf glanced to him in a startled flinch. "You okay?" Bjorn asked. Wulf leant forwards. "They're making monsters using our blood. I... We need to get out of here whilst we can, bury this place from above." Bjorn nodded in agreement, tilting his head towards the exit. "Soon. Come on, I have an idea."

On the way out, Bjorn searched the manifest: there were a little more than a thousand baned stretched across nine floors. Each floor had a little note indicating how much food was needed to prevent starvation, along with a small formula for calculating new amounts. With a small smile, Bjorn inflated the numbers on his and above floor. It wouldn't change much, but it couldn't hurt to have a bit more food to go around.

They made their way back to their floor, just as Boot and Channing were stashing the bodies of their replacements – Kamal and Nago changing into their robes. "You're back, find anything?" questioned Boot, opening the cells that Nago, Amos and Kamal had been in and dispatching the baned they had trained to other cells. "We have a map for you, memorise it and then two of you should go and get yourselves a proper meal," Wulf stated. "Then come back and swap." "One more pair to go and then we have full control of this floor. What's next?" questioned Boot. "We're going to see the golem presses for ourselves, and then we're going to check our exit," Bjorn stated, looking over the group and struggling not to smile. "Aye, good luck."

Bjorn and Wulf made their way down to the leeching floor, heading past the chained baned through a huge archway into an adjoining cavern. "Woah," Bjorn said unconsciously, as he stared at the army spaced throughout the far larger room. There were hundreds of golems, ranging in sizes from the common foot soldiers standing at Bjorn's human size, to others around eight feet tall. Far in the back stood a row of three giant golems, each roughly twice the size of the smallest golems, but dwarfed by a final golem standing at nearly twenty-five feet.

"The hell is that? It's almost as big as the colossus," Wulf whispered, as they walked through the neat rows of golems. Unlike the others in the rest of the room, the giant golem was too big to have been made in a press, a series of small cranes and a ringed walkway around it implied it had been assembled one piece at a time. "I don't know but look at the markings," Bjorn stated, glancing towards the nearest golem. Unlike the others scattered throughout the prison, the golems around them had been painted with red, black and purple colours. "They're for

the Warlocks, and only the Warlocks,” Wulf guessed, picking up the pace and approaching the giant golem’s cradle.

“Has a stone been forged yet?” questioned a Warlock standing guard, alongside a large squad of heavily-armed Navy. Bjorn and Wulf glanced at each other before back at the Warlock – his ornate robes were similar to the High Master, but given his duty Bjorn doubted he was of great importance. “No, not yet,” Bjorn bluffed, drawing a sigh from the senior Warlock. “How preposterous, will these accursed creatures ever yield anything worthwhile?”

“A high-quality soul stone is not easy to acquire,” Bjorn pressed. The Warlock nodded in agreement. “We should just feed them all to the extractor, waiting for one of high-quality will take a lifetime otherwise. The sooner it’s done, the sooner I can get back to doing a task worthy of myself. The General will not need guarding then,” he lamented to Bjorn and Wulf, who both nodded along, desperately trying not to stand out. “The High Master wouldn’t have chosen you if this wasn’t important,” Bjorn stated. The Warlock scowled and Bjorn immediately realised he had hit a sore point. “She wishes to busy me, protect her back and her station.”

“I saw her but an hour ago performing her rituals in the laboratory. She didn’t even notice my presence, now could be your chance,” Wulf suggested, leaping on the opportunity. “Bold – brother - bold, but commendable – I will remember that once the deed is done. You’ll have a pick of a station should I be successful. Guards, remain here – shoot anyone who comes without my orders.” The senior Warlock marched promptly away, almost skipping away with excitement. Bjorn and Wulf glanced apathetically towards the guards before following after him.

They made their way upwards, heading after the Warlock before stopping at the topmost landing and turning towards the final set of stairs leading out of the prison. The guards didn’t stop them as they passed, they made no comments at all. Neither of them could believe it – if they wanted to, they could just leave. The thought entered both of their minds and they looked towards each other. “We can’t,” they both admitted, resigning themselves to coming back – regardless of what was on the other side.

But as they neared the hatch that acted as a final door, it opened on its own: a singular Navy Lieutenant stepping through. Her eyes widened slightly as she saw the pair of them in front of her, her glaive dismantled and across her back. She quickly averted her gaze and stepped to the side, expecting for them to carry

onwards and pass her, but instead the pair of them remained stood in place – stunned and in shock. “Alara?” whispered Bjorn.

“Commander?” questioned Wulf, staring in disbelief. Her eyes widened in alarm before her mouth fell open and she pointed at the pair of them. She tried to speak but no words came out as she stood in even greater shock than they were. “Bjorn? Wulf? Is that you?” she whispered. Wulf and Bjorn looked around them before stepping forwards. “What are you doing here?” they both asked. She held her hands up and cautiously poked the pair of them. “Don’t start with me, I thought you two were prisoners?”

“Long story, but we’ve taken control of one of the floors and we’re preparing a mass breakout. Is the Sole Survivor here?” Bjorn asked, drawing her attention as she and Wulf stared at each other. “No, they’re waiting on Jayce to arrive. I’m here for photos and to find you. I guess one part of the mission is complete.” “You came for us?” Wulf mumbled in disbelief. She glared at him and shook her head in disbelief. “Of course I did. Why wouldn’t I?” she stated, placing a hand on his arm. “Wulf, I’m so sorry – you’re not leaving my ship ever again without my permission! Am I understood?”

His vision blurred and he nodded, wiping it away with his sleeve as she turned to Bjorn. “Jayce is on his way, he’ll be here soon – a day or two at most.” “Then you need to get your photos and we need to get things ready,” he stated. “I knew you two were coming, never had a doubt in my mind,” he added. She smiled. “You have no idea how glad I am to see you’re both alive. Anyway, tell me everything I need to know,” she ordered.

They filled her in with everything they had seen and knew before eventually she nodded and glanced past them. “Be careful Commander - if you get caught...” “I know. I’ll be careful, I promise,” she reassured, reaching out and touching Wulf’s beard. “First thing you do when you get back to the ship is shave, it’s a mess.” Wulf smiled, shaking his head – he’d never have thought to even be in the position to consider it. “Alara, I have my communicator. I’ll contact you when we’re ready.” She nodded, giving a soft look to both of them before stepping past and heading down the steps and out of sight.

“That changes things,” Wulf stated. Bjorn nodded in agreement, the pair turning and walking down after her. They made their way back to their floor. “Change in plans,” Bjorn stated, as Boot and Channing approached the pair of them. “Commander Vanathur is here, undercover,” Wulf stated almost giddily. “Jayce will be here tomorrow or the day after, but it sounds like they’re getting

impatient with their soul stone production. We're breaking out tomorrow – whether he's here or not."

Seize the Seas Tales: Moving Fast

Jayce groaned as he bounced across the floor of the training hall, his arms burning in agony as they recoiled from Thalia's undiluted strike. "Nice one," he let out, looking up - only for his eyes to widen as she leapt at him mercilessly. It had been little other than hardcore and unstoppable sailing ever since they had left the Salvation Isles. Bjorn was out there, somewhere, and he was counting on them to find him. From sailing to training, there was no time for the crew of the Stacked Hand to let up – a war was coming. It had always been coming, and now they had to win it. Everyone was working hard, giving training and their duties their all.

Well, almost everyone. "She's not here again," Ordo stated, as he and Jayce sat on a bench watching Thalia face the combined team of Astris and Caelie in a fast-paced blur. "Wicke?" Jayce asked, raising an eyebrow. Ordo grumbled an acknowledgment, burying his chin into his chest as he leant back. "What's her excuse?" Jayce asked. It had long been a common occurrence, but he had been hoping she'd motivate herself rather than need forcing – especially with everything on the way.

"Her magic is more important," Ordo stated. "It'll get her killed. We can shrug off half her spells thanks to Focus, if she catches a stray spell or shot..." "She knows that. She wouldn't be making this choice recklessly or out of laziness." Ordo glanced towards Jayce with a look that said otherwise. Jayce shook his head. "I trust she knows what she's doing. We're here to protect her anyway."

Ordo shook his head. "I hope you're not wrong. Anyway, I wanted to ask if I could leave the ship for a little bit?" Jayce looked at him with alarm. "That's a bit sudden. What for?" he questioned. Ordo reached into his pocket, pulling out a letter. "The Old Dogs got in touch with me. I need to see them." "Okay, take Caelie and the Last Card with you. Do what you need to and meet us as soon as you can." Ordo stood up and nodded to him. "Good luck, Ordo." "You too, Captain. Bring our man home."

Jayce watched them sail off into the distance before resuming his training. His mind questioned if it was the right move, even days later, but a new distraction took his attention away one cold morning. "They're in the Necropolis!" Jayce

declared, drawing his diminished crew's attention as he waved Alara's letter in the air. "All Mages, if there was anything you were holding back until now – I want you on those sails, use everything you have and let's go bring Bjorn home!"

Caelie tapped Ordo on the shoulder as they walked away from the village they had docked at. It was a small quiet village, on an otherwise not-noteworthy island, but to Ordo it was a place of great significance. He looked down towards her. She pointed at him. "Okay?" she questioned. He took in a deep and nervous breath before nodding. "Uh, yeah – yes, yes I am," he stammered. She elbowed him - he hardly felt it but her point had been made.

"It's... home. Or as close as home can be for me. I guess you can't really understand," he stated, glancing towards her. She shook her head, turning and walking backwards as she pointed out to the ocean. "Ship is home," she stated. "Felt... strange." He chuckled, placing a hand on her head and ruffling her hair – much to her immediate irritation. "Me too kiddo, me too." She ran her hands through her hair in an attempt to tame the untamed mane she had, before her eyes widened as she saw their destination: a large figurehead stood on top of a hill.

"You're here," said a long familiar voice as they approached. Caelie stepped behind Ordo defensively. "You can wait here if you want," he told her quietly, continuing forwards. "Of course I am," Ordo stated, "Captain." "I'm not your Captain anymore, Ordo," stated Evandril Xarga, the giant man stepping forwards and towering over Ordo. In an instant Ordo felt like he was back on their old ship – the Hawk – back in his days as a Cabin Boy to the greatest Captain of the Era. Ordo looked up to Xarga, as he always had. "You'll always be my Captain, Captain," Ordo stated. Xarga smiled, placing his hands on Ordo's shoulders before pulling him into a crushing hug. "It's good to see you old friend."

When Ordo was released he looked towards the others around him. There were only six of the ten Old Dogs remaining - a fact that pierced the deepest part of his heart like a knife. He greeted each of them in turn: Kelborn – the stalwart Navigator, Bralor – another giant and Xarga's ever-loyal Commander, Cassus – the crew's tactician and Master-At-Arms, and Kryze – the only woman and their old Quartermaster. Beyond all of the wrinkles and wear he saw images of them all in their prime, a sea of memories flooding his mind as he thought of the others: Bendak, Sherruk, Tagren, and Kex – the last two having not survived their assassinations.

“So,” stated Kelborn, walking up to the carved wooden hawk taken from their ship and left in memory of them. “Is it time to come back and put an end to the Church once and for all?” he asked, looking to Xarga. The others all turned and looked as well. “I can’t ask you all to come back and fight. A lifetime has passed.” “It’s a good thing you don’t need to ask,” stated Kryze, the others nodding in agreement. Xarga looked at them all and then set his eyes on Ordo. “Is he ready?” he asked. “They both are,” Ordo answered.

Chapter 141: Prisonbreak

With the floor successfully secured and the eight of them – seven from their cell and an additional neighbour named Hyde – they set about making their final preparations. Bjorn, Wulf, Boot and Kamal all headed up to the Warlock's quarters, heading into one of the side chambers where several beds were available for use. They locked the door behind them, doing their best to get a good night's sleep.

Bjorn jolted awake in his baned form, an unfamiliar face looking down at him. "Woah there," stated Boot, "easy, it's just me. Remember where you are, switch back. The others need a chance for sleep." Bjorn looked around him, it felt like one long nightmare, but he knew it wasn't. "Right, of course." He transformed back, throwing on his clothes and turning to the others as Boot roused them. "Today's the day," he stated to them. They all nodded back, eager to put an end to their suffering. "If not all of us, then most of us," stated Channing. They all nodded in agreement.

They grabbed a decent meal before swapping with the other four, instructing them where to go and telling them to lock the door. With the others sorted, Bjorn returned to floor seven, whiling away the hours by reading the book he had taken until the Navy arrived with the floor's meals. Once the food had been provided to the baned and the others had returned, Bjorn drew Wulf's attention. "Now?" Wulf questioned. Bjorn nodded. "Now."

Using his communicator, Bjorn summoned Alara - the three of them gathering up alongside the others of their cell. "Pleasure to meet you, Commander," stated the others – the Beastly Boys too shy to say anything and practically drooling as they stared at her. "And you, I'm sorry you've all had to go through this," she told them. They nodded in appreciation before all looking towards Bjorn and Wulf. "What's the plan?" Alara asked.

"There's three parts, but without any of them it'll all fall apart. Alara, have you got everything you need?" he asked. She nodded, pulling out her camera. "All the proof we need to show the world what these monsters have been up to." "Good." Bjorn turned to Wulf. "You're in charge of getting everyone out of here whilst the Commander and I sow some chaos. You'll be here with the others, waiting for the signal. Once it happens – and it's on you to figure out when is best to move – make your way up and release everyone you can. Then run and don't stop until you see the skies."

“What are you two going to do?” Wulf questioned. Bjorn and Alara looked at each other, before Bjorn pulled out the red soul stone he had obtained and presented it to her. “You saw their General?” he asked. She nodded, palming the stone before putting it in her pocket. “Understood. I’ll be waiting for your signal. I’m guessing I’m second.” Bjorn smiled, he understood entirely what Jayce and Wulf saw in her. “Damn right. Wait for the alarm to sound, or for me to signal you.” They all looked at each other, a nervous tension in the air. “We have one shot. One chance to go home, and not just us. Fight. Fight like there is no tomorrow because there isn’t one if we’re still here,” he told them. “I’m counting on you all.” They nodded and separated, Bjorn and Alara walking away.

“Good luck,” she told him. He nodded in appreciation, splitting off and heading down to the floor below. His stomach twisted as he thought about what he was about to do. He hated it, and he had kept it hidden from the others because he knew they’d have protested. The two Warlocks on patrol stopped and stared at him, both immediately sensing something was wrong – even though he looked like any other Warlock. “What are you doing here?” questioned one, only to stumble backwards as Bjorn grabbed the other with a Focused grip and forced their neck through the axe of the nearest golem guard.

The Warlock stammered as Bjorn transformed into his therian form, towering over the small man. “H-h-help me!” he screamed, falling onto the floor before rolling over and crawling forwards. Bjorn lifted a heavy foot upwards, the cells around him erupting into life as the convicts stepped forwards to see what was going on. He stomped down, obliterating the chest of the Warlock to the cheers of his audience. The golems sprung to life, raising their stone axes and charging him.

He grabbed the arms of the nearest and tore them off, wielding the axes for himself as an alarm began to reverberate through the prison. The statues fell in quick succession, decorating the floor as rubble. “Prepare to fight!” Bjorn declared to his fools, rummaging through the clothes of the dead Warlocks for their keys, before throwing one set down the corridor to the furthest cell – a waiting therian snatching it off the floor – and unlocking each cell, one after another.

“Go!” he ordered. “Hurt them like they hurt us!” he declared, unleashing his unknowing sacrifices. The therians around him grabbed anything they could use as a weapon, roaring and charging towards the stairs, but Bjorn headed in the opposite direction – along the corridor towards a set of stairs on the other end. A

set of stairs heading down to the floor holding the most dangerous therians in the prison.

An alarm began to cry out across the prison, Alara immediately picking up the pace as she hurried into the golem press. She waited, hoping for the guards to head out as she hid in the shadows, but to her distinct horror more entered, including a Warlock dressed in far more ornate clothes than the others she had seen. The woman was bald, pale-skinned with various tattoos and piercings – and what's more – she looked furious. "Move and prepare the General, the baned have broken free!" she ordered.

Alara entered into Focus, keeping her glaive sheathed as she raced forwards, rushing through the army of golems adjacently to the High Master. "You there!" called out a Navy Captain standing guard. "Halt! I said halt!" he ordered, drawing his rapier and pointing to Alara. The High Master's face fell, her eyes opening unnaturally wide. "Stop her!" she screeched in realisation, a pair of fleshy wings bursting from her back before she took to the air and flew in pursuit of Alara through the giant hall.

The guards raised their rifles but Alara was already upon them, darting between golems to throw off their aim before she dove forwards and threw a heavy fist through the Captain's jaw. He dropped with a crunch and she grabbed his sword, throwing it with precision at the High Master. The thin blade pierced the Warlock's chest, dropping her with a screech before she yanked it out and took back to the air – her wound sealing almost immediately.

But it was too late, Alara leapt onto the General's platform, racing to its back before kicking the Navy guard, who had just opened it, over the edge. She screamed as she fell before hitting the ground with a crack. "Don't fail me now!" Alara yelled, shoving the red soul stone inside before slamming the casing closed. "What have you done?" screeched the High Master, her body transforming as many more eyes appeared, as well as several mouths. She began to chant, readying an array of spells.

The General raised its hand, shadowing her from the lighting above. She screamed as it slammed its hand down, splattering her across the floor like an irritating insect. Although it had no organs, the statue seemed to laugh, tearing off its restraints before letting out a creaking screech. The golems across the room all clutched their heads, writhing as it took command before they all snapped to attention - turning on each other, the Navy around them and then the floors, supporting pillars and the walls. Alara dove off the platform, racing for her life

towards the exit. "It's done! Bjorn, it's done!" she screamed, as the roof and walls began to crack. She emerged into an all-out battle on the leeching floor between baned, Navy and Warlocks. "Please be close, Jayce," she prayed – racing through the fray.

Floor nine was different from the others: it was colder, darker and damper, with little other than faint red lighting. It was a cave of sorts, filled with a dozen metal chambers, each about three-metres high and wide, and about five-metres long. A red glow emanated from inside each chamber, acting as the only lighting in the cave. A heavy wheel sat on the front of each box, reminding Bjorn of bank vaults, but he suspected there was no treasure inside.

He could hear and feel fighting in the distance, the entire cave rumbling and shaking, but his attention sat locked on the prison cells. He felt eyes on him, as if watching from behind him, but he turned and saw nothing – instead hearing three loud and slow knocks from the centre-most cage. Bjorn's heart pounded in his chest, a chill permeating inside of him as he stepped closer. He stopped before he could see inside – the glass had been scratched. It read: 'Dead Man'.

He shook off his subconscious fear – he had nothing to be afraid of. He reached to the wheel and span it, a heavy clunk sounding outwards as the door unlocked. Bjorn left it closed, turning and heading quickly towards the stairs before stopping as he heard the cell open and felt eyes falling onto him. He glanced back, looking down at a huge black lion, his body almost invisible in the darkness apart from the red glow painting his back. He stared at Bjorn – his golden eyes boring through his skull.

Despite doing everything he could to resist, Bjorn stopped breathing – his body refusing to take in any air, as he felt as if he was looking death itself straight in the eyes. He had felt fear before, but this felt primordial: like prey seeing a predator for the first time. The baned nodded to him and turned towards the other cells, the ability to exist returning to Bjorn as he turned and ran upwards – off to finish their escape. He shuddered, his imagination running wild as to who, or what, else was inside those cells.

Alarms were ringing out across the prison, fighting and screams of death and frustration building into the cacophony. It sounded like the end of the world: guards were rushing down to pacify the escapees - a sacrifice, Wulf guessed. He couldn't believe Bjorn had done it, but he couldn't fault the old baned's resolve. It was probably the only way. "Now?" questioned Ohno, for the hundredth time

– all of the caged baned stood by their bars calling for freedom. Wulf shook his head – they needed a straight shot, they were still unarmed.

A screech shook the prison, a loud shake beginning to follow. He took a deep breath – it was time. “Alright, listen up!” Wulf yelled, drawing the attention of the baned around him as he transformed. “We are getting out of here, but we are not leaving without our brothers and sisters on the floors above! Marines, Navy, others – I am Lieutenant Wulf of Commander Vanathur’s Wolfpack! Follow me to freedom!” he declared, the others racing to the cell doors and unlocking them before an army emerged, following behind Wulf as he ran towards the stairs leading up.

It had been a cold and angry spring morning for Jayce, he had hardly slept and he wasn’t the only one. The entire crew – those that were still present – were all feeling the same. It was time for revenge. It was time to get Bjorn back! “Captain,” Astris stated, stepping into the living quarters. “The Sole Survivor is in sight, and the Necropolis is on the horizon,” she declared. Jayce chugged the rest of his coffee, standing to his feet and wiping his mouth. “Let’s bring him home.”

“Captain Exarga, it’s good to see you!” Witchford called out, through their shared communicators. “You too, Witchford. Where’s Alara?” Jayce returned, stepping next to Falconer at the Stacked Hand’s helm. “Inside. She entered a little over a day ago,” stated the Lieutenant Commander, giving a resigned look across the water as they sailed next to each other. “She what?” Jayce questioned in alarm. “She didn’t give us much of a choice,” Riley inserted, hugging Astris tightly as she teleported across to the Sole Survivor before returning back to the Stacked Hand. “Of course she didn’t, doesn’t mean you let her do something so reckless!” he scolded.

“That’s rich coming from you,” Astris stated, much to the bemusement of the others. Jayce rolled his eyes, turning his attention to their target. “Two Navy ships on approach!” declared Falconer and Riley to their respective crews. “Exarga, you’re in command,” stated Witchford, ever wary of the chaos the Rising Aces liked to cause. “Then sit back and watch the show,” Jayce told him, taking the wheel from Falconer.

“Wicke!” Jayce yelled, drawing her attention as she stepped out onto the deck of the Stacked Hand with a huge tome in her arms. She looked over to him before looking in the direction he was pointing. “Remove that problem for me!” he ordered, brutally. She nodded, racing to the bow and clambering onto the Stacked Hand’s colossal forward cannon. The Sole Survivor slowed down,

pulling back behind the Stacked Hand as Wicke began to chant, tattoos spreading across her bare arms and legs.

The bright, almost cloudless sky darkened and greyed – a howling wind picking up. The two Navy ships seemed to realise something was wrong, turning to show their broadside guns, but the ocean around them twisted and rolled away before rolling back in a colossal wave. Both ships disappeared beneath the waters, re-emerging as the waves settled with their ships upside down and smashed into each other.

The crew of the Sole Survivor stared in awe and fear as Pirate Lord Exarga executed both crews in an instant and without mercy or warning. Riley let out a long whistle. "I'm glad they're on our side," she stated, only to get pinched on the shoulder by Soner. "Focus up. What do you see?" he asked, looking out towards the tower at the top of the necropolis. "You're my spotter, you tell me," she bickered. "Both of you," settled Witchford, letting out a short exhale as he too took in the power of magic.

"Exarga, what now?" Witchford asked, as the Stacked Hand continued forwards before making a full stop and dropping anchor. Thalia looked towards Jayce with an almost begging expression. He nodded and her face lit up. "What?" protested Astris, as Thalia ran to the forward gun and sat in its main seat. "No fair!" she stated. Jayce smiled, shaking his head before gripping tightly onto the railing. "They've locked their doors," he stated across the communicator. "How about we knock politely?"

"Onwards!" Wulf commanded, as he and his army ran on mass from floor to floor, eradicating the mad golems and retrieving the keys from the Warlocks the statues had killed. Wulf led the charge – he couldn't stop, he wouldn't stop. But as he neared the final floor, he faltered – taking a moment to look over the edge at the battle below. It was bloody chaos, the sides transforming from baned against everyone else into everyone else against the army of golems flooding onto the floor. "Come on Alara. Come on Bjorn," he stated, turning back and continuing upwards.

Alara panted heavily as she leant against the wall of the seventh floor. Her right eye saw everything through a red tint and she could feel blood dripping down her chin. It was pandemonium – utter and devastating chaos - and it had taken everything she had to not get trapped in the melee. "Bjorn," she wheezed into her communicator. "Here," he stated, emerging onto her floor with a grin on his face as he saw the empty cells, only for that to immediately fade as he saw her.

"By the ancestors, Alara, are you okay?" he asked. She nodded, tearing off parts of her uniform before wrapping them around her cuts and head. "I'll live, I think. Come on, we need to go!" she stated, stumbling before racing forwards to the balcony and looking upwards: an army of baned were rushing towards the surface. The entire island rumbled, and then - to the stunned shock of her and Bjorn - they both saw daylight.

"That's the cannonball?" Jayce questioned, as Tempest levitated a huge orb as dark as the night sky. "It's huge," Jayce stated, the ball half the length of his arm. "Come on, come on!" Thalia stated impatiently, hopping out her seat and helping to drop the orb into a chamber in the bore. The chamber was then sealed and Tempest nodded. "It is ready," the djinn declared. Thalia bounced back into her seat, manoeuvring the cannon and taking aim. "This is the trigger mechanism," Tempest told Astris, pointing to another seat on the other side. Her eyes widened and she raced to it. "How do I fire it?" Thalia asked, looking back at the group. "Is it ready?" Jayce questioned. She nodded. He looked towards Astris. "Boom."

She pulled the heavy trigger and the world turned black and white. Jayce stared at the spectacle in awe – the entire world turning to pen and paper as he saw nothing other than white and the black outline of the sea, the sky, the ship and the world around him. A magical field warped itself around the cannon, a thousand rapid black detonations resonating from the weapon as Tempest's enchantments sealed and quietened the blast from within.

The cannonball launched from the end of the barrel, the black barrel itself cracking into a web of white lines. A thick black line etched itself across the white world as the black sphere scraped across the sky, sailing true and towards the island – towards the lone tower at its peak. It flew slowly through the air, but in reality it was less than a second – the fabric of the world bending behind it as it flew.

The cannonball sailed past the two capsized warships, both of them shattering into a million pieces as it passed, splitting the ocean underneath as flew over the water. The black orb sailed across the top of the island – scraping the side of the tower before flying beyond into the horizon. The tower remained intact and hardly touched, but then the world returned to normal, and the warped bubble of air carved itself across the island, flattening its surface and obliterating the tower.

The roar of the blast was ungodly, Tempest's enchantments doing everything they could to prevent the deafening of everyone around, but silence immediately

followed. "Holy shit!" stated Riley across their communicators. The Rising Aces stood stunned as dust and debris rained across the island, and the parting in the ocean closed with a crash. The Necropolis was gone, a straight line carved directly to the entrance of the prison beneath the island. "You missed," Wicke stated.

Alara and Bjorn grabbed their ears as the island roared and screeched – something divine tearing a hole in the roof, like the hand of a God guiding them to freedom. "What the hell was that?" Alara questioned, racing towards the stairs as they pursued the rest of the baned. "If it's anything, it's Jayce," Bjorn stated. "Forwards!" came a loud cry from above, a roar of cheers following afterwards along with the stamping of feet charging to freedom.

Alara and Bjorn emerged out onto floor one, Alara surging forwards after the rest of the therians as Bjorn ran to the edge of the walkway and looked down. His heart wrenched as he looked down at the bloodshed he had caused, at the therians he had given hope to and cruelly sacrificed to aid the escape of the others. It wasn't right, there could have been another way. His thoughts immediately vanished as the wall of the leeching floor burst open – the General charging through and crashing straight into the floors below.

"Boss Bjorn!" called a trio of voices from above. He glanced over, past the thin stone stairs leading to the last platform; the three Beastly Boys were stood waiting, ensuring that all of the other therians were making it safely across. "Good job boys," he muttered, charging towards them as the last therians crossed with Alara. The ground shook beneath him as he ran, his eyes widening as he saw cracks spreading – the ground collapsing.

He lunged for the stairs, stepping on and diving forwards as the ground fell out from underneath him. Bjorn yelled in panic as he began to fall - a long fall and a grisly death awaiting him. But he stopped falling with a yank, a pair of hands grabbing onto his. He looked up from the abyss beneath him, a pair of orange hands grasping his arm. "We've got you, bossman Bjorn," stated Fenn, his legs being held by Wam – who was also hanging, and being held by Ohno in a terrifying feat of strength.

A few other therians raced forwards, grabbing Ohno and helping him to pull Wam, and then Fenn, and then finally Bjorn, up onto the ledge. "Thanks, I owe you my life boys," Bjorn stated, with a deep sigh of relief. They shook their heads. "No bossman, we owe you." The ground began to crack and Bjorn dove forwards, grabbing Fenn and Wam and forcing them to their feet as they ran for

the slowly crumbling stairs. "Jump!" Bjorn yelled, grabbing Fenn and throwing him up and over the edge of the hole, before leaping for freedom.

Seize the Seas Tales: An Elder's Duty

It was the dead of night in the Capital, a quiet tension filling the air as the people of the Empire awaited a retaliation from Caedom, from Jayce Exarga, and from the now excommunicated Marines. But no one could starve off sleep forever, and Morgause had no intention of losing any over a potential war that certainly wasn't going to happen. She lay in her bed, amongst the dozen other sleeping Paladin Initiates in her dorm, all snoring away. Yet none snored as boisterously as she did.

A hand covered her drooling mouth, startling her awake from her dreams of dragons, knights, and baked goods. Her golden eyes stared around in panic, her silver hair tied up in a messy ball, until she set her eyes on Paladin Bedivere. "Shh," she said softly, Morgause quickly noticing other Knights quietly rousing the rest of the Initiates. "Paladin? What's going on?" Morgause asked, getting to her feet and looking up at the older woman. "Get dressed, pack your things and be ready to leave the Capital within thirty minutes," ordered the Paladin. Morgause's eyes widened, it made no sense – was it some special mission? Some secret training? Or was else something going on? "Why?" she questioned, a rarity for her to do. "Just do as ordered," stated Bedivere.

Morgause packed everything she had, which wasn't much other than a few mementos from her mother, an old photo of her with her absent siblings, and her greatsword. The others tried to chat, but were immediately silenced by the Knights and Paladin around them. They were then hurried through the Holy Palace to the docks, once again being ordered to be silent. Something felt wrong, her heart racing in her chest as she felt her life in danger.

They arrived to find three large ships being made ready for departure. There were numerous other Initiates, and even the younger Squires on board. Morgause's eyes widened as she spotted Sentinels Pasquerel, Metz and Dunois all commanding the loading. Her group were immediately hurried to the nearest ship, but Morgause had other ideas – slipping away as she spotted a familiar figure. "Proctor Gujin," she greeted, drawing his quick attention and a look of surprise. "Morgause, good, you're here – get on board."

"What's going on?" she asked, looking towards the supplies he was checking over. "If you're going to chat, help me load this – quickly," he commanded. She

nodded, grabbing a heavy box and lifting before following the old man. A loud clamour erupted from the entrance to the docks. Morgause put the box down and turned to look, spotting a large group of Paladins with their swords drawn. At their lead were Sentinels Baudricourt, Dauphin and Cauchon. Sentinels Pasquerel, Metz and Dunois all surged forwards to engage with their own weapons – fighting against the other Sentinels and Paladins.

Morgause gasped as a spray of blood painted a lantern, reaching for her own sword, only for Gujin to grab her and physically carry her towards the ship. “Gujin! Let go, I want to help!” she cried, but he forced her forwards towards the walkway leading to the nearest ship. “Cast off!” yelled the voice of Sentinel Metz. The ship began to move and Morgause looked back but, on seeing the panic and fear in the unshakable Gujin, she turned back and leapt for the ship. She held her arm out and Gujin grabbed it, the pair of them watching the conflict continue as they sailed away.

Metz weaved through the enemy, cutting down any and all who stood in his way, but almost immediately the large figure of Baudricourt blocked him, swinging his large greatsword with intent to kill. “Traitors!” he yelled. Metz backed off, glancing around. They were outnumbered – and in a moment the ships would be too far to leap for. He looked to his Paladins, and to his Sentinel brothers that had stood with him by the Elder’s side. “Go!” he ordered, charging forwards in a hope to save as many of them as he could. But none fled or abandoned him, his allies fighting with him until the end.

But no one charged to meet them, instead they parted as the cold and cruel figure who had initiated this all stepped through. “Jeanne d’Arc has surrendered, do the same and prove your loyalty to your Church!” ordered Elder Gille de Rais. Metz glanced back to the ships carrying the remains of their order - they were too far to be reached, and they could flee safely into the night. “For the Order!” he cried. “For the Elder!” called out his allies, charging forwards as the rest of the Church arrived.

Chapter 142: Investments

Jayce's eyes widened as baned spilled out from the top of, what had been, the Necropolis. There was hundreds of them, all rushing towards the shore. "Alara? Bjorn?" Jayce called out through his communicator, bringing the Stacked Hand closer to the island's only surviving pier – with the Sole Survivor following closely behind. "Here," Alara returned, bringing an immediate sigh of relief to Jayce and the Sole Survivor's crew. "Have you got Bjorn?" he asked.

Alara turned, her smile fading away as a horrified realisation crossed her. "Move! Move!" she ordered, pushing through the mass towards the hole they had just departed. "Bjorn? Bjorn!" she called out, only to skid to a halt as a fox baned flew out of the hole and crashed onto the ground. A baned panda followed after, climbing out of the hole, a badger appearing behind him. A large white claw slapped onto the edge of the hole, an exhausted Bjorn popping his head over the edge a moment later. "Thank the Gods," Alara exclaimed, breathing a sigh of relief as she stepped forwards to help pull him out along with the other baned.

"Thanks," Bjorn stated, looking to her and then the three baned around him. He returned his gaze back to Alara, a smile spreading as he glanced past her to the Sole Survivor and the Stacked Hand coming into dock. "We did it," he stated. She nodded. "You did it," she corrected, turning and looking out towards the mass of baned around them. "Now what do we do?" Bjorn questioned. Alara shrugged. "Why would I know?"

"Wulf!" cried Riley, racing up the shore and diving into him with enough force to knock him to the floor. He held her tightly. "You're here, I can't believe it," he stated, transforming into his human form. "The hell?" she questioned, her eyes wide as she looked him over. "You can change?" He nodded, getting to his feet and looking towards Witchford, the Weapon, Brett and Soner, all making their way over with the rest of the crew as they tried to calm the mass of baned. "Commander," Wulf greeted, Witchford shaking his head in disbelief before hugging him tightly. "I don't believe it," he stated, before releasing him and looking around. "Where's the Commander?" Witchford asked, looking through the crowd.

The baned around them all looked towards the large crew of Marines departing the Sole Survivor with distinct discomfort and unease. "This could go wrong quickly," Wulf advised. Witchford nodded and looked towards Wulf. "You're in charge," he stated, sensing that Wulf held far more weight than he ever could. "Sir?" Wulf questioned, glancing behind him to Boot, Channing, and

the others still stood by his side. "You got them out. They need a leader," Witchford stated. Wulf looked down towards Riley, still wrapped around him. "You have your orders," she stated.

Some yelling drew Alara and Bjorn's attention to the shore, the pair heading quickly through the mass to where the Sole Survivor's crew had gathered. "Listen up!" Wulf repeated, trying to gain control of the thousand-strong crowd. Alara unleashed a blast of controlled Panic, quietening the mob in an instant. Wulf looked to her expectantly, but she just winked and carried on past him with Bjorn – heading to the crew of the Stacked Hand as they emerged from their ship. "We need time to figure out our way out of here. Sit down, wait, and trust my crew."

Alara stepped towards Jayce with her arms open but he ignored her and hugged Bjorn instead. She glowered in quick anger as the pair held each other. "Don't ever do that to me again!" Jayce ordered. Bjorn chuckled, releasing his Captain and nodding. "I'll do my best. Thank you for coming after me." Jayce shook his head and stepped back. "I'm sorry it took so long." Bjorn nodded, his spirit uplifting as he spotted Marisha. He transformed, her eye widening as he stepped towards and kissed her.

"What did I miss?" Jayce questioned, turning to Alara before noticing her injuries. "Doc!" he called out, but Alara punched his shoulder, leaning into him. "I'm fine," she said weakly. He shook his head, supporting her as she leant on him. "You're not. But thank you for risking it for them. For me," he said to her softly, leaning over and kissing her grimy forehead. She remained silent, her mind flooding with the horrors she had seen, as Yuthura took her wounds. "They can't get away with that," she said quietly with steeled determination. Jayce nodded, looking towards the mass of baned. "They won't."

With her wounds tended to, Jayce released his support of Alara, but she didn't let go of him – her body shaking slightly. "I've got this, rest up," he told her, taking her hand and squeezing it before letting go and approaching Bjorn. "Sorry to interrupt," Jayce stated, drawing a glare from Marisha. "We need to talk and figure out how to deal with this." Bjorn looked down at Marisha with a bushy smile, before he transformed into his therian form. "Agreed, two ships isn't enough for all the therians."

"Therians?" Jayce questioned. Bjorn simply nodded. "Okay, looks like there's lots to talk about. Wulf!" Jayce called out, drawing the Wolfpack's attention. Their main members approached. "Do we need to worry about the Church inside?"

Jayce asked. "Already sorted, Captain," Witchford stated, looking with concern towards Alara as she sat on the floor. "I've deployed some Marines to guard the pit."

Jayce nodded appreciatively, only for his attention to be drawn away as he heard a strange roaring sound coming from off the island. They all looked, staring in curious disbelief at a strange metal object flying through the sky, leaving a large plume of black smoke trailing after it. It was loud and noisy, and looked a little like a mosquito or dragonfly. "What is that?" Riley questioned, drawing her rifle in preparation. "I have no idea," Jayce answered, watching the flying machine as it circled the island before dropping down in a slow descent towards the ocean.

It skimmed the water before slowing down, eventually gliding towards the end of the pier, where the Stacked Hand and Sole Survivor had docked. "Wait here," Jayce instructed, drawing Alara's attention and heading with her towards the strange arrival. "An airboat?" Alara questioned, as they walked along the pier, a hatch opening on the strange vehicle. "It's the World Guild," Jayce stated, pointing to the markings on the vehicles exterior. "Guild? What are they doing here?"

The pair of them faltered as a pair of young women stepped onto the pier. One had long blonde hair, tied in a pony tail, and was dressed in pair of smart, high waisted trousers, accompanied with a white blouse. Her large green eyes stared at them mischievously, paired with a prideful grin. The other was similar in height and had a dark greyish-blue suit, one side of her black hair tucked back behind her ear, the other long and loose. A high-collared black compression top sat underneath her jacket, and a silver necklace accompanied her matching hanging earrings. Unlike her mother she had two brown eyes, but for some reason she still had a sword.

"Holli? Myra?" Jayce questioned, stepping forwards to meet them along with Alara, his mind in disbelief as they stood before him. "What are you doing here?" he asked. Holli smiled and wrapped her arms around him. "We tracked the Stacked Hand's signal and were coming to see you anyway," Holli stated matter-of-factly before hugging Alara. Jayce looked down at Myra – Vice-Admiral Yashiro's daughter hadn't changed much, but she looked even more like her mother and he could see her fierceness in her eyes. The fires faded and she stepped forwards. "Jayce," she said softly, hugging him gently. Jayce glanced back towards Alara as he hugged back – feeling and seeing daggers flying his

way. She released him, looking towards Alara and giving her a soft wave. "Good to see you Alara – it's been a long time."

"It has," Alara returned. "You look... grown up," she stated, a hint of caution in her voice. Jayce had always spoken about Myra's doubled persona: the quiet girl, and the bossy devil within. She had never quite believed it, but Myra had always been a very smart and cunning girl – with a distinct obsession for Jayce. One that Alara very much doubted had faded away with time. Alara glanced towards Holli, hoping for any clues as to what was going on.

"It's quite lucky that you're here too, Alara. Perfect even. The best business deals come down to luck and timing, after all," stated Holli. Neither Jayce nor Alara liked what they were hearing. There was no reason to be nervous or apprehensive to either Myra or Holli, but they very much doubted these two old family friends were here just for a social catch-up – and that meant the Guild wanted something. "Father?" Holli stated, stepping to the side and looking back towards their air vehicle.

Jayce tensed as he spotted a slightly bedraggled man sat in the foremost seat. Last time Jayce had seen him he had been far more well-kept, he had also tried to kill Jayce. He had replaced his goatee with a thick stubble, and his very short black hair had been grown out and was now parted in the middle. His skin was light like Holli's and now with both in person, Jayce could see the resemblance – their green eyes looked identical. His golden gauntlets were absent, a pair of fingerless leather gloves on his hands instead.

"This was your idea, dear," stated the Phoenix, his voice silky smooth and casual. "Take the lead, both of you have earned guiding this deal forwards. I'll wait in the flyer," he stated, giving a slight wave to Jayce before leaning back in his seat and closing his eyes. Jayce turned to Holli. "Your father is the Phoenix?" he questioned in hushed alarm. "Oh yeah, I found him. He's been very helpful in my-" Holli looked towards Myra. "Our progression. It's nice having family in the right place, don't you think?"

"Holli, you don't understand – he's a bad man," Jayce warned. Holli pouted. "No, you were just on the opposite side of a business deal. There's no morality in money – that's decided after the deal is concluded and the victor is decided. Anyway – he's my dad. I don't need lectures from the child of the Bloody Barbarian and the man who just purged more than half of the Empire's Rear-Admirals."

Jayce tilted his head. "What?" he questioned. She shook her head, dismissing the question. "We're getting off track," interjected Myra. Holli nodded appreciatively. "Agreed. Alara, Jayce, let us present you with the best deal you will ever have," she stated, stepping forwards and gesturing to walk along the pier. Jayce and Alara looked at each other, getting the sense that they had little choice in the matter.

"Now, you find yourself on a precipice between war and surrender – correct?" "We're never going to surrender to the Church!" Alara stated. Myra and Holli glanced at each other with big smiles on their faces. "Perfect, now it's horrible to see what they've done to the baned here, a real disgrace," Holli stated. "Therians," Jayce corrected. Holli raised an eyebrow and then shook it off. "How do you know what they've been doing here?" Alara asked.

"That doesn't matter. What does matter is getting your message out to the world, encouraging the good people of the New World to rise up against their oppressors," Myra stated, shutting down the question. "We can do that for you. Well actually, even better, we can give you the tools to do it yourself." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a camera-like device, connected to a white glowing disk. "Ta da – your tool to save the world," Myra declared. "This has priority over all of the Guild channels – every radio, news programme, private network. Put a message out, along with images from a memory crystal, and bang – the whole New World hears you."

Jayce and Alara stared at the device – there was nothing they needed more than to show the world the horrors of the Necropolis and the Church. "Why?" Jayce questioned. "The simple answer is the Church will drag us backwards," Myra added. "Unofficially, view this as the Guild supporting your faction in the upcoming war. Our faction, supporting our friends," Holli stated. She smiled, and looked out across the mass of therians. She turned back. "There's no price, no hidden fees."

"Then what else are you getting out of this?" Alara questioned. Holli shook her head. "Nothing, I just want the pair of you to not hold any grudges towards the Guild, towards us, in the fallout of this war. Think of this as a favour to both Myra and I, not so much my father - if that makes you feel better. Have we got a deal?" she asked. Jayce and Alara looked at each other and then nodded. "You two are the figureheads of two halves: Marines and Pirates, law and lawlessness, order and chaos. Send a message that the world will rally to." Myra presented the device and Jayce took it. "We'll wait here, good luck," Myra stated.

Jayce and Alara returned to their group. "Who was that?" Astris questioned. "An old friend, we'll talk about it later," Jayce stated, looking to Alara as she dismantled her camera and pulled out its memory stone. "You ready?" he asked. "Who's talking, me or you?" she asked. He shrugged. "Guess we'll wing it," she concluded, slotting the memory stone inside and powering up the device.

"I hope this thing is on – I think it is. Hello, people of the New World – my name is Commander Alara Vanathur. Now some of you may have heard of me, likely not exactly great things in recent times, but please – just listen. In the last few months we have experienced a fracture in our military, those who have allied with the Church, and those of us who are loyal to the Emperor. They are lying to you: the Marines are not your enemies, the Church are. They have abducted the Emperor and are keeping him locked away in the palace."

"For years now the Church has been conspiring to seize power. They have murdered countless, tried and succeeded in assassinating those who stood in their way – including the Old Dogs. They... we attacked Caedom – burning it to the ground and killing everyone the Church deemed an enemy. It was wrong, and they're not going to stop there. Anyone the Church believes is a threat to them claiming ultimate power will be wiped out if we don't stop them."

"They kidnapped the baned, torturing and killing them before sealing their souls into their weapons. Those golems you see on the streets, they were people, and they could be you or your family next. The Church contains cultists and zealots: Warlocks and Witches, as well as their Priests and Paladins – they do not care about the misuse of magic, they want to be the only ones to use it. If we roll over and let them seize control then that will be the end of the Empire. The end of everything. The Marines will not stand aside and let it happen. We are going to fight, and that is why we have allied with the Pirate Lords in a temporary truce – join us!"

Alara passed the device over to Jayce, her face bright red as she stepped out of view of the camera. "The Emperor has been taken hostage, and the Church intend to execute anyone in their way. They've hurt so many people – good, innocent people, and they've killed people I cared about. They burnt down Caedom, an innocent city full of fantastic, wonderful people – and they kidnapped my friend, my crewmate. So, Pope, Elder, Warlocks... Zoya – on behalf of the Pirate Lords, on behalf of all those you've wronged and persecuted, on behalf of myself and my friends – I declare war on you!"

"We will sail to the Capital and free the Emperor, and if you move him then we will track you across this world. You have four weeks and my fleet will arrive. Make peace with yourselves and prepare to fall. To all those across the world, all who hold any justice and honour in your hearts – rise up, arm yourselves and join us on our quest to rid this world of the Church's evil, once and for all! For the baned, for the Mages, for the Marines... for Xander and all the others they have murdered."

He turned the device off, letting out a long exhale as he looked up at the skies. "How was that?" he asked, looking towards Alara and the others. Riley held her thumb up. "Bit too dramatic, but got the point across. Will we make it there in four weeks?" she questioned. Jayce looked towards Witchford and Falconer. "Should be possible - a bit tight, but possible," Witchford stated, Falconer nodding in agreement.

Alara looked across the mass of baned: they were going to be a problem. She looked back to Jayce and tilted her head in Myra and Holli's direction. "Let's see what can be done," she told him. They made their way over, not exactly confident about their positions as the figureheads on their side of the war, but not sensing much choice in the matter. "Well done," Holli stated, taking the device back from Jayce. "That'll be more than enough, especially if we circulate it a few more times in the papers and radio."

"Great," Jayce said sarcastically. "But we've got another problem: the therians." "That's already sorted," Phoenix stated, opening his eyes and looking over to them. "What?" Alara questioned. Phoenix lifted his hand and pointed towards the west – a fleet of ships sailing towards them on the horizon: Marine ships. "Help is on its way. An old friend got in touch," he stated. Jayce's eyes widened as he recognised a ship leading the way: it's hull and sails were black. It was the Whisper – his father's ship.

Jayce couldn't believe it as the fleet of five ships arrived, his father stepping down onto the pier in his black suit. Phoenix had decided he was worthy enough to get out of the flyer for, the pair approaching each other and shaking hands. "Philip," greeted the Phoenix. "Vance. Thank you for doing this," stated Vice-Admiral Exarga. "Of course, more than happy to repay you for all you've done for my daughter. We'll leave you to it," returned the Phoenix. "Girls, time's up." Myra and Holli nodded, smiling to Alara and Jayce. "It's been a ride. Good luck, and see you on the other side. Don't forget our deal," Holli stated with a wink.

"See you guys!" added Myra, the pair climbing into their flyer before with a roar it began to move away from the pier and then up into the skies.

"I don't even know where to begin..." Jayce muttered, looking exhaustedly to Alara. She nodded in agreement, the pair looking towards Vice-Admiral Exarga as he admired the flying machine. With a smile he turned to them, stepping forwards and pulling the pair of them into a hug. "You have no idea how proud I am of the pair of you, and how relieved I am to see you both okay," he stated, holding them tightly. "Dad, what's going on – where's Mum?"

"Cassandra is okay, she was the one who got us out. She's still there, keeping the pressure up whilst waiting for you," he answered, gripping both of their shoulders and looking them over. "Now, I've come to assist with the baned. We'll take them somewhere safe, and once the war is over we'll get them home." Alara frowned. "That implies you're not coming with us?" she questioned. He nodded. "Cassandra was always the better fighter, and if I'm there I will be their first target. Your mother deserves the best chance she has, and that means having you two by her side and me out of harm's way."

"But don't worry – I've tipped the scales to our favour." He chuckled. "I turned their own trap against them." Jayce and Alara immediately remembered the mention of the massacre of the Rear-Admirals. So much for Admiral Exarga being the more lethal, they both thought before glancing at each other and then back at Vice-Admiral Exarga. Jayce nodded in acknowledgment, turning his attention back to the therians. "What a mess," stated Vice-Admiral Exarga. "These poor people."

He stepped forwards, Alara and Jayce following behind as he immediately drew the attention of the masses. "Excuse me, pardon me, may I have all of your attention," he announced. As numerous eyes turned towards him, he bowed low. "On behalf of the Emperor and the Marines, I am sorry for the way you have been treated." He raised his head. "I assure you, this will not go unpunished – and you will all be compensated for this horror that has been inflicted upon you. My ships will escort you away from this place and in time you will be returned to your homes."

"How can we believe you?" called out a voice from amongst the masses, followed by the affirmation of several others. Vice-Admiral Exarga held up his hands. "You have my word, on the lives of my family, that you will not come to any harm under my care," he assured. They didn't seem convinced. Bjorn and Wulf

both stepped forwards. "Go with the Marines," Bjorn ordered. "I trust them." "My people will not harm you, your suffering is over!" Wulf added.

The attitude reluctantly shifted and slowly the people began to stand up and follow the directions of Vice-Admiral Exarga's Marines. "Thank you Bjorn, thank you Lieutenant Commander Wulf," he stated. Wulf frowned, looking in confusion. "Sir, I'm only a Lieutenant," he corrected. The Admiral glanced towards him out of the corner of his eye. "Congratulations," he stated. "Admiral, not to disagree it's earned but I already have a LC," Alara said quietly. "I think Captain Vanathur has a better ring to it, but if you disagree..." Alara's eyes widened and her face flushed red. "Thank you, Sir," she stated. "You two best get moving if you hope to make it there in four weeks. Good luck - I'll see you all on the other side."

He turned to his people and walked off, leaving the two crews alone with a surprising amount of remaining therians. "Lieutenant Commander, Captain," stated Boot, stepping forwards along with more than three dozen therians – a surprisingly large portion of them all wolves. "Permission to take the fight to those bastards who did this to us?" he questioned. Wulf looked across the group, most were half-starved or ill. They weren't capable of fighting. "Captain, if I may?" he questioned. She nodded.

"All of you, I appreciate it – truly. You are my found brothers and I would gladly accept all of you. But you're hurt, wounded – and I have a far more important job for you. Protect the civilians, get them home, and when this war is finished I will accept all of you to our crew. For now, ensure their safety and your own," he ordered. There were looks of disappointment, but they all stood at attention and saluted. "Oohrah!"

Wulf pointed at those he deemed healthy enough to join, including Boot and Channing – his fellow wolves. "Welcome to the Wolfpack," he told them. They immediately turned to Alara and stood at attention. "Welcome aboard, Wolves. I expect your best: I need it now more than ever. Get on board, the Quartermaster will get you equipped, and be ready to bite back against those who did this to you."

Jayce couldn't help but smile as he watched Alara interact with her crew, they all looked to her and she fit the role of their leader perfectly. She had come far, and would continue to go further – he was certain of it. He turned away, immediately spotting Bjorn watching him. His Quartermaster grinned and Jayce scowled, only

to frown as he noticed that Bjorn had three shadows. "Uh, Bjorn," he stated, pointing past him to the fox, the badger, and the panda behind him.

Bjorn turned and looked down at the Beastly Boys. "What are you doing here, the ships will leave without you if you don't get a move on," he told them. Fenn, Wam and Ohno all looked at each other before mirroring the attention of the Marines – in a far more sloppy stance. "Boss Bjorn, we want to go with you," stated Fenn. "Absolutely not, we're going to war – that's no place for boys like you."

"Please," stated Wam. "We have nowhere to go. No homes, no family – we won't take up much space and you can work us hard – I'll keep these two morons in check. I swear." Bjorn shook his head, looking at the three of them. They could do better, they deserved better than to put their lives in harm's way – he wouldn't have it. "Welcome aboard," Jayce stated, much to Bjorn's immediate horror. "Jayce!" growled Bjorn.

Jayce just shrugged, stepping over to the four of them. "You've imprinted on them, Bjorn. Why not? Boys, are you willing to follow orders?" he asked. They all nodded. "Yes, Captain, Pirate Lord, super bossman," they declared. "Are you willing to fight for others apart from yourselves?" Jayce asked. "Yes, boss!" they repeated. Jayce glanced towards Bjorn with a big smile. "Are you willing to fire our big guns?" he asked. Their faces lit up with wide grins. "Yes sir!" they cheered. Jayce nodded, quickly noticing their gazes wandering to the cannons aboard the Stacked Hand and then towards Wicke, Astris and the other girls on board. He frowned and softly shook his head. "Bjorn, they're in your care. Keep them out of trouble."

Jayce ignored his grumblings, walking over to Alara. "Captain." She turned towards him. "Captain?" she returned, a glimmer in her eyes as she stood tall and proud. "Let's take the fight to them. Prepare for war."

Seize the Seas Tales: Tidying Loose Ends

Philip watched the Stacked Hand and the Sole Survivor sail off into the horizon. "Do me proud, kids. I believe you can do it," he said quietly, before turning as he sensed his Commander approach. "Admiral," she greeted softly. He turned and smiled. Commander Host was dressed in her usual attire, the same as all of Vice-Admiral Exarga's special operations agents: a pure black Marine uniform with a matching gaiter mask and beret. "Ginny?" he returned, turning and facing

the hole into the prison. "We're ready to cleanse the site – are you joining us?" "And miss out on the action? No, let's go," he stated, drawing his pistol.

Not long after, Philip wiped the sweat from his brow and adjusted his glasses. "I want this area excavated, leave no stone untouched. We need to know everything they were up to," he ordered to his twenty agents, vanishing in and out of the shadows. "Commander, with me," he followed up with, looking at the map in his hands he had procured from Wulf before firing a single shot at a close wall. It exploded outwards, revealing a staircase beyond.

Both he and Commander Host readied their weapons as they stood next to the hole, before he stepped in first and she disappeared behind him – supporting from the shadows. "Clear," he stated, holstering his weapon as he stood in the cave marked as floor nine. There were a dozen metal cells around him – all opened, and with no traces of their occupants. "Records?" he questioned, peering inside each cell. "Eight survivors – names have been redacted," she answered.

Philip nodded, the mass of buried baned corpses would make it hard to identify whether any were from floor nine. He pulled from his pocket a fine purple powder, flicking it into the air – the powder glowed as it fell. "Presence of magic confirmed. They teleported out," he stated. Ginny pulled down her mask. "Sir, a baned that can use magic of that power – that must mean that it was her." He shook his head. "I follow, but if it is Crach's War Hounds... who would have kept them alive and why? He himself handed them over for execution."

He shook his head. "We've been betrayed, and now the worst baned in history are back."

Chapter 143: Rollcall

"So, I propose we have a massive party to celebrate," Jayce stated, leaning on the railing next to the Stacked Hand's wheel, as they sailed away from the ruins of the Necropolis. "A party?" Bjorn questioned, as he locked the wheel on a westward heading. "To celebrate declaring war?" Jayce shook his head. "No, dumbass – you. Celebrate getting you back, having Wam, Ohno and Fenn join our crew, the firing of our new gun, all sorts. It's not like we're going to get another chance for some time." Bjorn let out a sigh, his belly rumbling. "A feast doesn't sound that bad." He transformed out of his therian form. "Perfect, then it's settled – I'll make Alara aware. But you need a haircut, and a shave, and a wash."

"How are our troops?" Alara questioned, stepping into the galley after finalising the details of their voyage with Witchford. Lieutenant Chase Soner looked towards her, before gesturing towards a large table where Wulf and the other therians were all sat - devouring everything they could get their hands on. "They're... hungry," he said with a small smile. She met Chase's big green eyes. "I still can't believe it, Alara – Wulf's cured."

"He's not cured, Soner, he's just... more himself, but I know what you mean. It's good to see, and about damned time," she stated. He looked up at her, his height just below hers. "So what comes now, Captain?" he asked. "If it's not too much for someone like me to ask a person of your status?" he joked. She scowled and stuck her tongue out at him. "Screw you, Lieutenant." He laughed. "Truthfully... I don't know."

"Does Jayce – I mean, Captain Exarga know?" he asked. She shrugged and he nodded in acceptance. "Right, well – I'm sure we'll be fine. What's the worst that could happen?" he said with a big grin. She glared at him. "Kidding, but whatever you need Riley and I to do – we have your back." She nodded in appreciation. "You better," she said in return, rapping him on the shoulder with her knuckles before approaching the therians.

"Captain," greeted the others, all standing to attention as Wulf remained seated. "At ease. Don't worry, I'm pretty relaxed when it comes to things – carry on eating. You're all looking good, the uniform suits you," she stated. Her men nodded appreciatively, Alara grinning at Wulf as he sat in human form – freshly shaved and with a close-cropped haircut. He met her gaze and glared at her. "Sorry. You look good, Wulf," she stated, stopping her staring. He nodded appreciatively.

"I'm forming a baned – sorry, therian division. Lieutenant Commander Wulf is your CO, you'll be my commandos – special operatives. I've asked Captain Exarga to come up with a solution that will let your uniforms adapt to your form. But in the meantime, I want you all to feel as welcome as possible. You have three days leave – rest up, eat up, explore the ship and get acquainted with the crew." "Aye Captain, thank you," stated Lieutenant Boot, the others repeating his words. She smiled and stepped away. "Oh, and I've heard Exarga's holding a party tonight, so make sure you find something to wear."

"We're going to need to resupply, soon," Bjorn warned, as he looked over the vast amount of food and drinks that Marisha had prepared. "We were going to have to anyway – we hardly stopped on the way to you," Jayce stated. "Boys!" Marisha snapped, causing both Bjorn and Jayce to flinch as she yelled at Fenn, Wam and Ohno. "Don't finger the food! If you want something, take it," she scolded. They all stood at attention and took their prizes before retreating. "Bjorn, teach your boys some manners," she then attacked, turning her attention to him. "Yes, bosswoman."

They docked their ships together, extending multiple gangplanks across the two decks. Unsurprisingly, the majority of the off-duty Marines took the opportunity to come aboard the Stacked Hand, and it wasn't long before the Rising Aces were outnumbered on their own ship. Zeta took it upon herself to keep Thalia out of trouble – but to Jayce's and her distinct relief, Thalia fortunately had no interest in fighting any of the Marines.

"I'm surprised," Zeta admitted, as they walked around the Sole Survivor. "Of what?" Thalia questioned, a neat bottle of whisky in her right hand and a half-empty bottle of rum in her left. "Are they really that weak?" Zeta asked. Thalia looked a pair of Marines up and down, the pair of them flinching as she stared intently at them. "If we were split up – all of the Rising Aces – and thrown across the world, do you think we could find each other again?" Thalia questioned, in a somewhat slurred display of thought-provoking eloquence. Zeta thought to herself, accepting the rum as Thalia presented the bottle to her. "Yeah, I think we could."

"The Marines couldn't. They're like ants – they need each other. They have queens to guide them, but on their own they're not much. Now, me against the whole ship – hmm, that would be something. But Vanathur is the only one I'd be interested in, maybe the girl with the big rifle as well – those two together might be as strong as Astris," Thalia lamented. Zeta nodded in acknowledgement,

following Thalia as she wandered around, searching for something. "Here it is," she stated with a big grin, the pair stopping in front of a large barrel stored in its own room near the kitchens. Zeta frowned as Thalia emptied out her bottle of rum - into her stomach, of course. "You came all this way for this? What is it?" Zeta questioned, only for her eyes to widen as Thalia turned the barrel around. "It's their rum rations," Thalia said proudly.

Jayce was deeply surprised by the amount of autographs he had to make out to Alara's Marines; he had been expecting friendliness, but now that they were truly on the same side he found something deeper - admiration, awe, mild-to-severe fawning. He didn't mind the respect, and the mild fawning, but it did feel a little weird. "Excuse me," he said, stepping away from the group around him as he spotted Alara head into the living quarters. He followed after her, pausing at the door as he spotted her sit down with a group of her people - Wulf, Riley, Witchford, Brett, Soner and Astris amongst them, along with some others. He shook his head and turned away, leaving her to it.

"To Captain Vanathur, Commander Witchford, and Lieutenant Commander Wulf!" stated Raine Delex, holding a tankard into the air. The others held their own drinks up as they relaxed on the Rising Aces' sofas. "And to those who we've lost - may they never be forgotten," added Silas Gale. "To Ryker and Axel." The others nodded, the mood turning slightly. "I'm glad we didn't lose you too, Wulf," stated Violette Bancroft, leaning into Delex as she sat on him. The others nodded in agreement. "Thanks, I-uh wasn't sure I'd make it out of there. But you all came for me, and I should have always known that was going to happen," he admitted, looking down. "Yeah, drinks on you for doubting us!" stated Brett, drawing several laughs.

Alara smiled as she sat on the edge of the sofa, looking across her squad. Their tree still sat in her quarters - both Ryker's and Axel's tags hanging from its branches. She hoped she wouldn't have to hang any more, but as she looked across the laughing and chatting group of her friends, she couldn't help but doubt that would be the case. She could see in all their faces, hidden behind their smiles and eyes, was deep worry and anticipation about what was coming. They were going to war; there was no way they'd come away unscathed.

"You okay?" Wicke questioned, as Jayce passed her below the main deck. The three Beastly Boys were all stood with her - all looking up to something suspicious. "What's that in your hand?" Jayce questioned, spotting a bottle of something alcoholic. "Nothing," she stated immediately. He shook his head.

"Just be sensible - boys look after her, she's not even sixteen yet." Wicke looked up at the three therians, before letting out a sigh, handing over the bottle and following after him. "You're no fun..." she muttered. Although she couldn't see it, he smiled just a little bit.

He headed inside Caelie's retreat, Wicke following after before shutting the door behind them. "Why are you in here?" she asked, as Jayce lay down on the grass and looked up at the fake sky. She sat next to him and then lay down – putting her head on his arm. "In all honesty, Wicke, I don't really know. I just... needed a moment, I guess." She glanced over towards him, her eyes full of worry as she looked over his face. "You're afraid of something?" she questioned, reading his expression and body language.

He thought for a moment, and then looked at her. She had grown up a lot in the time since he had met her, but she was still a child – one that he was now taking into war, along with the three therian boys, Caelie and all of the Marines across his ship. Their lives were in his hands, and - no matter how much he planned for what was coming - there was no way they would come away unscathed. There would be losses - a lot of them.

He let out a long sigh and met her gaze. "I want you to stay behind. When we stop off at the next-" he attempted. She bolted upright, her face pale, her eyes flashing with immediate anger and fear. "No! No way! You can't ask me-" "Okay," he relented. He had known there was little chance she'd have accepted it, and even if he forced her, she'd find a way back on board. "It's going to be dangerous Wicke – more dangerous than anything we've faced before. I need you to follow orders – no matter how you feel about them. If I tell you to run, you run, okay?" She looked at him with deep concern before nodding. "Good." "We'll be fine, Jayce. I know we will."

The party slowly dwindled as the night carried on, but Jayce stayed chatting with Wicke about their adventures together for most of it – the pair eventually leaving and returning to the quietened night. Jayce was not surprised to find a very drunk Alara in his quarters. He wasn't sure how long she had been there for, but she was fast asleep and drooling all over his pillow. He smiled and turned off the lights before joining her. She stirred slightly, rolling over and holding him tightly. "Don't die, any of you," she mumbled, still asleep. He held her back. "I won't. And I won't let you either," he answered.

The days passed by, the two ships joining the highway leading to the Capital before long. "Navy ships, portside," Bjorn declared one afternoon, drawing the

attention of both crews. "Wait," Alara stated across the communicators, "look at their flag." Jayce frowned as he looked: they were waving white flags. They let the ships approach. "Captain Exarga, Captain Vanathur, we're here to join you," stated the Captains, as they stepped onto the Sole Survivor, immediately kneeling and presenting the flags of their ships and their weapons. Both Jayce and Alara stared at each other in disbelief. "Welcome to the fleet," Jayce stated, accepting them without question.

Jayce provided each ship with paint, and Alara handed over a few Marine uniforms, the four Navy warships changing the patterns on the hulls and making themselves new flags to identify themselves as allies of Jayce, Alara and the Marines. Alara and Jayce were even more stunned as they found more ships waiting for them: Pirate, Navy, and Marines all ready to join the fight. But it was a small ship that brought Jayce the biggest joy.

"Welcome back - with guests!" Jayce stated, as he welcomed Ordo and Caelie back on board, his attention immediately upon the Old Dogs with them. "Evandril - I mean, Captain Xarga," Jayce stated in disbelief, looking up at the giant man. Ordo lunged forwards as Thalia burst out onto the deck, her eyes locked on the Captain of the Old Dogs and a big grin on her face. Xarga ignored her, looking down at Jayce with a smile full of pride. "You've grown tremendously, Jayce." Jayce nodded appreciatively, looking across the other Old Dogs. "Please, make yourselves at home." He looked at Thalia warningly and she shut her instincts down. "Finally," she said with a smile. "Some real power."

"We all heard your declaration," Kelborn stated, leaning against the wall as they all gathered inside the living quarters. He was a somewhat short man, taller than Ordo but shorter than Alara. He was in very good shape for a man in his sixties, his exposed arms muscular and well-defined. His hair was still militaristic: grey and cropped short. He had fair skin, his eyes were narrow and brown and he had a faint scar across his lips. "What's your plan?" he asked.

Alara and her main officers looked towards Jayce, the rest of the Old Dogs doing the same. Jayce glanced towards Bralor as he stood with his eyes on Thalia: she had yet to break line of sight with Old Dog Xarga. Bralor was a giant man, comparable to Xarga, but with dark skin, a bald head and thick grey stubble. "Bralor, could you go with Thalia to the training hall and spar with her?" Jayce requested, sensing trouble. "I want him," she stated, pointing at Xarga. Xarga glanced over to her.

"Beat Bralor first and then we'll see about it, youngster," Xarga stated. Bralor chuckled as Thalia let out a sigh of disappointment. He towered over her but she didn't look the least bit concerned. "Don't die on me, old man," she goaded, walking to the door. He laughed, following her outside. The second they departed the room seemed to diffuse, an invisible tension fading away. "That's better," Jayce muttered, before getting to his feet.

"So, from what I know, the Empire has a pretty firm protocol when the Emperor is threatened. They form the Iron Wall, right?" Jayce questioned, looked towards Cassus – his father's legendary mentor. Cassus nodded in acknowledgment. He was tall: a little shorter than Jayce and far leaner. He had a scar across his throat, and his left eye was a milky white. He had fair skin, a thick, bushy grey moustache and similarly cropped hair to Kelborn. "The Iron Wall is a myth," Riley stated. "It isn't," Bjorn stated. "They used it once during the Blood Wars, before your time."

"It's also in your manuals, Lieutenant," scolded Kryze. She was a short woman: not as short as Astris or Caelie, but tiny compared to Xarga or Bralor. Her hair was long and tied up, with a loose strand hanging over her right eye. She had a mole underneath her left eye, both eyes a brown, almost red, colour and slanted slightly. Her hair had been dyed a faded purple colour and she had slightly tanned, wrinkled skin, with very thin lips. Riley mumbled something, but flinched as the old woman glared at her.

"Regardless of if it's used or not, our strategy is the same. Kill the leaders of the Church, get to the Emperor. Achieve either objective and it's over. No one in the Church has as much power as the leaders of their factions. The Warlocks are the only exception - we know nothing of their hierarchy," Jayce stated. Wicke raised her hand. "What is the Iron Wall?" she asked. Jayce looked towards the Old Dogs. "It's a wall of guns, a thousand strong. They summon every ship they can to surround the Capital, packed together like fish in a can. It's not about efficiency, or tactical power, it's about might and showing the enemy just how small they are," Ordo stated.

"We break through the wall, land forces on the Capital and storm the Imperial Palace to retrieve the Emperor," Jayce stated. "Until we know the size of our forces there is little more to plan or do. But locking down Admirals Cynane and Kai will be a priority." Jayce spotted Astris' face fall as she realised her father was on the side of the enemy – likely her siblings as well. "And Admiral Truth," stated Wulf. "He's a Marine. Isn't he on our side?" questioned Wicke. Alara shook her

head. "Truth swore loyalty to the Empire. His Marines followed him," she stated. "The Banded Butcher was never going to be on our side," Wulf added.

"Exarga, do you think the other Pirate Lords will join you?" questioned Cassus. "Some have said they will, I don't know about two of them. Zoya is the Witch Queen, she's allied with the Church – so even then it's just the six of us." "Which Admirals are on our side?" Bjorn questioned, looking towards Alara. She shrugged, but Marisha drew the room's attention. "Reports say that Vice-Admiral Barome and Rear-Admirals Armstrong and Brawne have all allied with Truth." Alara's eyes widened. She shook her head in disbelief. Barome had been the one who had welcomed her into the Marines – why had he sided with the Church? "So of the Marine Admirals that leaves – what – seven? One Admiral, four Vice-Admirals – down to three without your father. Against three Admirals, eight Vice-Admirals, and however many Rear-Admirals survived. How can we possibly deal with that?" Alara questioned, looking at Jayce.

The door opened and Bralor staggered in with Thalia over his shoulders. The majority of the room was stunned, but Ordo laughed loudly. "You have us. We'll handle the difference," Xarga stated. "This is a battle we can win." Jayce nodded in agreement. Thalia bolted upright with a startled gasp as soon as she was lain on the floor, immediately looking towards Xarga with alarm before back at Jayce. "The Old Dogs can still bite!" she exclaimed.

The days flew by, accompanied by their own events: Yuthura's birthday – her true age still a mystery, Jayce and Alara's eighth anniversary – spent quietly and discretely between the pair of them, and Bjorn's birthday – spent similarly quietly and discretely in the arms of Marisha. But with each happy occasion the mood and growing anticipation continued to press down on all who were present. The days were moving quickly, too quickly.

Jayce held Alara tightly in his arms on the night before their arrival at the Capital. "What are you thinking about?" she asked quietly, listening to his heartbeat in the darkness. "What else could I be thinking about?" he questioned. She nodded, looking up at him before forcing a smile. "How much time we'll have for this afterwards? With you pardoned and a member of the military," she stated. He laughed. "Me? I think you mean with you as a member of my Pirate Lord crew." She rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Absolutely not, not with my path to Admiralty all but guaranteed after a successful battle like tomorrow." He smiled and kissed the top of her head. "I'll think about it."

"On a more... serious note. What's actually worrying you?" she asked. He let out a sigh and released his hold on her. She grabbed him tightly, reinforcing his arms around her body. "What if we lose?" he questioned. She shook her head. "Don't think about that. It won't happen," she stated adamantly. He opened his mouth to counter it, but she shook her head firmly. "It won't Jayce, it can't. The good guys have to win."

"Alara, this isn't some fairy tale – we're outgunned and maybe outclassed. I'm not letting my friends die for the Emperor. If... if it does go wrong, if we can't win... will you follow us to the Old World?" he asked. Her eyes widened and she sat up, looking down at him. "You can't be serious – the Frontier? That's your backup?" she questioned in disbelief. He nodded, looking up at her. "Wicke and Bjorn's families already crossed, so did your parents – who knows what's on the other side? And I've already spoken to some old monk living in the trees on the border."

"Jayce, we can't throw away this world. We can't give up if we lose." "Alara, there is no second chance. No rematch, no retaliation. Almost everyone who is fighting will die before retreating. The Old Dogs, the Marines... my mother. I can't lose you," he said quietly. She placed her hands on his cheeks and forced him to look at her. "Then don't lose this war. I'm not running away with you Jayce. I'm sorry."

"Okay," he told her sadly. "Then I'll do whatever it takes to win. To protect you." "Weren't you going to anyway?" she questioned. He lied and nodded, pulling her in tightly. If he had to swim in blood to the Capital then that was what he would do, what he would do for her and for Wicke and his crew. "I love you," he said quietly. "I will kill you if you die on me," she threatened. "When we win, and we will win - and this is over, you better be ready to propose to me. And with some cool ring that transforms into a weapon, like your mother's. Or shoots fire or lightning," she stated adamantly. He laughed, squeezing her tightly. "I'll see what can be done."

The morning came too quickly, the fleet setting sail on their final voyage to the Capital. Alara stayed with Jayce as long as she could before she departed to her own ship, and Jayce felt all the worse for it. "Today is the day," he told his crew and the Old Dogs. "Today is the day we end the Church once and for all. The day we free the Capital. The day we avenge all of those that have been lost at the hands of our enemies. Each of you have a role to play, each of you have a duty to

uphold, and there is no one else I would prefer to have fighting by my side. We will win," he stated.

"We are outnumbered and outgunned, but not outclassed," Alara told her crew, dressed in her black and red Captain's uniform. "They had to use trickery and cunning to stand against us, because they were so afraid of what we can do! What we will continue to do, long after they have been ground to dust beneath our feet!" she stated, walking back and forth in front of them. "It doesn't matter if there's a thousand of them, or a hundred-thousand of them, each of you is worth countless of them because you are brave and strong and you have stood up for what is right! We will win, we will write the history books of this day and they will say our name as the victors, forever known across the world for all of time as the saviours of the Empire! As the heroes of the Marines! As the Wolves of the Emperor! And if any cult-loving, monster-making, murdering, zealot son-of-a-bitch gets in our way, then we will show them the depths of the abyss with an express ticket to hell! Am I right Marines?" she yelled. Her Marines saluted, slamming their knuckles together and raising their heads. "Oohrah!"

A mist covered the ocean, but it burnt away as the sun cleared the horizon – revealing their enemy before them. Jayce felt his stomach twist, a nauseating feeling crossing his body. The three islands of the Capital sat in the distance, a haze surrounding it. A few kilometres to its south sat a fleet bearing the red Admiral's colours. There sat at least two-hundred ships, the Ursus Ultra at its front. But as Jayce and Alara's fleet of twenty ships neared the Capital, the haze faded – the white colour separating into a wall of a thousand ships surrounding the entirety of the Capital.

"By the ancestors," muttered Bjorn, staring in horror at the sight. They were never-ending, packed hull-to-hull as a physical and impenetrable wall. An expendable mass that no fleet could ever match. Sat on the edge of the Imperial fleet were the flagships of Admiral Truth and Admiral Cynane. Admiral Kai's ship – the Ballast – sat in the harbour between the three islands, a final threat for any able pass through the wall. Jayce spotted Truth's loyalists spread throughout the southern wall – their yellow colours bright and easy to recognise. Jayce gripped the railing of his ship, his knuckles white as he steeled himself. "Take us over to Admiral Exarga," he ordered.

They sailed their fleet closer, their escorts splitting up and spreading out to join the fleet. "There," Astris pointed, as the Sole Survivor and the Stacked Hand pulled up on either side of the Ursus Ultra. "That's my sister's ship, and that's

Kask's. I don't see my brothers..." she stated, her eyes widening with worry as she searched. "It'll be okay," Jayce reassured, nodding to Bjorn as they dropped anchor. "Be ready," Jayce and Alara told their people, leaping up onto the deck of the flagship with the Old Dogs and Astris. They looked towards each other as they landed in near synchronicity, their bodies tense and equally fearful for each other, but a voice spoke out, shattering their nerves and instilling them with warmth and reassurance.

"You made it," stated Admiral Exarga. Alara and Jayce looked towards her, but there were no hugs, no bright and cheery greetings – Admiral Cassandra Exarga looked furious. Her orange hair floated on the wind behind her, along with her black and red cape. She was dressed in her usual uniform: a red Marine coat and trousers with black boots and a peaked cap. "I was getting worried," she added. Jayce smiled. "Sorry, had to add some suspense to the tension before the battle." She glared at him and he cleared his throat. "Relax," she reassured, her expression softening. "We're waiting on them to move first. Are you ready for this?" she asked. They both nodded. "Good. I trust you recognise our allies."

Astris rushed forwards into her sister's arms. "You're here!" she stated, Cyrenna nodding in agreement. "You were right, you were right all along," she stated. Astris released her sister and dove towards her brother as he stood behind them. His face was slightly bruised, his lip split. "Where's your ship?" she asked, looking up at him. Jayce and Alara could both see the hurt in his expression. "Not here," he said plainly. "They didn't follow me, but they can't hurt us either," he stated. "Your loyalty has been noted, Captain Kai," stated Admiral Exarga. He turned and faced her before bowing slightly.

Alara punched Kask hard on the arm. "Ow! What the hell was that for?" he questioned. "I'm glad you made the right choice," she stated. He scowled and shook his head. "I didn't really have a choice, he would have held it over me in the afterlife," Kask stated, pointing towards Jayce. Alara raised an eyebrow but shook it off. "The others?" she questioned. Kask shook his head. "Damn, Roose?" she asked. Cyrenna looked over to them, a saddened expression on her face. "I tried my best, but they wouldn't listen."

Alara turned her attention towards the aft deck, a pair of Marines stood with the Helm. "I don't believe it," she muttered, a broad smile spreading across her face as Senior Instructor Zenobia stood in her Commander uniform with Instructor Gibbs next to her. "Captain," they both greeted with pride. She nodded to both

of them, relieved to see them both alive. Her attention was then drawn to a cluster of Admirals talking with the Old Dogs.

Vice-Admiral Yashiro had kept her scarlet suit, her sword ready at her side along with a shorter spare blade across her waist. She nodded to Alara and gave a reassuring smile. "Sabre, concentrate," scolded Kelborn. She apologised quickly. Next to her was Vice-Admiral Chika Blackwell. She was short, Astris' height, with a bob of brown hair, tanned skin and confident green eyes. Her suit was wood-brown. Vice-Admiral Hai Koga stood next to her. He was a slim, but not particularly tall, man with dark hair, a goatee, and brown eyes. His suit was a deep purple.

It wasn't just the Vice-Admirals. Dressed in their yellow and red combat fatigues were Rear-Admirals Harper Otrera and Vixen Vito, both standing tall and paying close attention to their seniors. Otrera had sand-coloured blonde hair, tied back in a short ponytail beneath her yellow beret. She was well-built, with broad, rounded shoulders. Her deep forest-green eyes briefly glanced towards Alara, giving a quick wink before returning to the conversation. Vito was far smaller, not exactly slimmer, but considerably less brawny. A large rifle sat across her back akin to Riley's. She had dark skin, and braided dark brown hair kept in cornrows.

Jayce looked out across the ocean for the other Pirate Lords, but he couldn't see any of them – not even Kitty. "Dammit," he muttered, looking towards his mother. "You have a plan, I take it?" she asked. He nodded, turning and looking at the Capital. "We get through that wall and into there," he stated, pointing at the Imperial Palace at the top of the Isle of Majesty. "So confident. What about the wall?" she asked. He thought, his eyes focusing onto Admiral Truth's flagship as it raised its sails and began to sail forwards. "Leave that to me."

Admiral Exarga stepped forwards, the others on the deck of the Ursus Ultra and their allies across the fleet falling silent. Alara and Jayce looked at their friends and allies, those that they had known for a long time, and their new Navy friends dressed in borrowed Marine gear, before at each other. Cassandra turned and looked at her family. "Be ready for war," she commanded, turning back and walking to the bow with Jayce and Alara following closely.

Seize the Seas Tales: Familial Ties

Morgana's heart raced inside her chest as she and the other prospects crossed the chasm towards the Witch Queen's tree. Like the others around her, she was

elated: power – true power - was finally within her grasp. Yet... her mind wavered, flicking occasionally towards Sentinel Arthuria Pendragon: her sister. She had promised to come back, but the majority of the fleet had returned, and now the Exargas had declared war. Where was she? Was she safe? Was she still alive?

She shook her head, trying to throw her thoughts aside. What did it matter? That Paladin had lied to her – manipulated her. She was better off dead... “No,” she mumbled, slapping her temple with her palm. “Are you okay?” questioned another prospect. “Huh? Yeah – of course,” she lied, trying not to give anything away as she deeply regret her wish of harm on Arthuria. “Please be safe,” she thought.

“Serving Girls, kneel,” wheezed one of the old crones that served as the Witch Queen’s Council. They had been taken inside the giant tree, into a large room full of bubbling cauldrons and mushrooms. The floor was covered in grass, and a blue bioluminescence lit the room, apart from the odd glowing yellow spore floating in the air. The others obeyed as Morgana took in the room. The Counciler looked towards her and Morgana looked back at her. She was old, unfathomably old, with an unnatural, grey, sunken skin that made her look like a corpse. Her eyes were a matte black – either pupilless or entirely pupil, Morgana couldn’t tell. A large spider-like headpiece covered her hair, a blood red and grey colour with leg-like appendages made out of bone. Her nose was large and beak-like – almost connecting to her large and curved chin.

Morgana knelt and she looked away, turning to her cauldrons before lifting out a large ladle full of an acid-green bubbling fluid. She flicked it across the room – the grass melting away and releasing a potent and nauseating odour. “You have all stood the test of time, devoting yourselves to our convent – to our Lady Zoya. And now it is time to welcome you fully as sisters, to reward you for your devotion,” stated Councillor Mauga. She pulled a wand out of a pocket in her red and black dress, flicking it across her. A knife floated in front of Morgana, in front of each of the other Serving Girls. “In binding of blood and soul, you join us,” stated the Councillor.

Morgana reached out and took the blade – Arthuria’s warning ringing loudly in her ears. With another gesture, a cauldron dragged itself across the room. A Serving Girl cut herself and stepped forwards. Her cat familiar looked up at her before it unravelled at the seams, revealing a blue soul stone. The girl picked up

the stone, smearing her blood across it before dropping it into the cauldron. She then stepped back and knelt.

The others all began to do the same and Morgana looked down at the blade in her hands. Her raven, Urien, nudged her and she looked down at him. His beady eyes staring at her before he shook his head. "Dammit," she thought – willing him to unravel before taking his stone and putting it in her pocket. She fumbled around, finding the stone she had kept in reserve just in case something happened to him. It was unbound to her, a pure backup – one of her many fallbacks. She cut the back of her arm - the others had gone for their palms and now were all in pain – smearing the blood across the blue back-up stone before dropping it in the cauldron. She tried not to think about it – she had made her choice. She had put her faith in her sister.

The Councillor chanted, guiding her wand across the edge of the cauldron. One of the Serving Girls gasped, her eyes widening as she clutched her chest. Another followed, Morgana then copied as the cauldron exhaled a plume of purple smoke, filling the room before fading away. When it settled Morgana immediately noticed the others looked different: older, more beautiful. The Councillor frowned slightly as she looked at Morgana and then seemed to ignore it as she looked away. "Welcome Daughters of Shade, stand amongst us."

Morgana stood, stepping forwards and looking into the cauldron along with the others. It was empty – their stones at the bottom. The others all had black cracks marking theirs, an identification of their binding. Morgana blocked their view, grabbing hers and pocketing it. She then summoned Urien, her raven appearing on her shoulder. Another Daughter of Shade entered the room. "Morgana, Lady Zoya wishes to see you." The others looked towards her with deep envy, but she ignored them – she now had bigger things to worry about.

Chapter 144: War

Truth's flagship – the Huntsman – dropped anchor about halfway between the Iron Wall and Admiral Exarga's fleet, but Cassandra gave no order for the Ursus Ultra to approach. Instead she waited, watching as Admiral Truth walked up to the bow of his ship and then leapt off. He landed on the surface of the ocean, his entire body wrapped in a powerful display of Focus as he willed the water to form a floor for him to walk across. He strode confidently towards the fleet, his yellow and black cape flowing in the wind behind him.

He approached with little fear, still wearing his normal outfit: a yellow - almost gold - coat and trousers, his boots a shiny black, and a peaked cap on his head. He stopped fifty or so metres in front of the Ursus Ultra, standing on the water and folding his arms. "Watch closely, listen if you can," instructed Admiral Exarga, dropping off her bow onto the waters below. "Can you do that?" Alara questioned as they watched her approach Admiral Truth by walking on the water. Jayce shook his head. "Not yet, it's one of the last forms for me to master. You?" he returned. She shook her head. The pair of them staring intently at Admiral Truth.

He towered over Admiral Exarga, a giant man with an intense demeanour. He had closely-cropped golden-blond hair, a tightly kept beard, and strong deep brown eyes. Admiral Exarga looked up at him defiantly, fearlessly. But as a moment of tense glaring passed, he let out a small chuckle and shook his head. "Are you truly prepared for what is to come?" Truth asked. Exarga nodded. "I have been for a long time, you know that more than anyone, old friend."

Jayce and Alara glanced towards each other, a deep sense of unnerve crossing them both. "I suppose I do, but still – I must ask – are you willing to sacrifice everything for victory? Your family, your career... your life?" he asked. "There could still be a chance for peace?" She shook her head and he let out a long sigh. "Then this is what it's come to – what it's all been leading up to?" he questioned. "It was always only ever going end to one way," she stated. "A purge, a restart." "So war it is then. You better be ready... Pumpkin."

Jayce frowned, something was off.

Cassandra smiled and shook her head, placing her hands on her hips. "It's time. You owe me a drink at the end of this, Antlers," she stated, turning and walking back to her ship. He watched her walk, before glancing up towards Alara and nodding. "We live through this and I'll buy you an entire bar," he muttered,

turning and walking back in the direction of his ship. It slowly began to move without him, turning in a large arc.

"What was that?" Jayce asked, as Admiral Exarga leapt back on board. "He's Antlers?" Jayce questioned. Cassandra glanced towards him as she passed, a glint in her eye, but she carried onwards across the main deck. "Prepare for battle!" she declared. "All ships, sync communications. Pay attention to your allies and prepare to assault the Iron Wall." Alara looked towards Jayce, wondering what she hadn't grasped. Jayce pointed outwards.

Truth had begun to run, a huge greathammer materialising into his hand, forming from a beam of light. His ship was continuing its arc, but it was bringing itself around – as if to join the fleet rather than head back to the Iron Wall. "Antlers..." Jayce muttered, shaking his head in disbelief as he turned and met Alara's gaze. "He's a therian!" Jayce declared, Truth transforming into a giant elk therian somehow still able to use Focus as he raced towards the Capital. Chaos erupted across the defensive fleet as several ships unleashed their cannons point blank onto their neighbours, Truth's fleet transforming into an army of therians buried in the midst of the Iron Wall.

"All ships, assault that wall!" ordered Admiral Exarga, as Jayce and Alara raced back to the centre of the main deck, the fleet surging forwards. "Alara, Jayce, hold your ships back and wait for an opportunity!" she ordered. "The Emperor is all that matters! Get him and the war is over!" she confirmed. Jayce and Alara nodded, Ordo and Astris waiting nearby as they all waited on the deck of the Ursus Ultra. "There," Astris stated, pointing directly ahead.

The Ballast rocked heavily as Admiral Kai propelled off its bow, soaring past the fractured Iron Wall with a pair of heavy, spiked metal gauntlets on his hands. "Truth!" he yelled, slamming into the therian with the force of a cannon – the ocean beneath them erupting into a huge splash and a following wave. Truth bounced across the water, scrambling to his feet as he forced the ocean to support him, but Thorro Kai was already upon him. Diving at him like a frenzied beast and throwing a heavy swing with his spiked gauntlets. Truth leapt back, leaping into the air and darting away with the blue Admiral in pursuit. "Good luck, Cass!" he yelled, simply for expression, luring the Admiral in close before swinging his greathammer into Kai.

A boom thundered across the sky followed by several more as the Admiral's fought one another. "By the Gods," Alara uttered, watching the battle above in awe. But Jayce had his attention elsewhere. Despite Truth's betrayal, the Iron

Wall was still strong. There were cracks and the fleet was in disarray from the mass of therians wreaking havoc, but the Red Fleet could hardly make a dent in the still strong wall of cannons.

His heart stopped and a cold breath touched his neck before a hand dragged him backwards, a green-tinged blade cutting the air where he had been. Cassandra grabbed Admiral Sycilla Cynane, throwing her down the main deck. However, the Green Admiral wasted no movement, using the momentum provided by Admiral Exarga to dart between her Marines – cutting them down with brutal and fast strikes from her two curved blades. “Zenobia?” Cassandra yelled. “Go!” confirmed her Commander.

Cassandra darted forwards, her ring transforming into a colossal greataxe before another formed in her other hand from a flash of red lighting. The pair of them disappeared in a blur. A yell of pain drew Jayce’s attention to the edge of the ship. “Killers!” he yelled, Cynane’s personal assassins appearing out of nowhere. “Jayce, we’ve got company!” Bjorn declared through his communicator, Wulf saying the same to Alara. “Get to your ships!” Zenobia ordered. “We’ll be fine.”

They nodded, leaping to the Stacked Hand and the Sole Survivor, finding both their crews fighting a dozen or so of the veiled assassins. The Old Dogs darted across the deck of the Ursus Ultra, tackling and assaulting the Killers as they appeared and disappeared. “Ordo, go to your people!” Xarga ordered. Ordo sent a Killer ragdolling across the deck of the ship with a swing of his greatclub, her body laying still. He caught Xarga’s eye. “You’ll always be one of us, old friend, but you have new people to worry about – go!” ordered Xarga. Ordo nodded, leaping to the Stacked Hand. “Forwards!” declared Zenobia, the Ursus Ultra surging forwards and leaving the Wolfpack and the Rising Aces behind.

Thalia turned a Killer into red mist with her anchor, the others backing away as Jayce glared at them. Their Commander was nowhere to be seen – something he didn’t like. The Killers shimmered, disappearing in less than a blink of an eye as they retreated. “Watch your backs!” Jayce called out, looking for any casualties. Bjorn growled as he pulled a blade out of his arm, throwing it the side. He transformed into human form - the wound disappearing - before transforming back. “Useful ability,” Jayce stated, joining him on the aft deck. Bjorn nodded in agreement. “Truth could use Focus whilst in therian form, looks like there’s a lot for me to still learn about my kind.”

The Wolfpack was having far greater difficulty. Alara stared in horror at the bodies across the deck of her ship – her people, her crew. “Bastards!” she yelled,

cleaving through a Killer at her waist with her glaive. The Weapon grabbed and threw one overboard. Wulf surged across the deck with his armoured therians, reinforcing the Marines that had been injured. "Riley, the bow!" Witchford ordered, a bolt of cyan flame propelling itself across the deck. A scream of pain drew Alara's attention up ahead, a Killer clad in white clutching a hole in her side. "Fall back!" she ordered, leaping over the side of the ship. The Killers fled, but the damage had been done.

"We're clear," Alara said sadly, the bodies of her crew being taken away – Silas Gale amongst them. Her crew had lost fifteen members, a further twenty-three having been injured. She steeled herself - they would be mourned later. "We're good too," Jayce answered, turning his attention back to the battle, a flash of relief disappearing as he focused on the next stage of their mission. Far to the west, a small fleet of ships were on approach, a big smile spreading across Jayce's face.

"Ladies, gentlemen, bastards and heroes!" called out Kitty's voice on all communication channels. "We heard you needed someone to save the day!" she declared. The Governor unleashed a wave of explosive cannonballs upon the western wall, shattering the ships trapped within. Ruyn Masse followed with his own bombardment of cannon fire – his reinforced hull absorbing the return fire as Crach's therians rammed into the fleet, leaping from their ships into the fray.

"They know how to make an entrance, I'll give them that," Wulf stated. Kitty sailed towards the south-west wall. "Hey assholes, this is for Anne!" she yelled, her voice loud and clear across the warzone as the Great Seacat, the Rouge and the Heavyweight bombarded the Vice-Admiral's flagship embedded in the wall. To Jayce's immediate wonderment, the wall began to separate – a small fleet of ships breaking out of the wall in pursuit of Kitty and the Pirate Lords. "We've done our part," Kitty stated. "Good luck, Jayce! Save a portion of the spoils for us!"

The damaged flagship set off after Kitty and her Delivery Kats, a Rear-Admiral's ship following behind, along with a dozen other goaded ships – the cluster of vessels sailing through the chaos back towards the west. Ruyn Masse and the Governor did the same, leaving with their own tails, but Crach's ship sat back ready to support his soldiers embedded in the wall. "Thanks Kitty. All of you," Jayce stated, his attention turning to the lone ship sailing towards him.

It pulled up between the Stacked Hand and the Sole Survivor, a familiar face at its wheel. "How's it going?" Tim asked, a big grin on his face. Jayce stepped towards the edge of his ship. "What are you doing on the Mirabelle's ship?" he

questioned, taking in the array of magical enchantments across the vessel. The door to the Captain's quarters opened and she stepped out in a large technicolour hat and robes. She placed a hand on his shoulder and leant onto him. "He's my apprentice, Jayce. Watch your back - he is your rival after all," she stated.

Jayce laughed, nodding in acknowledgment. "Don't worry about if the battle goes wrong," Tim stated. "We'll keep a path open for us all to escape if we need to retreat." Tim looked towards Mirabelle and she grinned at him. "Ready?" he asked. "How could I not be?" she returned. "Jayce, don't lose - we're counting on you!" she stated. Their ship sailing past before looping back around and heading into the warzone. Jayce watched them, the skies above changing into storm clouds before ice, fire, and lightning rained down from the heavens. "We won't need it," Jayce said quietly, taking in the state of the battlefield.

The southwest and west wall had collapsed, a large portion having been drawn outwards by the threat and fearlessness of the Pirate Lords. But the island they were defending was the Isle of Duty - the island containing the Navy headquarters - the Citadel's walls of guns firing salvo after salvo at the attacking fleet. Even if they broke through - the Isle of Duty was the worst place to land. They needed to enter the bay - to land on the Isle of Majesty.

The red fleet was swarming around the Iron Wall, probing for any weaknesses, any opportunity to lure those within out. Jayce could see the hotspots in his Gaze, points where Admirals were engaging one another and where crews had abandoned their guns to repel the therian invaders. But even with parts of the Iron Wall in turmoil, the majority of the defending fleet was intact. The only damage had been dealt to the south and west walls.

If they opened a hole, and somehow broke through, the north wall could move across to close them in, or worse - the enemy abandon the wall and turns to ship-to-ship combat. Jayce didn't like it. His mother was entirely right - getting the Emperor was the only way to win. He had the ultimate authority, and he would end the war for all who deemed themselves loyal to the Empire. Another ship sunk on their side as the Capital's guns fired barrage after barrage over the Iron Wall, another ally disappearing from the world into the waves.

"Okay," Jayce said with an exhale. "Vanathur, hang back," he commanded. "Bjorn, bring us in range." The Stacked Hand pulled forwards, Jayce's crew looking to him for orders. "Jayce, what are you going to do?" Alara questioned. "Captain, we should stay as far back as we can," advised Witchford, the others nodding in agreement as Alara watched the Stacked Hand in alarm. "Boys, ready

the forward cannon," Jayce ordered, the three therians saluting and racing forwards to the front gun. "Tempest, I want the west and southwest wall gone," Jayce ordered. The djinn nodded, waving a gauntlet and materialising a cannonball that looked like it was made from lava.

Wam stepped forwards. "Do not drop it," warned Tempest, the young therian nodded strongly in confirmation. "Aye, Tempest, bossing," he returned, taking it carefully and walking it to the cannon before loading it. Jayce headed over, standing next to the boys as Ohno got ready to fire and Fenn aimed. "That line," Jayce instructed, pointing diagonally across the Iron Wall. "Yes bossman," stated Fenn, lining it up. "Ready," he then stated.

"All forces, and anyone who likes to have a beating heart and a functioning brain," Jayce declared. "Clear the west and southwest wall – this is your one warning!" Jayce instructed across all communication channels. The Navy remained firm, but Jayce left it long enough for his therian allies amongst them to make a choice – almost all turning and retreating as they raced across the decks of the countless ships in the wall. "Open fire!" Jayce commanded, damning all who remained.

A trail of orange fire fell from the sky as the cannonball sailed true, high and over the ocean. "You missed, we're too far away," stated Zeta, the trail disappearing as the cannonball neared the Iron Wall. It then began to break apart, dropping small orange stars behind it – falling slowly on the wind like stardust. Jayce's heart thumped in his chest as he watched, the world stopping and watching until the first star hit a ship.

The first ship detonated in a huge ball of fire, followed by another, and another, and another, and another – as each piece of starfire landed, consuming the ship beneath it before erupting into a huge explosion. A line of detonations raced across the wall, as Jayce snuffed out thousands of lives in an instant. The fires continued to rage as the explosions ended, and he turned his attention to the main gun of the Stacked Hand. "How many more times can we fire?" he asked. "One or two more shots, then the cannon will be inoperable," warned Tempest. "Then we make those shots count. Ready a heavy round," he ordered.

Seize the Seas Tales: The Elder's Champion

"All ships are to return to the Capital immediately." That was the order that had rung out across all ships that had stayed behind in Caedom – ensuring the purge was complete and that the city truly had fallen. "It's hard to believe that Exarga

actually declared war on the Empire,” stated one the Paladins around Arthuria as they boarded the boat back to their ship. “Do you think he stands a chance, Sentinel?” he questioned. She shook her head, partially out of disbelief that the world had fallen so far so quickly, but also out of agreement. “The whole of the Church, the armaments of the Capital, the Navy – no chance,” she stated. They nodded in agreement, returning to their conversation and leaving her be.

It had been a trialling few weeks. She had stayed behind to ensure that no one doubted her loyalty to the Order, but she hadn’t been expecting to stay so long. Every day her mind wandered back to the Capital – to Elder d’Arc and what had happened. Was she safe? Had the other Sentinels actually betrayed her? Arthuria didn’t know, but she doubted things had gone well. From what she had learnt from the Paladins around her, they had each been approached and gently prodded into betraying the Elder – presumably those that hadn’t followed, or were known loyalists, had been killed without question.

The journey sped along without issue, Exarga and Vanathur’s declaration continuing to be repeated across the New World. The Navy and Church around her all were on edge, a mixture of nervousness relating to the incoming war and anticipation that they wouldn’t arrive before the battle had begun. Arthuria had no such feelings. She had created her plan of action – get onto the Capital and find those she cared about.

“Pirate Lords have been sighted up ahead,” warned the Captain of the Meridian as he approached Arthuria. “What is it you wish us to do?” he questioned. Arthuria hated that she was technically in charge, she felt so fake and it disgusted her to the core that she had to work with monsters like those around her. “Has the battle begun?” she asked. The Captain nodded, pointing to smoke on the horizon. “We’re coming up on the Capital now,” he stated. Arthuria thought desperately for a sensible answer. “Maintain course, I’ll advise when we get a better look.”

The battle was utter chaos, the arrival of the Pirate Lords had let to a direct assault on the southern side of the Capital. “Take us round to the north, we’ll join the Iron Wall there. The others can reinforce the fleet,” she ordered. There was a look of relief from the Captain, but the others around her seemed confused. “Sentinel, should we not join the action?” asked one of the Paladins. She nodded. “Agreed. When we pull in, you and the others are to make your way to the south. Join the fighting and make them know our Order’s might,” she ordered.

"You're not coming?" they asked. She shook her head and pointed to the Isle of Sanctity. "My mission lies elsewhere." That stopped their questioning.

The Meridian pulled into the Iron Wall, Arthuria not hesitating to begin her charge towards the Capital. She left the others behind, leaping from deck to deck and not stopping until she felt solid ground. She took in a deep breath of air, scolding herself for the last few weeks of inactivity as she leant against a wall. "Come on Arthuria," she told herself, beginning to run again as she ran through her priorities: the Elder, Mai Lu, her sister, the Sisters, the orphans. She had to see if they were alright. Then she could turn her attention to whatever lay next.

Her armour got her through whatever barricade or blockade she encountered: no one questioned her, giving her a straight run across the Isle of Majesty. It was as she reached the bridge to the Isle of Sanctity that there was a problem. "Paladin, where have you come from?" questioned a Warlock amongst a squad of Navy, several large and grotesque creatures stood with them – large wet sacks of meat with countless eyes and arms. "I just landed, let me through," she stated. The Navy looked towards the Warlock. "All of your Order are currently gathered within their district. I was not informed of any others arriving. Give us a name and we'll send a message for confirmation."

"Sentinel Arthuria Pendragon," she said honestly, hoping for a spot of good fortune. The name was sent across the bridge and almost immediately the Warlock stepped backwards. "Kill her!" he ordered, his head rolling across the floor before he could begin to chant as Arthuria drew her sword and swung. Without their master, the creatures went into a frenzy - grabbing the Navy around them and beginning to tear them apart. "Choose wisely," Arthuria warned, racing through the Navy as they picked between her and the creatures.

She made it to the other side with little issue – those guarding the various posts along had their attention outwards on the battle surrounding the Capital. The other end of the bridge, however, did have an issue, but Arthuria bulldozed her way through with a more-than-prepared Celestial Beacon spell – blinding them all long enough for her to pass through. From there it was a straight run to the Holy Palace, but as she passed the Sisters' convent, the world roared and a wall of orange flame lit up the Capital.

Chapter 145: Into the Breach

The entire battlefield had changed in an instant, all eyes turning on the Stacked Hand as the Iron Wall burned. Tempest summoned another cannonball from his personal storage - this one as black as the night sky, with a coldness that drew all surrounding heat inside, chilling the air. Wam took it cautiously, walking it to the forward cannon before loading it inside. The other two Beastly Boys looked towards Jayce, their eyes wide with shock at the devastation they had just caused. "A-another?" questioned Fenn.

Jayce looked at them. They were still just teenagers – adults, but still just boys. "It's my orders, my decision. Understood? It's not on you to think what or why. If you need someone else to take your spots then that's fine," Jayce stated, his hands already dripping with invisible blood. They shook their heads, steeling themselves as they looked forwards, a large portion of the Iron Wall breaking off and heading towards them. "Aim for the Ballast, the flagship in the bay," he ordered.

"Jayce, you have incoming," Alara warned through necklace. She still couldn't believe what she had seen – the Stacked Hand had massacred hundreds, if not thousands in a single shot. And from what she could see, it looked like Jayce was going to do it again. "I know," he returned, his voice cold, but barely burying his guilt. "Jayce..." she said quietly to herself, shaking her head. "Is this what you were debating last night?" she asked, their communication private as she willed it to only be heard by him.

The ships were getting closer, those at the front desperately firing in the Stacked Hand's direction but falling short. Jayce let out a sigh, stepping forwards into the waterfall of blood about to drown him. "For our future," Jayce said out loud, answering Alara and reinforcing his crew's resolve. "To all of our enemies, you've seen what we can do. Clear the way to the bay, we're coming through," he declared across the warzone. This time there was no hesitation, any and all allies vaguely in the south of the Capital immediately began to flee – scrambling across decks of ships or rapidly turning their vessels to get out of the way.

The intercepting Navy split their decision, some turning in desperation, others maintaining course and firing everything they could – only to futilely bounce off Tempest's shield or hit the water instead. "Alara, watch your head. Don't fall behind," Jayce warned, raising his hand. "Prepare to go in through the breach, this is it – we're going in!" he declared, before lowering his hand and pointing ahead. "Wipe them off the face of this planet! Open fire!" he ordered.

The cannon detonated, roaring with pure ferocity as the colour faded from the seas and skies and everything turned white, until a pitch black orb carved its way across the canvas of the world. The cannonball tore through the ships in its way, the following shockwave crushing their crews and obliterating their hulls before flying true – straight towards the Iron Wall. The black orb found no barrier, tearing clean through the wall of twenty ships like a fist through glass before carrying into the bay and towards the bow of the Ballast.

Admiral Kai appeared in a flash, connecting with the orb as he desperately attempted to save his ship and crew. He roared in anger, pain, and frustration as it span and twisted against his body, before he grabbed it with his gauntlets – sparks flying – and threw it to the side. The ball careened through the air, its angle changed as it spiralled west – crashing through the top of the mountain that the Citadel was built into to.

Thalia let out a long whistle. “I hope they wanted a sunroof,” she stated, Admiral Kai crashing into the Isle of Majesty as Truth caught up to him. “Forwards!” Jayce ordered, his hand hovering in the direction of the parting they had made in the Iron Wall. Bjorn didn’t hesitate, the Stacked Hand lurching forwards as they charged the breach. The cannon’s barrel had split open at the end, rendering the gun useless. “Defend this ship,” Jayce ordered, the southern Iron Wall collapsing as ships desperately manoeuvred to stop them and the others made for the breach.

“Go, go, go!” Alara ordered, her Marines rushing to their stations and raising the anchor as the Stacked Hand surged forwards towards the hole they had created. “Kais, Kask, with me!” she ordered, the Sole Survivor following a few hundred metres behind the Stacked Hand. “Aye, Captain Vanathur,” came Cyrenna, her brother acting as her Commander aboard her ship – the Sentinel – the pair of them heading towards her. “We’ll try our best, Com-Captain,” responded Kask, weaving through a scattering of enemy and ally ships whilst spraying out barrage after barrage at broadside.

“Falconer, get to the air and give us some eyes,” Jayce ordered. Falconer nodded, heading below deck with the Beastly Boys before exiting the ship aboard Wren through one of the bays in the hull on the third deck, the therians closing it behind him. Wren let out a loud cry as she flew up towards the clouds, the sun hidden directly above them. “Man the cannons and keep them away! Wicke, clear our path of any debris!” Jayce ordered, before heading to the aft deck.

"What are we going to do about the Ballast," Bjorn questioned, the bay rapidly approaching. The Stacked Hand's cannons thundered as the Rising Aces manned them, firing cannonballs straight into a series of blue portals created by Caelie – their destinations directly above enemy ships or in critical spots. "Nice one, Belial and Caelie," Jayce stated, his mind working as the Ballast stared them down. The flagship was almost twice the size of the Stacked Hand, and Jayce doubted very much that it wasn't more than ready to respond to a Mage or two.

To his distinct horror, the ship began to swivel – bearing its broadside towards them as the Stacked Hand began to pass through the shattered and cracked hulls of the Iron Wall. Jayce glanced towards Tempest, the djinn holding up his defensive shields around the ship – but even with Zeta reinforcing and reinvigorating them all with her music, Jayce doubted the shields would last for long under a barrage from more than fifty cannons. "Caelie might be able to redirect some," Jayce thought. "Thalia, Ordo and Astris could launch an assault? No, I need them fresh for their jobs," he answered himself, the Stacked Hand entering the bay and time running out. His eyes widened, no answer coming to him, as Tempest's shield failed and his armour depowered, Zeta's magic fading as well as they entered an antimagic field

"Need a hand?" questioned Evandril Xarga, as he landed on the deck of the Stacked Hand, the other Old Dogs racing past in a blur as they assaulted the Ballast. "Not a moment too soon," Jayce answered, a smile of relief crossing his face. "Keep fighting boys, we'll hold them back. Do what you need to," Xarga stated, leaping off the Stacked Hand with enough force to shake the ship. He collided with the Ballast, knocking the entire ship backwards as the Old Dogs tore the ship apart with their hands.

"I'm bringing us in, prepare for a rough landing!" Bjorn warned, angling the ship towards the piers connecting to the Isle of Majesty. "Slow us down! Bjorn, slow us down! Bjorn!" Jayce cried out, the Stacked Hand lurching to a sudden halt as it crashed through and onto the piers. "Not your best work," Jayce stated, as he peeled himself off the aft deck railing. "I'll do better next time," Bjorn returned, letting out a groan as he held his side. "Let's hope we live to see a next time, now comes the hard part. All crew, disembark."

Jayce pulled RK into his orb before leaping off the side of the Stacked Hand, down onto the remains of the pier below. The others followed closely behind, the Beastly Boys slowly climbing down the ladder built into the hull. "Right, listen up," Jayce started, summoning the Stacked Hand into its bottle and looking over

his crew. "We're in deep here, and this isn't going to end until the Emperor has been recovered, but there's a big chance things won't go as expected – in fact, I could bet on it."

"We're splitting up into three teams. Team one will secure an exit for us on the north by north-east side of the island, in a small dock where Bjorn, Wicke and I first left the Capital. We've been there before. Now that the Iron Wall is broken, they're going to fall back and break apart, trying to trap us or wipe out our allies on the seas. We may need to evacuate with the Emperor, so having our escape secured is crucial. This team will be led by Marisha," Jayce stated, handing both the Stacked Hand and RK to her. "Tempest, Fenn, Wam and Ohno will go with her."

They clustered together and Marisha nodded in acknowledgment. "Boys, you're to guard her and the ship with your lives," Bjorn stated, drawing their attention before meeting Marisha's gaze. She nodded to him. "We'll be fine," she reassured. "Group two," Jayce stated, interrupting and regaining their attention, "Will be led by Ordo. You will head to the Citadel and break into the Navy Headquarters. You're going to steal everything in their vaults: confiscated magic items, classified weapon schematics, every secret and all of their money. I want them to hurt and struggle so that if this goes wrong we have bought time for a second wave, and for people to stand a chance should we fail. Thalia, Yuthura and Zeta are going with him."

Thalia grinned, whilst Zeta almost burst into tears. "Once you've accomplished your mission, or if it gets too dangerous, make your way to group one and be prepared to leave with or without us." Group two nodded in acknowledgment. "Won't let you down, Cap'," Ordo stated, Yuthura catching Jayce's eye and silently questioning his decision. "I'm seeing this through to the end," he stated. She nodded. "Don't die, kiddo."

"Go, get moving!" Jayce ordered, the two teams wishing each other luck before racing forwards. Marisha released RK as soon as they touched solid ground. Jayce then turned to his team, group three, consisting of Astris, Bjorn, Wicke and Caelie. "We get the tough job," Jayce stated. "We stay together, and fight like everything depends on it. Because it does. Understood?" he questioned. They nodded, Caelie transforming into a partial mix between her and Belial, Astris drawing her hand-cannons, Bjorn drawing his new axes, and Wicke gripping her heavy grimoire. "Let's go," Bjorn stated. "We have an Empire to save."

"Where's Exarga's ship gone?" questioned Captain Kask, as he sailed into the bay after the Sentinel and the Sole Survivor. "They do that," returned Captain Cyrenna Kai. "All crew, brace for impact!" Alara yelled out, the Sole Survivor surging past the remains of the Ballast and crashing into the Isle of Majesty, the Sentinel and the Vigilant One crashing moments later. "Forwards!" Alara yelled, racing to the edge of her ship and leaping to the shore below.

"Riley, Soner, Witchford, Brett – you have your orders, take your forces and secure the Holy Palace. Let nothing stand in your way and watch your heads," she stated. "Aye Captain!" they clamoured, a large portion of her crew heading with them as they broke off from the others. "Captain," Riley called out, drawing her attention. "Don't die," she stated, Alara nodded, looking towards Soner. "Keep her safe," she ordered. Soner nodded, the pair racing off after the group. "Do we have a plan?" Beowulf asked, as he, Alara, Cyrenna, Kask, the Weapon and Wulf stood in front of their army. "Take the Imperial Palace, rescue the Emperor," stated Alara simply. They nodded, turning their attention forwards before beginning the charge with Alara at their lead.

It didn't take long to find traces of the Rising Aces. Corpses littered the streets: Navy, Church, monsters, all leading ahead in the direction of the Palace. "They work fast, perhaps we don't need to worry after all," stated Kask, much to the ire of Alara. A bullet hit the floor in front of them, the ground rumbling before a battle cry echoed around them, as an army's worth of reinforcements arrived. "You just had to open your mouth!" yelled Alara, entering into Focus. "Captain!" yelled Ashton Braze, drawing her attention backwards. "Go ahead, we'll hold them off! The Emperor is all that matters, we can handle these guys!" Cyrenna's and Kask's crews expressed the same, their Commanders taking lead. "Go end the war!" added Delex, Violette nodding in agreement as she held her sword with determination. "You damn fools," Wulf stated, stepping forwards and using his body to hurry Alara forwards, his therians staying behind. "Don't die!" Alara commanded. "Wulf, Weapon - with me!"

The Captains, Wulf and Weapon ran forwards, leaving their people behind as the reinforcements flooded in from the side streets. "They'll be fine," Beowulf stated, sensing the mood as they ran. Weapon fire was everywhere, their crews indistinguishable from the countless others waging war across the city and the surrounding ocean. "I hope so," Alara stated, looking down as she ran. "We might have to worry about ourselves first," Wulf stated, pointing ahead as a group of figures stood waiting.

Alara and her squad came to a stop, holding their weapons tightly as the New Era stood in front of them. "You've got to be kidding me?" Alara questioned, turning and glaring at Kask. "You've jinxed us!" she stated angrily. He held his hands up. "Enough," stated Cyrenna, taking a deep breath and stepping forwards. "Should have known that you'd be right on the tail of Exarga," stated Captain Vemrin. "Damn traitors!" Soron yelled.

"Us? The Church have kidnapped the Emperor, enslaved the baned, tortured and killed countless," returned Beowulf, stepping forwards. Both groups of six glared at each other. "Lies!" yelled Roose, shaking her head and stepping forwards in front of the other New Era. "You've sided with Pirates, Mages, murderers. It doesn't matter what you claim, this is the side of law and order. You've couped," she stated.

"Olivia, please," begged Cyrenna. "Don't do this. All of you, please see reason." "Never thought I'd see the great Cyrenna Kai begging for her life," stated Losa. Cyrenna didn't break eye contact with Captain Roose. "I'm sorry, Cyr. You fell for their tricks. Throw down your weapons, I promise you'll get a fair trial." "Like hell we will, I'm not going back in a cage!" roared Wulf, hefting his sword and preparing to fight. "Does he speak for all of you?" questioned Amass. "He does," Alara answered. The six New Era looked at the six of them. "Then by the powers granted upon us by the Emperor and his Church, your sentence is death," stated Vemrin, yelling and charging forward with the New Era.

Cyrenna surged forwards, weaving through the New Era and ignoring them as she tackled Captain Olivia Roose. The Weapon took the largest of the New Era – Captain Amass – grabbing his heavy sword with his metal arm before throwing a left hook into his jaw. Amass staggered backwards, but the Weapon snapped his blade with his hands and then swung the shard across Amass' neck. Amass fell to the floor, his shaved head rolling down the cobblestone slope.

"You're a fool to fight us, Vanathur, you can't win!" chided Pirin. "I can only imagine the reward we'll get from Admiral Kai for killing you." Alara lunged with her glaive; Pirin twisted to the side, lifting her blade up to strike down on Alara. But Alara pulled her glaive back, dragging the blade across Pirin's stomach on the return. She staggered backwards, holding her open stomach in shock. Alara then lunged forwards, impaling Pirin through her sternum and ending her life. "You always talked too much," Alara stated.

"No, no, no, nooooo!" cried out Vemrin, as Wulf lifted him up in the air and dropped him down with a crunch onto his knee. Vemrin lay on the floor, his legs limp behind him. "Damn animal!" he growled, as Wulf picked up his sword and then cut him down. Kask danced around the small battlefield as Haros lunged after him with a sabre. "Give up, don't make me do it," Kask stated repeatedly. "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" Haros screamed, diving towards him.

Kask stepped to the side, kicking his leg out from under his unbalanced body and then aiming his pistol at the back of Haros' head as he fell. He painted the floor with the inside of Haros' skull, letting out a sigh and looking to Alara. "They seem weaker than I was expecting," he stated. Alara nodded in agreement, turning and watching as Beowulf duelled with Losa. They battled back and forth, but it was clear who had the upper hand. "We were never good enough for you and your sister! From the first day, you always looked down on us!" Beowulf faltered and Losa lunged. Beowulf batted the blade aside before he thrust his sword up and through Losa. "No," he said quietly into Losa's ear. "I never thought I was good enough for all of you. I'm sorry, truly. Be at peace, comrade."

Beowulf looked back at Alara and the others before it all dawned on them that Cyrenna was missing. They looked back, spotting Cyrenna on the floor, mounted on top of Roose. She threw punch after punch at her, the pair screaming at each other with their weapons on the floor next to them. Roose tucked her legs underneath Cyrenna and kicked her off, her face bloody and battered. "Please, Olivia," begged Cyrenna, laying in pain on the floor – her pistol the only weapon in reach. Roose shook her head, looking defeatedly at the corpses of the other New Era. "You'll have a fair trial," Cyrenna promised. Roose let out a bloody smile, tears in her eyes as she reached for her own pistol. "No I won't."

She drew her pistol and aimed at Cyrenna, but Cyrenna shot first. Roose landed on the floor with a crack, and immediately Cyrenna threw her pistol aside and scrambled across the floor towards her. "No-no-no-no-no! Olivia, please look at me," she sobbed, holding Roose's head in her lap. Roose looked up at her weakly, a hole through her chest. She slowly reached up, placing a bloody hand on Cyrenna's cheek. "I'm sorry, Cyr. I'm so... so... sorry..."

Cyrenna screamed as Roose went limp and unresponsive, but the battle continued to rage around them – the war ongoing. "Cyr," Beowulf said softly, placing a hand on her shoulder. Cyrenna shook it off. "We need to go," he added. "I can't leave her," cried Cyrenna, looking from him to Alara in desperation.

Alara shook her head. "Cyrenna, every moment that passes is several lives that could have survived. I'm sorry, we need to move forwards."

Cyrenna looked down at Roose, shaking her head before she reluctantly stood. She reached down to pick her up, but Beowulf stopped her, placing his hands on her shoulders. "Cyr, she's gone. I'm sorry. Tris is waiting on us," he said. Cyrenna sniffled and wiped her face with her arm, smearing the blood, sweat and grime before she nodded. "Okay," she said defeatedly. Alara led the way, heading forwards and upwards towards the Imperial Palace.

Cyrenna watched the others head on forwards, staying behind for a moment with her brother as she looked down at Roose, her body laying in the middle of the street. Slowly, she turned, beginning to run and leaving her friend behind.

Seize the Seas Tales: From One Soul to Another

Morgana did not like the timing of her summons to the Witch Queen's quarters. It implied that she had been waiting for Morgana to finish her ritual. And that implied that she wanted something from her. Morgana also didn't like the fact that she was alone as she stood in Lady Zoya's room: not even the Witch Queen's familiar was present. "Trouble, we're in trouble," cawed Urien, as he hopped around the floor of the room. "Shh," she scolded, ever wary of watching eyes or listening ears.

The room itself was quite quaint, simple and styled almost like a cottage – even with its own windows that went nowhere and saw nothing other than stone. A large bed surrounded by purple curtains sat upon the wooden floorboards, and a large dresser and wardrobe sat in a short distance from the bathroom – containing little more than a simple wooden tub, a toilet and a sink. A small wooden chest of sorts sat on a bedstand and, as much as Morgana tried not to mimic her raven, she couldn't help but approach it. She glanced around before peeking inside.

A beautiful and pristine golden soul stone sat inside: it was unbound, a spare like her own Morgana guessed. Beneath it sat some jewellery and a few photographs. She glanced around once more before picking them up. They were of Zoya – that much was obvious – but she was far younger, a child or young teenager. She was stood on a farm, tending to some livestock: cattle, sheep, along with a huge dog and a tuxedo cat. She was smiling, happy. One image showed a serious-looking, muscular man, a thick and dark handlebar moustache on his face, a far smaller

woman stood holding a young Zoya. Her eyes matched Zoya's – her parents. A trio of old women sat on rocking chairs in the background.

Another image showed her much older, alone on a farm with far less animals – the land looked ill, sick and twisted and Zoya looked both exhausted and miserable. Another image showed her stood with the three old women, Zoya was a late teenager, and the old women looked far more withered than they had before. Zoya's body was covered in dark scars, exposed in her short and loose clothing, long straight lines along her bones as if she had been surgically cut open. Morgana's eyes widened as she looked at the old women stood with her – she recognised them: the three Daughters of Shade Councillors.

Urien cawed in panic. "Find anything interesting?" Zoya asked, announcing her discrete arrival as Morgana slammed the chest shut. "Uh, apologies Lady-" Morgana attempted, lowering her head. "Enough of that, you're not here to fawn over me, Morgana – I'd have summoned someone else," stated Zoya, stepping into the room and beginning to undress herself. Morgana flashed red and looked away, much to Zoya's bemusement as she changed into more casual and comfortable clothes than the dress she had on. "Why am I here?" Morgana questioned.

"Because we are near the end. In less than a week, war will arrive. We as a sect will have everything we have ever wanted, the greatest power imaginable and the ability to stand in the sunlight without question. But you want my seat, my position, and my power," Zoya said bluntly, sitting down in a rocking chair and crossing her legs. "Uh, I-" Morgana stammered, a quick flash of fear crossing her body. "Take a deep breath. You're not in trouble, even if I don't approve of you going through my things. Please, sit," she said, gesturing to a large pillow on the floor.

Morgana cautiously sat down, meeting Zoya's blue and green eyes with her own gold. "From the moment I noticed you, you've always been hungry for power... or maybe power isn't the word I should use. You've craved control. No family, I presume?" she asked. Morgana faltered, unsure what to answer before she nodded. "None I can trust," Morgana said quietly. Zoya smiled softly, looking towards her windows before waving her hand. A scene of a large, open, grassy plains with cows and sheep appeared in the windows, a faint breeze sweeping over the grass. "I know the feeling."

"To tell the honest truth, Morgana, I want to trust you. I've trusted before, and they've failed me, but you're different. You're more akin to me than any of the

others.” She shook her head and then bore her eyes into Morgana’s. “You’re just like a sister to me. Just like the one I once had. She was just as eager to show off her abilities and to make a mark on the world. And I really, truly want that for us – to be sisters. More so than any others you may or may not have.” Morgana looked down in shame. “Why me? If you already-“

“You can make whatever choice you wish, Morgana. I won’t hold anything against you. And I don’t want to know anything more about whatever is going on – for your own safety, it’s better I don’t know the whole truth. But, in the coming days, things are going to change, I assure you. And although it’s too late for me to walk a different path – it’s not for you. You could be my... you could stand at my side, and maybe even take my seat if that’s what you wanted when it came to it. Your path is still to be set in stone.”

“My Lady-“ Zoya met her gaze with a soft warning. “Zoya,” Morgana said softly to the far older woman. “I think I’ve already made my decision.” Zoya nodded, a look of genuine disappointment on her face. “I thought so. It explains the state of your familiar. If I were in your position, and if I had had someone who was being me...” She looked down and then looked out towards the false scenery, shaking her head softly as she thought to the time she had been given that chance. “No, if I had let him take me, then I would have run away. I could have gone as far away from here as possible, taken what I’d learnt and gone. Lived a nice, peaceful life with people who cared about me. Before it became too late.”

“I don’t understand,” Morgana stated. “Go? Go where?” she questioned. “That’s for you to decide. When the war starts, it will be too late to escape. The trap will have been sprung and the end will be in sight. If you want to take my hand, and be my sister, then come and find me anytime before then and we will rule the world to come together, as master and apprentice. But if you do go, then please don’t look back. You deserve better than a life in a cage, and you deserve to fly free.”

Chapter 146: Broken Promises

Arthuria couldn't help but stop and stare as the horizon erupted into a row of orange flame. The power was devastating and utterly terrifying, but she shook it off – she had no idea what had caused it and all it had done was reinforce her need to hurry. She had to find Mai Lu: a Demon of Baal's power could not be left alone, and this was Arthuria's chance to free her. She turned and ran onwards, speeding along the road towards the Holy Palace.

There were no Knights guarding the entrance. A few Navy sailors stood around, along with Priests to guide them, but they either hadn't heard of the commotion Arthuria had caused or didn't care - their attention focused outwards, not on her as she passed by and entered the Palace. She raced through the hallways, heading upwards on a direct path straight to Mai Lu's chambers before bursting through the unguarded doors.

The room was empty. She wasn't there, nor were her Handmaidens. There weren't even any of Mai Lu's things. Arthuria frowned, heading into Mai Lu's bedroom – it had been emptied. She let out a sigh, shaking her head and hurrying back the way she had come. "She is likely being used in a ritual," Arthuria rationalised. "But why have they cleared away her things? Is she being moved? Or do they intend to kill her?" She picked up her pace - she didn't like any of the options.

Bishop William Vikare still couldn't believe it – a promotion, at this hour, in the middle of a war? It made no sense, but who was he to complain if they were promising more power and a better title. He would be one step closer to becoming a Cardinal, and the powers and status he'd have as an Archbishop would be almost unrivalled. He couldn't wait, and neither could the thirty-to-forty others around him. They didn't all appear to be Bishops, which drew an immediate thought of curiosity to him.

"In here," ordered the Archbishop leading them, pushing open a huge set of black stone doors – the all-familiar entrance to the Pope's throne room. William grinned - of course it would be there – the Pope himself would likely ordain him, it made perfect sense. His face fell immediately as he and the others stepped inside, the naked image of a small girl's body twisting his stomach. Another prospect threw up, the sight grizzly as she oozed thick streams of crimson blood into the pool she was chained over.

“Steel yourselves brothers, the body of an Angel will grant you vigour and might,” stated the leading Archbishop, taking them forwards. William cautiously obeyed, joining the others in a large ring before goblets were passed out to them all. He let out a nervous gulp, standing directly in front of the child. She was small, young, her body shackled to a crown-topped, stone cross by her hands and feet. Her legs and arms had been cut open with large and deep cuts, and an ungodly volume of blood filled the pool beneath her.

As he stared, the girl stirred, letting out a pained groan before looking to him. Her eyes were a brilliant red, with a moving pink inside. Her hair was stuck to her body; by sweat or blood, he couldn't tell – but it was a bright white, with a pink hue. She had a sharp, pointed nose and round cheeks, decorated by a thin pattern of freckles. Her skin was pale, presumably even paler than normal due to the blood loss.

But as William stared up at her, and she stared down at him, he felt nothing other than a deep sense of terror filling every pore in his body. “Angel?” He questioned, as she grinned. She was no Angel, she was Demon – her face contorting as a pair of red curved horns sprouted from her forehead, another pair curling outwards from her temples. Her teeth sharpened into a maw full of fangs, her tongue splitting into a serpent's. Her skin turned an oily crimson, apart from her face which was a ghostly, bone white. Her pupils turned into slits, the colour remaining.

“By all that is holy...” muttered several of the Bishops and Priests around William. “Brothers,” announced the Archbishop in charge. “Before you lies an apostle of the Gods themselves, a divine being who is here to bless you all and to bind you through blood into our presbyterium! All who sit above you have followed this ritual, have accepted the Priestess's blessing openly with their hearts and souls. I ask you, in this time of need, on behalf of the Pope himself, to join me so that we may march and crush our enemies together. Step forth, brothers, fill your goblets to show you are ready.”

“You're out of your damned mind!” stated a Bishop, throwing his goblet to the floor and marching to the door. It was then that William noticed the golems arranged in a ring around the room. “Pity,” stated the Archbishop. “We have no place for those without faith,” he stated, a golem stepping forth and cleaving the Bishop in half. A few others began to panic, dropping their goblets and fleeing for the one exit as well, but they too were cut down without question by the stone soldiers.

William turned away, forcing his eyes shut as the final screams were silenced, his heart pounding in his chest and sweat forming on his forehead. "More than was expected," muttered the Archbishop. "A waste." He stepped forwards, walking up to the pool and looking over William and the others who remained. "What are you waiting for? Fill your cups," he ordered. William gulped and rushed forwards with the others, dipping his cup into the warm pool of blood. The smell was vicious, but he ignored it, forcing his feelings aside as he retreated – the Demon girl's eyes on him the entire time.

Nervously he adjusted his glasses, looking up at her as he steeled himself. "Whatever it takes," he told himself, as he had said so many countless times before. "Oh, great Priestess, divine conduit that you are, we offer these bodies to you as a sacrifice and a sign of devotion to you. May you take what is owed and bless us with the power to conquer our enemies, to lay waste to the heretics and fiends populating this world, and grant unto us your divinity," chanted the Archbishop. "Amen!" said William and the others, his mind not exactly fond of the word 'sacrifice' buried within the prayer. He raised the goblet to his lips, only to falter as he heard the doors open.

"Halt Paladin, none may enter at this moment. What is your business here?" questioned a pair of Priests stood outside of the Pope's throne room. "Uh," Arthuria stammered, trying to come up with an excuse. "Turn around, if you know what's good for you," stated the other Priest, gripping his grimoire. Arthuria let out a sigh and looked down, before she drew her sword in a fast arc. Their heads bounced down the stairs, their bodies collapsing afterwards. "I've never been any good at small talk," she admitted, wiping her sword and pushing the doors open.

The throne room was dark, the skies above the Capital full of cloud and smoke, but still Arthuria could see everything she needed to through the low lighting. Baal hung from the cross in the centre of the room, the Priests around him drinking on his and Mai Lu's blood. Arthuria stepped forwards, only to immediately notice the golems around the room. "What are you doing here?" questioned the Archbishop stood by the fountain, noticing her arrival. "Arthuria?" questioned Baal and Mai Lu. "Finally, it is good that you are here."

The numerous Priests in the room all turned and looked at her, some holding their stomachs with mixed expressions of fear. "Kill them!" ordered the Archbishop as Arthuria gave no response, simply drawing her sword. The golems stepped forwards, before they seized up and then promptly exploded

outwards as blood red crystals erupted from within, created from the blood coating their weapons. The Archbishop stared in horror, immediately turning towards Baal.

"My Lord, why? Please, grant these loyal subjects your boon. Grant us the strength to win this war. For you, for your future, my Lord," he begged. "Please, take your dues, my Lord, they are ready for you." Baal cackled, turning his attention downwards to the Archbishop. "I've never needed anything from you. It was purely for my... satisfaction," he stated, the Archbishop turning white. Baal looked across the room and then settled his gaze on one Bishop in front of him, a scrawny man wearing spectacles. "Drink," he commanded.

"No, don't!" Arthuria yelled out, the various Priests around kneeling and beginning to pray in pure terror or drinking from their goblets. The Bishop with glasses did both. A sinister smile spread across Baal's face as large spiky tendrils emerged from the pool of blood before impaling the Priests who hadn't drunk. The remainders seemed to let out a sigh of relief, only for their eyes to go wide as they felt their insides twist.

William screamed in pain amongst the choir of other voices. "Please," he begged, his vision turning red. The Demon looked down at him. "Fool." William's spirit broke, his life flashing through his eyes in an instant – his existence wasted in pursuit of petty power. It had been nothing but failure, his own consistent failure. And when he'd been given a chance for more power, by drinking the blood of a Demon, he'd been stupid enough to dive off a cliff for it. "Oh," he said defeatedly.

Arthuria gasped in shock as one by one the Priests exploded from the inside out as large sharp crystals tore them apart. A pair of glasses bounced across the floor before landing at her feet. Arthuria tore her helmet off her face and threw it aside before spewing out the insides of her stomach. A voice drew her back to the grisly sight. "My Lord?" questioned the Archbishop, his body covered in the gore of others. "Why? We did everything you wanted," he cried, his voice weak and shattered as he knelt on the blood-covered floor. Baal looked down at him with nothing other than disgust. "Yet you did nothing for this girl, other than lust for her even as she hid in the body of a child. I dread to imagine the weight of your sins, and what you'd have done to my dear host had I let her grow up." "My Lord?" the Archbishop begged, before his head burst in a final colourful and grotesque display.

Arthuria stood alone in the painted throne room, the smell disgusting and the sight truly evil. Her eyes remained locked on Baal as she held her sword, the

Demon chained to the cross, unsuspecting and waiting for her to approach. Her oath echoed in her mind: "I vow to harm no being unworthy of punishment. I vow to do my duty, to protect my Elder. I vow to commit no evil. I vow to do good. I vow to uphold my faith that my mission is pure."

The words repeated over and over, her sword thrumming in her hand as she slowly walked towards the physical manifestation of evil before her. "What have you done?" Arthuria questioned, gesturing around the room at the mess. "Nothing of great difference," stated Baal. "It matters not. Anyway, it is good that you are back. Release us, I would rather not have to harm this body to free us."

Arthuria stared up at Baal. She could end him, end his evil once and for all. It was her duty to, her vow to do good. She couldn't release him, it went against everything she stood for. Everything she thought she stood for. The Demon faded away, replaced by the soft expression of Mai Lu. She smiled at Arthuria, her eyes soft and tired. "You came back, I knew you would. You promised you would," she said gently, before looking down at the blade still in Arthuria's hands.

"Ah," she said with soft realisation, as she saw the tears brimming in Arthuria's eyes, her body shaking with fear. "It's okay... you can if you want to. I understand. I am a monster, but you've always been kind to me regardless... Thank for being something to look forward to. Baal can't hurt you, I've locked him away for now," Mai Lu told her, tears falling from Arthuria's eyes. She hefted her sword, looking at the Demon girl. "Thank you for being my friend," Mai Lu said softly, her eyes watering before she forced them shut, a tear sliding down her face.

Arthuria struck hard, shattering the chains attached to Mai Lu's legs. She felt her sword vibrate, the power seeming to fade, and as she looked at it she saw cracks along the metal. Arthuria let out a scream as she swung again, cutting the chain holding Mai Lu's right arm, before she swung for the last chain. Her sword hit the metal, shattering along with it, and dropping Mai Lu to the pool beneath her. Arthuria fell to her knees, clutching her head as her powers abandoned her – her oath broken once again. She sobbed loudly, her mind and body conflicted and confused. Nothing made sense, everything felt wrong.

A few moments passed before Mai Lu stepped out of the pool of blood. "Phew," she stated. "I was actually worried for a moment that you'd go through with it." Arthuria looked up at her in disbelief, the façade of innocence completely gone and a cocky, unashamed and confident smile looking back at her. "What? It's just

a sword, don't be so upset. Come on, we need to go," she stated callously, looking towards the corpse of the Archbishop before stripping his body. The robes were huge on her, so she tore them open with terrifying ease. They were also covered in blood, but she didn't seem to care too much about that, looking towards Arthuria with frustration as she remained on the floor.

"Look, I owe you my life, Arthuria – genuinely, thank you. But there's bigger things to worry about. Your Elder for one, the Witch's ritual for another," Mai Lu stated. Arthuria looked up at her, before she punched the floor, letting out a pained yell and forcing herself to her feet. She hated it, but Mai Lu was right – there would be time to debate her decision later. "Better?" Mai Lu questioned, reaching out for Arthuria's wrist to try to heal any potential injury. Arthuria snapped her hand away. "Stay close, don't fall behind," Arthuria ordered, grabbing her helmet.

The entire Palace shook as Arthuria ran towards the doors with Mai Lu behind her, and when she forced them open she saw rubble and the dark open sky. It was only afternoon - the battle had gone on for several hours already, but the smoke made it look like it was evening. Arthuria felt her body tense defensively, a pair of bodies dropping through the hole in the roof onto the rubble in front of both of them.

They were dressed in little clothing: tight-fitting dark clothes that exposed their shoulders, arms and necks. Both were women with fair skin, one taller than Arthuria. She had short black hair tied into a ponytail. The other woman had long blonde hair, similarly, tied up. Arthuria stared at them both: they wore red ceramic masks, both plain apart from black markings along the edges and the eyes. Arthuria couldn't see their eyes - both were hidden behind a black void. A deep sense of dread crossed her mind as she looked down at their arms. The blonde one wore a pair of black, taloned gauntlets. The one with black hair had a huge sword across her, but her forearms were exposed. Both of them were stained red, all the way up to her elbows. In an instant Arthuria returned back to the snowy island of Frozen Branch, the assassin belonging to Jayce Exarga tearing apart the forces she was with before turning on her.

Arthuria raised her fists defensively, but Mai Lu placed a hand on her arm. The two figures reached up and pressed their masks, taking them off. "Thank the Gods you're alive," stated Meredea, stepping forwards and embracing Arthuria. Arthuria stood stunned, her eyes wide as Athena grinned at her. "What's going

on?" Arthuria questioned desperately, looking at the two assassins – the two Sisters - before her.

"Good question," Athena stated, fighting and shouting echoing from outside of the Palace. "Now's not the time for long discussions and catching up. When we were told you had returned, truthfully we didn't believe it. I wish we had, we'd have found you sooner, but it seems you're doing alright," Meredea stated, looking down towards Mai Lu and nodding to her. "There isn't much time, and we've got our own mission to attend to. The Witches are about to unleash their ritual, and your Elder and her Sentinels are being prepared for execution."

"What?" Arthuria questioned. "The Elder's been captured?" Meredea nodded. "They were hoping to make a spectacle out of it, but with Exarga on the way they delayed it, hoping for an opportunity to publicly denounce her – so that they could defame her and ensure no questions. The Guild put a stop to that and have been repeating nothing other than Exarga and Vanathur's declaration. Sentinel de Rais wants to take her position, but he needs enough witnesses to legitimise it, so most Paladins are gathered by your tree waiting for the execution."

"Then I need to go now," Arthuria stated, stepping forwards. But Meredea blocked her. "You have bigger issues at the moment. You need to stop the Witch's ritual. You're the only one with a way to do so." Arthuria shook her head but Meredea grabbed her shoulders and forced her to look at her. "We will all die if you don't," she stated. Arthuria's eyes widened, an explosion illuminating them. "Why can't you? If you're... assassins, surely you can do it?"

"We're the Emperor's Fist, we're more than assassins. This is all part of a plan larger than all of us, Arthuria. Go, please," Meredea stated, releasing her before backing away. This time Arthuria grabbed her. "What about the children? Are they still in the Capital? Who's protecting them?" Arthuria questioned. Meredea looked away in shame. "I have my mission. They're in the city but I can't go to them," she admitted, a genuine look of turmoil and grief on her face. "Screw your mission, they need you now more than ever. Others will cover for you. Right, Athena?" Arthuria asked. Meredea looked to Athena. "You'll just slow me down, Sister," she said, with a nod of confirmation. Arthuria let go of Meredea, the Emperor's Fist backing away and looking between the pair of them before leaping up through the hole and disappearing. "Don't die," Athena told Arthuria. Arthuria nodded and then repeated her words back to her before Athena leapt up and followed.

"There's your answer, we need to hurry," Mai Lu stated, the pair of them racing forwards. "We need to get to the Elder," Arthuria stated. Mai Lu shook her head. "No, there will be time for that. The ritual is a weapon, one that will kill everyone other than the Witches. The war will end in an instant, with them as the sole victors. It must be stopped, or we will all perish. They were not lying." Arthuria swore loudly, shaking her head and changing her direction. "Hold on, Jeanne."

Seize the Seas Tales: Betrayal

Jeanne's cell was far from luxurious, but she didn't particularly care – the cracked and dark stone was the least of her discomforts. She sat against the wall of the round room on the bedroll she had been given, her hands kept in shackles with a large chain. Her feet were bare, her body covered with little more than wrappings across her chest and a chainmail shirt. A bucket sat on the other side of the room: there were no windows, and a heavy, barred door kept her locked inside her prison. Without any daylight, and hardly any light at all other than a flame from the other side of the door, she had no idea how long she had been locked away. The days had come and gone like a blur, and she had long lost hope of any escape.

Jeanne dropped her head, forcing her tears away once more – she refused to let them break her. She would die first. Her face was bruised: a violent beating had followed in retaliation for her own retaliation against her previous warden, and her lip had split. She could smell herself, and it wasn't pleasant. A heavy clunk drew her attention to the door and she forced herself to her feet, her body weak from starvation and dehydration. She raised her fists defensively.

"Oh my, how fierce," goaded the familiar voice of Gilles de Rais as he stepped inside in casual attire, only to skid on a patch of blood by the door, a similar mark on the door. "Don't worry, I'm not here to fight – not that you could," he stated. "Drop your trousers and I'll tear yours off as well," Jeanne stated bluntly. He laughed. "Oh no, don't worry – we won't make that mistake again. You have my apologies for the behaviour of my men. I've got someone else to play with you instead, should that need arise."

Jeanne looked towards the doorway, a large muscular woman leaning in the doorway. "You won't break me. I'm never going to confess to a crime I've not committed," she stated. "As the Gods are my witness, I will not relent to you!" "Ooh scary. The truth is Jeanne – I don't care whether or not admit your betrayal, because it's not me you betrayed. You betrayed yourself. And that's something you cannot hide."

Jeanne lowered her guard, her green eyes meeting his red. "Ah, you thought this was all for my sake? For personal power and glory? Truly you've fallen far, Elder..." He tutted. "Ex-Elder. I am as loyal to you as I have always been. Loyal to your beliefs, to the messages and teachings you taught me, all that time ago... The lessons you've forgotten!" he yelled, kicking her empty bucket across the room. Jeanne stared at him in disbelief. "I have not-"

"Haven't you?" he yelled. "You have rolled over, shied away from your duty and oath to bring security and strength to the world! To cleanse and purify all that surrounds us. You surrendered yourself. You! For what? For the safety of others? You have never cared, you have never felt, and you have never faltered – until now. The Elder I followed was a beacon of light, with the wrath of the sun behind her. That is why I followed you, that is why we sacrificed everything for you!"

Jeanne looked down. "That was a different time," she confessed. He pointed at her. "Ah-ha, and so you confess at last. What changed? How did you fall to such cowardice?" he questioned, opening up his shirt to reveal a large scar across his chest. "You gave me this because I dared to question you. How, Jeanne, have you become... this?" he asked. "Tell me," he whispered, standing over her. "So I do not make the same mistake."

She looked up at him, her face hardening and the emotion fading from her eyes. "There's my Elder," he said softly. She looked away and he grabbed her chin, forcing her to look at him. "You may have forgotten yourself, but I haven't – and I never will... I mourn you, and I will mourn you, but your legacy will not be forgotten – I swear on my oath." He released her and stepped towards the door. "Once those scum coming to our Capital are wiped out, I will march on all those monstrosities living amongst us and cleanse them from the world, as we always should have. As we always were going to. The Order will never bow to anyone, and we will rule as kings."

"Enjoy your final days, and think on your sins. I will always serve you, the real you, rest assured. But know in your final and darkest days, that are alone. That the ideals you failed to maintain were your strength, your true strength, and that this... disgrace that you have become is your weakness. Maybe it was Pendragon, or the Sisters, or that filth we found in your quarters that warped you? I don't know, I really don't know. I'll just have to burn everything you touched, just to be sure."

He stepped out of her cell before slamming the door shut, his face appearing in the bars. "Oh, and I thought you should know – Pendragon never returned, and

neither did those I sent to keep an eye on her. If she does turn up – if - I'll bring you her head. Just something for you to look forward to." He turned and departed, leaving her alone in the darkness. The s

Chapter 147: The Final Run

"Alara and the others will be right behind us. It's on us to clear a way for them!" Jayce stated, as he, Wicke, Caelie, Astris and Bjorn marched upwards in the direction of the Imperial Palace. Navy and Church kept surging towards them from all directions, their end following quickly as Jayce unleashed sharp blasts of concentrated Panic - stunning squads at a time for the others to wipe out - or Wicke threw devastating spells towards them. She unleashed a heavy plume of blue fire towards an incoming squad, Caelie then forged a portal in its path, creating an exit across the squad, directly into another portal before into another – the pair creating their own purgatory for any caught inside. Astris leapt from rooftop to rooftop, providing covering fire from above whilst Bjorn and Jayce managed the front lines, cleaving swathes through the defensive army sent to stop them.

"Fall back! Retreat!" yelled a voice from somewhere up ahead, the large army falling back as several figures emerged from within. "Shit!" Bjorn stated, the group staring down six Admirals. Vice-Admirals Naomi He and Ashmore Grice stood at the front. Vice-Admiral He wore a light green suit, a long, thin and needle-like blade in her hands, whilst Vice-Admiral Grice wore an orange suit, a heavy double-headed axe lofted across his shoulders. Rear-Admirals Ceren Yai, Brutus Borealis, Bai Soon, and Girard Kong were spread either side, each with their own various weapons.

Astris apparated down to stand on Jayce's left side, her two pistols loaded and ready. Bjorn stood on Jayce's right, his two axes ready. Jayce held his own two swords, the three of them stood in front of Caelie and Wicke. "I'll admit it," Vice-Admiral Grice began. "You've impressed me, Exarga. You broke the wall and have made it this far, but you'll go no further. This is the end of your rebellion." "I'm surprised to see all of you here, you must be getting desperate to have fallen back so far," Jayce retorted.

The Admirals snarled at him, but Jayce could see hesitation – they were afraid of him, no matter how hard they tried to hide it. Jayce stepped forwards, a sliver of hope in his mind. "Stand down, and step aside – or I will cut through you. I defeated Admiral Yashiro and-" There was a crash, something landing on the cobblestone nearby and cutting off Jayce's attempt to disarm the Admirals. "You were saying?" questioned Marine Vice-Admiral Yashiro, her katana dripping with blood and a few scratches across her face. She glared at Jayce and his blood

went cold, the other Admirals all immediately prioritising their attention on her. Their fear evident compared to their wariness of him.

Jayce sensed more figures arrive, his body tensing as a figure walked up next to him and stepped in front of Astris. Rear-Admiral Armstrong towered over him, the therian panther holding a pair of long curved knives. An ox therian crossed Bjorn, stepping in front of him – his torn uniform identifying him as Rear-Admiral Brawne. A final hand placed itself on Jayce's shoulder – Rear-Admiral Otrera ready with a two-handed axe. "We'll clear a path for you, and cover your back," she stated.

Jayce looked at the two groups of Admirals: Yashiro and the others were outnumbered, but he would turn the tide. "Enough talk!" yelled Vice-Admiral Grice, charging forwards along with the others in a hope to take the initiative. Grice and Admiral He headed straight for Yashiro, but she danced backwards, luring them away from the group. "Don't stop for anything!" she ordered to Jayce, switching to an offensive stance once suitably away.

The Rear-Admirals engaged one another, leaving Rear-Admiral Kong for Jayce. Kong was a giant man, wielding an array of large spears strapped to his back. Jayce's eyes widened as he remembered his red uniform – Kong had chased them away when they had attempted to hand over Astris. "You!" Jayce growled. "You put holes in my ship!" he yelled, leaping to the side as Kong threw a heavy spear at him – the spear travelling faster than any bullet. "You escaped me once, not again!" Kong returned.

Jayce couldn't help but glance past the Rear-Admiral – a mass of grotesque monstrosities trampling their way through the defending army as they surged towards them. Some were ball-like mounds of flesh, full of eyes, arms and legs – wielding dozens of blades and weapons. Others ran like dogs, but had humanoid bodies with their heads and arms twisted backwards – their toothy mouths covering most of their faces. Others flew in the air on fleshy wings, their bodies bony, skinny and slimy.

"Sorry, don't quite have time to dance with you," Jayce stated, racing forwards to close the distance. He slid underneath a thrown spear, the air whooshing past his head, before leaping and slicing at the Admiral. It landed, cutting a line across his eyebrow – nothing deep, but a wound that bled heavily. The Admiral growled as he stumbled backwards and wiped his face, his vision turning red and blurry.

Jayce caught Caelie's eye as she waited for a good moment to step into any of the battles. He winked at her. "Come on then! Is that all you've got!" Jayce yelled. Kong growled, grabbing a pair of spears and throwing them both. Jayce dropped to the floor, Kong grabbing another spear and preparing to throw it - only to instead lurch forward, his eyes wide in horrified surprise as two sharp points emerged from his chest, his own weapons spearing him from behind. "Bastard..." he grunted, toppling forward.

"Come on!" Jayce yelled to his group, charging forward towards the mass of monstrosities. "Wicke!" he yelled, the young Wizard stepping forward with her grimoire. "Hellfire! Echo!" she yelled, unleashing a blue-black plume of fire before several fiery orbs appeared around her, the spell replicating into weakened versions of itself. The monsters and Navy burned as she pushed forward with her inferno. She grinned madly, her orange eyes flashing blue in the reflection of her devastation.

Jayce couldn't help but stare in alarm, but he forced his concern aside as the magic faded, turning his attention onwards onto the remaining enemies as he carried onwards along with Astris and Bjorn, cleaving and blasting apart golems before targeting a far larger golem commanding them all. "Where are the Paladins?" Jayce questioned, spotting Witches flying through the air, trying to bombard them from above and Warlocks casting spells or recycling corpses to create more monstrosities. "You're complaining?" Bjorn questioned. Astris disappeared in a splash of red mist and leapt onto a Witch's broom before using her to target other Daughters of Shade. "It's strange, that's all!" Jayce commented, agreeing that there were more pressing things to worry about.

The defences fell apart, Jayce and his exhausted group continuing onwards up the long path of steps leading up to the Palace and its courtyard. Countless golems guarded the path, along with a few forces dressed in the armour of the Emperor's guard. The five of them crouched down behind a destroyed golem, a hail of gunfire pinning them down. "Catch your breath and wait for them to stop, then be ready to charge," Jayce stated. Caelie shook her head, dragging her finger across her neck. "Me," she stated, transforming into Belial.

A blank white mask crossed her face, two crescent black horns emerging from the top of her head. Her eyes turned pitch black, before golden tears dripped down her face. "What are you doing?" Jayce questioned, uncertain who was in control. "Trust us," Belial and Caelie stated, forming a swirling portal in front of themselves before stepping out from cover. The gunfire continued, but a series

of pained yells emerged as well, Caelie and Belial turning the numerous weapons against their users.

Jayce stood up, staring at Caelie in horror as she staggered back towards him, the Demon melting away and her body riddled with holes. "Caelie!" he exclaimed in alarm, rushing towards her, but she held up her hand and shook her head – the injuries sealing shut, but a distinct look of exhaustion crossing her sweaty face. "Are you okay?" questioned Wicke, allowing Caelie to lean on her. Caelie nodded before giving a thumbs up. "Don't do that again," Jayce scolded, taking a healing potion out of his bottomless bag and giving it her before drinking one himself – his numerous cuts and bruises fading. "We're nearly there, don't let up!" Astris stated, charging forwards with Bjorn. Jayce looked at the two teenagers, but they both glowered back at him – sensing his concern. "We're fine, Jayce," Wicke stated. "Let's go!"

The Imperial Palace was as beautiful as it always had been, even though it had been battered by stray shots and spells. It stood defiant and proud, with the setting sun illuminating its peak. In the eclipse of the day and night its magnificence reminded all across the warzone what they fighting for, its bright white body glowing, and its decorations shining in the darkness. But Jayce couldn't help but see the ruins around it. No matter what the Palace looked like, the Capital and its oceans were burning.

They emerged into the ruined courtyard of the Imperial Palace, its azure doors shattered and fallen, the entire group on high alert as they braced for an ambush. Yet, as Jayce looked around, he saw only corpses: bodies of shattered golems, Navy, Priests, and the Emperor's replaced guard. "What happened here?" Astris questioned, slowly scanning the area with her pistols aimed and ready. "Jayce," Bjorn stated, kneeling down next to a body. The head was missing, and blood, gore and pieces of bone lay splattered across the stone behind where the body had fallen.

Jayce snapped his head to the edge of the courtyard, sensing eyes watching him. He was the only one to notice a figure stood in the shadows: a man in a red ceramic mask, his body covered in dark clothes, his hands stained red up to the elbows and dripping blood. Jayce blinked and the mask disappeared, the figure replaced by the smaller frame of Vexx. His red eyes stared at him, his blonde hair long, his arms identically stained red. Jayce blinked and Vexx disappeared, along with the figure reminding Jayce of him.

"This is like..." Wicke muttered, her face a ghostly white. Jayce shook his head. "It's not Vexx, he was on a ship headed to the Frontier. He's gone," Jayce stated adamantly. Wicke and Caelie both looked at him with shock. "What?" Wicke asked, Caelie stepped forward and grabbing Jayce's shirt. "It's true," Bjorn added, drawing both of their attention as they shook their heads. "He wouldn't, he can't have, he's out here somewhere."

"Wicke..." Jayce stated softly, placing a reassuring hand on Caelie's head and focusing on Wicke. "I should have told you, I'm sorry. Marisha found out some time ago. I didn't want to say because you needed to focus on the Dungeons. And I know you'd have wanted us to follow him, and then go to your sisters. But we just haven't... had the time. And you promised your sisters you'd explore the Dungeons – that must mean something, there must be a reason they asked, and we'll figure that out once this is over. And then we'll go find your sisters, and Vexx, and Bjorn's family, and whatever else we want to."

"Jayce, I'm not a child – you could have just said that rather than hide it! You too, Bjorn. We left here together, the four of us! I'm more of your left hand than Astris – I know everyone and everything about our crew, our family. I've always been here, but I'm still just a kid to you! Why don't you trust me?" she questioned, the Capital burning in the horizon and the sun starting to set. They were all exhausted, hungry, and decorated in cuts, scrapes and bruises, but Wicke stood behind all of them – untouched.

Her eyes widened, brimming with tears as she saw all of their expressions – even Caelie's. "I'm just a kid to you... aren't I? Someone to protect... not trust..." she said defeatedly. Caelie stepped towards her and leapt onto her, wrapping her arms around Wicke. Wicke had grown tall, Caelie had not, so she hung off her slightly. "Little Sister," Caelie said quietly, Wicke burying her head into Caelie's shoulders.

Bjorn and Astris both looked towards Jayce expectantly and he looked back at them. "What do you want me to do?" he mouthed, not quite certain what he could say. It was true, Wicke was the child of the crew – she had always been, and always would be. She was the closest person Jayce had to a little sister, in a similar way that Caelie acted like his daughter. He protected Wicke above all else, and Caelie had been raised to be independent and mirror him, maybe even succeed him from what he had been teaching her. He had never had that intention with Wicke... because Wicke had somewhere else to go. She had family,

and that was something few others on the ship had. Whether she liked it or not... she was always going to go home to her sisters someday.

"Say something, reassure her; we have bigger things right now," Bjorn and Astris mouthed back at him, gesturing to the surrounding war and the Imperial Palace right next to them. Jayce stepped forwards and placed his arms around Wicke and Caelie, squeezing them both. They looked up at him, both tearfully. "Look, you are both two of the most precious beings in the world to me. I nearly lost you Caelie – and that almost broke me. Wicke – I dread to imagine what hurt I would inflict on others if I lost you." He looked down at Wicke. "You are young, fantastically brave and clever, but look around you: we're in a war and you're fifteen--"

"Nearly sixteen," Wicke inserted, naively and childishly. Jayce let out a sigh, shaking his head. "You're not ready, and you still have lots to learn. You will be ready soon, I know you will be, but you aren't there yet. We'll talk about this once this is over. But getting through this comes first, and that means protecting you for now. We trust you, you wouldn't be here otherwise. Just trust us. Trust me." She looked up at him and then at Caelie before reluctantly nodding.

They turned their attention towards the closed doors leading into the Imperial Palace. "Ready?" Jayce questioned to his group. The others nodding in agreement. Jayce scanned beyond using Focus, there were countless living bodies inside – strong ones. "Wicke, blow it open," he commanded. She stepped forwards, her mind in a flurry of emotions. She understood what Jayce was saying, but it still frustrated her. She wasn't a kid, no kid did what she could. Saw what she had seen. Lived the life she had. She shook her head and steeled herself. "I'll show them..." she muttered, beginning to chant before throwing a large fireball into the huge doors.

The large reinforced metal doors flew backwards into the corridor beyond, crushing the armed guards stood beyond. Jayce, Bjorn and Astris then surged forwards through the dust, unleashing their ferocious assault on the stunned remains. As Wicke and Caelie walked in behind, a proud grin on Wicke's face, a hand grabbed Wicke's foot, startling her with a yelp – the dying body behind it staring up at her. She had long red hair, knocked loose from her braids – her eyes a soft green. Wicke stared in horror at the woman, her bloody hand gripping her ankle in final defiance, her body crushed. Wicke tried to yank her leg free but the death grip was strong. She gargled something, spurting blood out from inside her before her grip released and she went limp. Wicke stared in horror, at the

corpse, a red handprint left behind on her leg. Desperately she tried to wipe it off, only to leave a smear on her flesh, her hands covered in red.

Caelie placed a hand on Wicke's shoulder and she jumped, staring defensively at Caelie. "Don't look at me like that," Wicke snapped, as Caelie expressed sympathy, moving her shoulder away from Caelie's hand and stomping after Jayce and the others. Caelie stood behind for a moment, watching Wicke walk away, before looking at the torn up red and gold carpet, the ruined artworks and delicate busts. "He's right," Belial reinforced. "That one will kill herself if she's not protected." Caelie shook her head. She had initially felt the same way when she had first joined, she understood Wicke's feelings. Her head moved on its own as Belial forced her to look down at the body Wicke had been startled by. Caelie saw the bloody red hair. "Your kind die countlessly - you yourself have died. Do not mistake strength for invulnerability," warned the Demon. Caelie slammed her palm into her temple, dazing them both before stumbling forwards after the others.

Jayce glanced behind him as he stood at the bottom of the golden bifurcated stairs leading upwards. "All the way to the top," Astris stated, taking a step forwards before Wicke surged past. "Wicke, wait!" she yelled, the others racing in pursuit of her. She climbed the stairs, passing straight inside a set of doors on the landing between the two floors and stepping through into a large room. Wicke skid to a halt, her eyes wide as she came to a sort of parliamentary chamber. A stone round table had been split, both halves sitting either side of a long rug leading straight to another set of stairs leading upwards.

Spread across the room, stood on the large ring were six Church Cardinals, and a wall of Archbishops. "Shit!" Wicke stated, the mass of Priests beginning to chant, their grimoires hovering in front of them. Wicke chanted quickly as the others raced in after her. "Counter!" she screamed, focusing on the nearest Cardinal – easily identifiable by his crimson robes - to disrupt his magic. "Echo!" she yelled, copying the counter as much as she could, stopping each of the cardinals of the Cardinals and some of the Archbishops.

Jayce and Bjorn leapt to opposite sides of the room, rushing the Cardinals, but the Archbishops dove in front, physically blocking them as the Cardinals began to chant again. Astris fired a series of shots into one Cardinal, dropping him before apparating to the far side of the room. "Counter! Counter! Counter!" Wicke yelled desperately at the wall of Mages around them, each of them saying the same chant: the spell she had stolen from them - Hellfire.

“Burn heretics!” yelled a Cardinal, a ball of blue-black flame in his hands. He unleashed it down upon Jayce, the heat intense but his Focus protecting him as much as it could, stopping the flames from touching his skin. Bjorn threw his axe, beheading the Cardinal preparing to do the same to him. Astris apparated behind another, grabbing his head and forcing her teeth into his neck as she refilled herself. Caelie opened a portal beneath another, dropping him into the path of the Cardinal assaulting Jayce, who then used the moment’s pause to lunge and cut through the screaming, burning Cardinal and plunge Sola and Luna into the assaulting Cardinal.

But Wicke had no such defence. Her eyes widened as she saw only blue and black flames rushing towards her, her chanting desperate but unable to stop the Cardinal as her magic failed her – her magic running dry from a day’s worth of spells. Her grimoire floated in front of her, going up in flames as it was caught in the plume. The others were scattered around the room, all focusing on their own enemies as she stayed in the back. She desperately channelled her Focus, the one thing she had remaining. The one thing she had always neglected.

The Rising Aces all turned in horror as they heard an ear-piercing scream from behind, a Cardinal still standing and unleashing a plume of blue-black Hellfire onto Wicke. She dropped to the floor, tucking defensively into a ball. “Wicke!” Jayce screamed, Astris firing a clean and singular shot through the side of the Cardinal’s head. The spell dissipated, the four of them rushing to her side as she writhed on the floor, screaming in agony.

The blue-black flames continued to burn on her clothes and body, her right side entirely engulfed. Jayce and Astris desperately smothered them as Caelie chanted, creating water and splashing the flames. Wicke shuddered as the flames hissed away, her skin bubbling and charred. “Wicke, Wicke, can you hear me?” Astris questioned desperately, channelling her own powers to try to heal Wicke. But the flesh didn’t heal - in fact it seemed to still be burning, even without flames, glowing black markings crossing her flesh. “It’s cursed,” Bjorn stated, as Jayce desperately forced a healing potion into Wicke’s burned mouth and face, only for it to have no effect.

She looked unrecognisable, the majority of her body burned, most of her hair gone and clothes gone. Jayce stared in complete disbelief and panic, unable to form a single thought as he held her. “Jayce! Jayce!” Bjorn stated, forcing him to look away. “She needs Yuthura,” Bjorn stated. Jayce nodded, standing to his feet

with Wicke in his arms and heading to the door. "Jayce!" Astris stated, physically blocking him. She didn't say anything else, but he could read her expression.

"Fuck!" he screamed, turning to Caelie. "Caelie, get her back to the ship, now," he ordered. She nodded, taking Wicke in her arms and creating a portal. "Good luck," she said quietly, stepping through and disappearing. Jayce immediately crouched to the floor and held his head, tears streaming down his face as he took deep, agonising breaths. "She'll be fine," Bjorn lied, forcing a look of reassurance as he placed a hand on Jayce's back. "Come on, we can't let her suffering be in vain. We need to finish this!" Astris added, Jayce's right and left hands attempting to help him up and force him forwards. He remained crouched, his fear and pain fading as he looked forwards to the spiral staircase heading upwards, an unbridled fury filling him. He stood up, wiping his face and letting out a sharp exhale. "Let's go," he said coldly.

"How'd the magic get through to her?" Bjorn questioned, as they began the ascent. "She's been skipping her Focus training," Jayce answered, shaking his head. Ordo had been right, of course he had been right. He had been a fool to let a child choose for herself, and now it may have gotten her killed or permanently disfigured. Astris and Bjorn looked at each other as they followed after Jayce. "Caelie will get her to the ship, she'll be fine," Astris reinforced. Jayce nodded, turning his attention to their right as they climbed the wide-ringed staircase.

"Holy..." Bjorn muttered, the three of them staring through a series of windows at a large chamber built into the Imperial Palace – a Dungeon sat inside. "See, told you," Astris stated. It was identical to the other towers, a white pillar of intricate stone with a huge pair of metal doors. "It doesn't matter anymore," Jayce stated, his attention onwards. "Jayce, it wasn't your fault," Astris forced. Jayce looked back at her, the anger fading and a deep sadness coming through his eyes. "No, it is. I'm a fool for taking a child to war."

The rest of the climb was in worried silence, worry for Wicke, for each other, for the others, and for the inevitable battle awaiting them at the top. They climbed for a while before they came to a small room leading to a pair of golden doors. A pair of butlers stood waiting, both dressed in bloodied suits and surrounded by corpses of Warlocks. Their gloves sat discarded, their hands stained red. They bowed to Jayce. "They are waiting for you inside, all rests upon your shoulders," stated one. They both then walked to the windows on either side of the room before leaping out. "Did you notice their hands?" Bjorn questioned. Jayce nodded

and Astris frowned as she looked at the pair of them. "They're not the only ones here. But they're all the same type of assassin as Vexx," Jayce answered.

A rushed stumbling drew their attention behind them, a group of Marines bursting out onto the floor, Alara at their lead. "Oh thank goodness," she panted, catching her breath as she looked towards Jayce. "You waited," she added. "Where's the rest of you?" asked Cyrenna, hugging her sister. Jayce looked down. "Wicke got hurt, the others have their own objectives," Bjorn answered in his stead. "Jayce, I'm sorry." He shook it off, looking across the group. "Is Kask not with you?" Jayce asked. Alara shook her head and pointed back the way they had come. "He's holding the rear until our forces arrive."

Jayce nodded, turning to face the doors to the throne room. "Then let's finish this," he stated. Bjorn, Astris, Cyrenna, Beowulf, the Weapon, Wulf, and Alara all nodded in agreement. "For the Empire," the Marines stated. Jayce stepped forwards with Alara by his side, pushing open the doors together.

Seize the Seas Tales: Ignored Distress

"This is... of... Drop," came a patchy signal from afar, the seat next to the receiver empty – the Island of Duty shaking as another barrage of cannon fire hit it. "I repeat, this... Lieutenant Vanto, please come in!" echoed the voice in the empty room. "Dammit!" came the panicked voice. "Please... Headquarters... respond!" The island shook once more, dust and rubble falling from the ceiling and knocking the receiver onto the floor.

"Capital, respond! Someone... come through... Frontier!"

Chapter 148: Break-in/Breakout

Thalia, Ordo, Zeta and Yuthura raced across the Capital towards the bridge leading to the Isle of Duty. Enemies were everywhere, having either fallen back from the cracked Iron Wall or having been placed there deliberately - the group didn't know. Ordo took it all in as they ran, his mind racing as he thought about how the defences had been placed. It was going too well. Jayce had shattered the wall, as was expected, and now the Marines and their allies were landing their forces on the Capital, but the Navy was in disarray. They had been caught completely unaware by Truth's triple cross, something Ordo had known was coming.

Antlers had re-joined the Navy after awakening his ability to transform at will, along with a select few others - Barome, Armstrong and Brawne - some thirty years ago. He had been fighting for the baned, the therians, all that time; filtering and transferring them into the Marines - his faction - to keep them away from the Church and to give them the chance to live free lives. Ordo shook his head, drawing a look of distinct curiosity from Yuthura as Thalia painted the streets with the blood of the Warlock's monsters blocking their path.

"Don't conk out on me now, young man," she checked. Ordo chuckled, nodding and pushing forwards. He looked up to the rooftops, a pair of Killers watching them, but not intervening. He sighed, Cynane had been one of them, one of his students, a long time ago. She knew Truth was therian, and was the closest person to Cassandra - other than Philip - back on the Hawk. She would have known his betrayal was inevitable - especially after the Necropolis was revealed to the world. Yet she had likely vouched for him. Why? To what end? Ordo didn't know, but he couldn't help but feel they had all fallen for a colossal trap - or their allies on the inside had been far more successful than they could have ever hoped for.

They arrived at the bridge between the two islands; the guard posts across them lay in flames, a heavy bombardment having shattered the guns and collapsing parts of the bridge. Ordo opened the pouch Yuthura had given him before the battle, it was full of thick syringes with colourful chemicals inside. "Do not overuse them," she warned once again. "They could damage your heart." He nodded, a feeling of exhaustion already ingrained across his body. Yuthura threw down a small glass ball, releasing a sweet-smelling blue smoke that eased the exhaustion. "They are a last resort."

“Hurry up!” Zeta called back to them, Thalia unstopping in her charge towards the Citadel. The few remaining forces along the bridge all found themselves on the vicious side of her huge anchor, as she leapt across huge gaps in a mad frenzy. The other three were a little slower, with Ordo throwing Yuthura and Zeta across gaps too large for them to leap across, but eventually they found Thalia waiting for them – somewhat – as she assaulted a gun tower.

Screams drew their attention to her location, rapid gunshots echoing from within, along with flashes across the windows, before they were covered with a thick coat of blood, or a corpse crashed through a wall. Thalia grinned as the gunshots rang out, the noise thundering in her ears and the danger surging her adrenaline. She swung her anchor into another gunner before she looked upwards, seeing through her Focus countless more above her. “Boring!” she roared, swinging her anchor into a loadbearing wall, the entire tower falling apart with her inside.

The tower Thalia was in collapsed in a great plume of smoke and dust, Zeta coughing as it blasted her face. When the dust settled, Thalia walked towards them – for the most part unscathed, other than an odd graze or two. Yuthura scowled, noticing a fragment of a bullet embedded in her shoulder. “Stand still!” she scolded, forcing Thalia to stand still as her eyes darted across the Isle of Duty for more prey. “I’m fine! I’m fine! Ow!” she yelped, as Yuthura pulled it out of her before taking the wound for herself. “You’ve been slacking on your defensive training,” Ordo warned.

Zeta looked at the pair of old people scolding and coddling Thalia, frustration filling her. Despite the fact that Thalia had charged likely countless rifles and probably been hit by more than a few dozen shots, they were fretting over the one that had left a mark. “She’s fine,” Zeta stated, standing up for Thalia as she looked down in shame. “No,” Ordo stated, turning on Zeta. “A lucky shot from a Focus-enhanced bullet could kill her. We’re not invincible, you need to think on who your enemy is and tailor your tactics to it. Especially for you, little princess.”

Zeta scowled, brushing the dust out of her hair and dress. Thalia cleared her throat. “Thank you, Doc,” she said quietly. “I will try to use my head, old man.” The seniors nodded, Ordo stepping forwards and leading the way towards the entrance of the Navy Headquarters. Thalia stayed behind for a moment, taking deep breaths as she composed herself. “You okay?” Zeta asked her. Thalia smiled down at her and nodded. “Yeah, just cooling my head – you know?” Thalia stated. Zeta nodded and placed a reassuring hand on Thalia’s shoulder. “They

are right," Thalia added. "I appreciate you saying something, but... I've got to protect you." Thalia looked almost bashful. "Jayce said so," she added.

Zeta laughed and smiled. "Of course, my dear barbarian. But trust yourself, you're strong, and not an idiot." Thalia smiled at Zeta and then nodded, hefting her anchor and striding after the others. Zeta looked down at her feet, kicking a small rock. "Of course he did," she said with a smile before letting out a sigh. "Why is it always meatheads that I fall for?" she questioned, an explosion startling her and dragging her back to the war raging around her.

Ordo led them away from the main entrance, placing his hand to a concealed entranceway. Glowing orange lines traced themselves across the stone before a doorway opened. "Stay close," he advised, stepping inside. The inside was dark: there was next to no lighting other than a faint red glow. "Where are we?" Zeta asked as the doorway closed behind them. "Near the main storage lockers, we're low down, but there's several paths we can take that will take us up to the main atrium. We need to then follow the main spiral down to the basement, the vaults are there."

"How do we get inside the vaults? You don't have access – right?" Zeta questioned. "You'll have to disable any magical wards, Thalia can then punch a hole," Yuthura answered. Zeta didn't look particularly confident about that plan. "You remember the spells Wicke taught you, right?" Yuthura pushed. Zeta fumbled inside her bag, pulling out a small notebook and flicking through. "Great..." Yuthura said with a sigh. "How else can we get inside?" she asked, looking at Ordo. "An Admiral would have access," he answered. "It's unlikely any will be here, but their offices might have something we could use." "Then let's go," Thalia interjected, stepping forwards. Ordo cleared his throat and she turned to look at him as he pointed down a different passageway. She forced a smile and gestured for him to lead on.

"This way," Ordo stated, leading them past a giant empty room full of communication devices and typewriters and into a large briefing room connecting to several other passageways. The group immediately stopped as they heard a voice. "Are you sure about this?" said the voice of a woman. "Yeah, of course, it's the perfect time – in and out and no one will notice. We can then report to Admiral Exarga of our contributions, take a medal or two and then enjoy the sun on our backs and as much se—"

Zeta stepped out from the thin wall they had all hidden behind, her eyes wide as she recognised one of the voices. Immediately a gun was pointed towards her

and a sword was drawn. "Delta?" Zeta questioned, staring in disbelief at a woman in a wheelchair with short blue hair and a pair of round glasses. A man wearing sunglasses stood behind her, a pistol in one hand, another by his belt. He had scruffy brown hair, and thick stubble across his jaw - his body well-built under a set of casual clothes. "Zeta," gasped her sister, Marine Commander Delta Vao.

"Zeta?" questioned Captain John Onasi, lowering his pistol as Zeta rushed forwards and embraced her sister. "What are you doing here?" he questioned, looking directly towards the other Rising Aces emerging from cover. "The same could be said to you, Onasi," Ordo stated. Onasi let out a chuckle and scratched his head. "Chief, of course you're still alive. I'm glad to hear," Onasi said with a grin. "Don't be cute, Marine, explain," Ordo countered. Onasi turned from Ordo to Yuthura. "We never got a chance to thank you personally, Doctor, I hope you received our letters," he stated, ignoring Ordo and taking Yuthura's hands. "A gentlemen," she stated with surprise. Both Zeta and Delta scoffed. "Find me when this is over and I'll see what can be done about your eyes. And you, young lady, how's your legs?"

"Better, mostly. A few more doses still to take, and we'll see," Delta said with a smile. Onasi stepped away from Yuthura towards Thalia. "Woah, hello there," he attempted. "Ahem," uttered Delta, Onasi retreating back to her side. "Sorry dear." He then turned to Ordo. "We're hoping to get into the vault, but I'm guessing you're of the same mind, right Chief?" Ordo nodded, folding his arms. "You two shouldn't be anywhere near here - it's a warzone and you're both still injured. How did you even get through the blockade?" Ordo questioned. "We arrived before the Iron Wall was formed and stayed in the city amongst the other civilians," Delta answered. Ordo nodded in acknowledgment but Zeta folded her arms.

"Are you insane?" she yelled. "Do you know stupid that was?" she scolded. Delta rolled her eyes. "Sister, relax. Besides, you're fighting a war in a dress - I think of the pair of us you have far littler ground to stand on - and I struggle to walk." The pair began to bicker, but throughout the noise, Ordo, Thalia and Onasi all heard something. "Quiet," stated Onasi, drawing his second pistol. "We have company."

A loud scraping drew their attention to a figure entering the room from a passageway, a large bastard sword dragging across the floor behind him. He wore a bright pink suit decorated with medals and adorned with pieces of gold.

He stepped into the room and placed a heavy boot onto a huge table, sending it sliding across the room and crashing into a wall with a single kick. "Boyce," growled Ordo, Thalia's entire body vibrating as she stared at a man emanating nothing other than an incarnate feeling of death.

Vice-Admiral Keppel Boyce stood facing them all, a large group of Navy dressed in black uniforms rushing in behind him, along with Priests, Warlocks and several smaller dog-like monsters. "Well well well, thieves and traitors, in my Navy base? What a surprise," he stated. He was a giant man, nearing seven-foot in height, with huge shoulders, arms and legs. He had spiral tattoos all across his jaw, his skin a dark brown colour. A small goatee sat on his chin, the dark hair on his head short and curly.

"And what is the great Vice-Admiral of Defence doing here? Shouldn't you be defending the Empire?" Ordo questioned, his hands on his greatclub as he eyed the numbers of his enemies – twenty to six, likely more nearby. "Ordo, the battle is already won – you just don't know it yet. I've been assured by greater powers, so I trust in the Gods above and the Fleet Admiral's grand design. That means ensuring we don't lose the basis of our military – our coffers. Unfortunately for you, that means your adventures end here. Die valiantly, Old Dog - I'll be sure to mention you in my memoirs."

The Navy around him yelled a battle cry, surging forwards with their swords drawn as the Priests and Warlocks began to chant. "He's mine!" Thalia declared loudly, ignoring the Navy and charging straight at Vice-Admiral Boyce. "Cover me!" called out Zeta, turning her magical instrument into a violin and beginning to play. Yuthura threw down a red smoke bomb, all of the groups' senses heightening as their bodies filled with adrenaline. Onasi started to fire his pistols, sensing his enemies through his Focus, as Delta stood up from her chair – sword in hand.

Ordo threw his greatclub at the group of Navy, battering several sailors as he drew an autoinjector from his bag and jabbed it into his leg. His muscles tensed, his lungs crushing the air inside him and forcing him to take sharp, grunting breaths. His skin flushed red, his veins threatening to pop out of his body. His eyes sharpened, widening and darting around until he locked onto the Warlocks and Priests.

Ordo lunged forwards, the floor cracking beneath his feet as he pushed off the ground, snatching his flailing greatclub – still sailing through the air – and hefting it above his head. He roared as he slammed it down and through the nearest

Warlock, their body crunching into themselves as he removed a dimension from them, flattening them. A chain reaction of failing spells surged around him, his monstrous form terrifying all who stood nearby, stunning the various Mages as they suffered the consequences to their lapse in concentration. They didn't live to repeat their mistakes.

Thalia thundered her way around the room as she and Vice-Admiral Boyce assaulted one another. He vexed her, his defence unbreakable and counters deadly. She swung her anchor in a wide sweep, holding onto its chain to rapidly adjust its distance in an attempt to surprise him. The attack cleared a huge gap in the room for them to fight in – any fool caught in the sweeping strike immediately meeting a brutalising demise as they were sent flying across the room. But Boyce stepped into the range of the attack, using his sword to catch the chain and send her own anchor back at her as it pivoted around him.

Thalia ducked, letting the anchor keep on swinging in a hope of wrapping the Admiral, but he just switched onto the offensive, pressing her lapse in defence to land a sharp blow across her shoulder – drawing blood before kicking her backwards. Thalia crashed through a table, rolling to her feet before having to dive out of the way as Admiral Boyce lunged at her with his sword. "For someone people claim is one of the strongest fighters alive, you do a lot of running," he goaded. She yelled, surging forwards and wielding her anchor like a greataxe with several heavy swings.

For a giant man, Boyce was terrifyingly agile, weaving between strikes like a boxer before slamming a heavy fist into Thalia's side. She doubled over, the air knocked out of her as he raised his sword to finish her off. "Thalia!" yelled Zeta, throwing her instrument across the room – the violin harmlessly bouncing off Boyce's head, but stunning him for the briefest of moments. He growled as Thalia stood up, following with a sharp kick to the same spot he had punched, sending her and her weapon bouncing across the floor. He then rounded on Zeta. "Enough of your petulant games!" he growled, striding towards her with his sword in both hands and a look of fury on his face. "The Fleet Admiral will have to be content with two less grandchildren!" he roared, hefting his sword.

Zeta stared up at the blade, her eyes wide as the bloody sword glinted in the low light. She stumbled back, falling to the floor and raising her hands defensively as she braced for the killing blow. She heard her name echo around the room, called from several others too far away to save her. In an instant, her life passed before her eyes: a series of great adventures, some success as a performer, but her

dreams of standing on the stage before thousands unachieved. She shut her eyes, accepting the end.

A splash of hot red blood decorated her face and body, a shadow standing over her and a pair of arms spread wide protectively in front of her. Zeta stared up in horror at the silhouette guarding her, a figure with long brown hair that had fallen loose from her braids. A defiant smile was on her face, hidden from Zeta as she faced Vice-Admiral Boyce. Her top had been cut open, the bottom half falling to the floor as it slid down her waist and legs.

Thalia's smile faded as Boyce delivered a heavy backhand across her jaw, the diagonal cut made from the bottom of left ribs to the top of her right hip opening up as the upper half of her body tore free and fell to the floor with a crash, followed by her legs. "Thalia!" screamed Zeta, staring in horror at the lethal wound delivered to her, her blood gushing out of her as she lay on the floor, desperately trying to move. "Pathe-"

Ordo tackled Boyce, the pair of them crashing through a wall into a neighbouring room. They separated, rolling away from each other, their weapons lost in the rubble. "You're next old man!" Boyce yelled. Ordo screamed, rushing at Boyce without care or thought. Boyce caught his heavy blow, returning a sharp elbow that dazed Ordo. Boyce didn't leave him to stagger, pressing forwards and moving behind Ordo before grabbing his waist and slamming him over his head into the ground.

"Thalia! Thalia! Oh Gods! Thalia, please stay with me!" Zeta sobbed, dragging Thalia's heavy legs to her torso and then lifting her head onto her lap. Thalia's eyes rolled in her head before she forced them onto Zeta, her skin ghostly pale. "Zeta..." she said weakly. Zeta leant down towards her, placing her forehead to Thalia's until a body pushed her aside. "Move!" Yuthura yelled, drawing her philosopher's stone and holding it over Thalia's torso as she drew a large alchemical circle around her using Thalia's pool of blood. "Guard us!" Yuthura ordered, handing Zeta her crossbow and a few syringes, before chanting - a green smoke flowing out of her palms as she reached inside Thalia's body and forced organs back together.

Zeta stared in stunned shock until a loud gunshot drew her back to the battle still raging around them, her sister and Onasi fighting to defend them. She stood up, loading the crossbow and firing a bolt straight into a Priest's forehead. Thalia burbled something, blood pouring out of her mouth. "Shut up!" Yuthura commanded, hooking up blood bag after blood bag to Thalia's body. "You don't

get to quit living! I am Yuthura, a Doctor of the Rising Aces and I have fought death more times than you have killed! And I hate to lose!" she cried.

Thalia's vision was red, dark and blurry, her attention focused on Yuthura as she hung over her. Her expression was fierce, but tears streamed down her wrinkled face from her purple eyes. Thalia felt nothing other than a deep sense of discomfort and an unbearable cold, but slowly she felt a rekindling warmth, and a numbness in her foot. Her vision cleared slightly as Yuthura turned away and retched blood, but she wiped her mouth and turned back, continuing to work inside of Thalia.

Finally she sat back, a pained expression of relief on her face as she stabbed herself with several autoinjectors and turned towards Zeta, holding her hands over Thalia's two halves. "Doc, don't give me that look!" Zeta cried, seeing a very dangerous expression on Yuthura's face. "Sorry kiddo. It's on you now, Zeta," Yuthura declared, an electric jolt passing through her hands into Thalia – her muscle, bone and viscera knitting together in an instant, a large ring of bisected skin remaining over her regenerated insides.

Yuthura toppled over, tearing apart at the waist as she took Thalia's wound for herself. Her body attempted to regenerate and hold itself together, but the wound was too grievous. "What the fuck, Doc!" Zeta screamed, dropping to her knees and desperately holding Yuthura together as she fell into immediate unconsciousness from the shock of the pain. Thalia sat straight up, her eyes wide in shock before she immediately turned towards Zeta and Yuthura. "What the hell is wrong with both of you?" Zeta screamed, Thalia grabbing a weapon and joining Onasi and Delta – even as a fold of her carved, bloody skin hung down across her waist, revealing her muscle underneath.

Ordo grunted as he crawled across the floor towards his greatclub. A heavy foot crashed into his side, sending him sliding away from his weapon. "I don't think so!" growled Vice-Admiral Boyce, breathing heavily as he stumbled towards his own sword next to the hole in the wall they had made. "Now, normally I would just kill you, but I want it to be slow and the others with you could prove more of a problem than a broken old man. Wait here, or die alone in quiet – I no longer care, Chief!"

He cracked his neck and began to walk away. Ordo gasped in pain as he tried to push his chest off the floor, only for his arms to give out and his body to slump onto the ground. He lay there for what felt like a cold eternity. Everything hurt, but his mind couldn't focus on anything other than Thalia – the young girl he

had sailed with all those years ago. A stubborn child, far brighter than she was given credit for – and deserving of a future better than being betrayed by those around her. His eyes shut on their own - perhaps it was for the best... he'd never had a family of his own, and although she'd never been his daughter – she'd come pretty close. This way they could go onto whatever came next together.

His heartbeat thundered in his head, a slow and steady pulse, getting quieter and quieter. "We'll have to wait to apologise to Jayce," he thought, his Captain's ability to speak with the dead something he had always found disconcerting. "Jayce?" Ordo questioned. "Jayce..." Ordo pondered. "Jayce!" he realised, his eyes snapping open. If he was going to die, he refused to do so laying down. Ordo rolled onto his back, opening the pouch Yuthura had given him – four more doses inside. "Sorry Doc," he muttered, grabbing two in each hand and injecting them into his chest. His back arched, his body spasming and his skin turning bright red as his muscles swelled and threatened to tear his body apart. His mouth hung open, his eyes towards Boyce as he faded through a cloud of dust into the next room.

A growling scream pierced the air, drawing Zeta, Thalia, Onasi and Delta's attention towards Boyce as he emerged from a cloud of dust leading to another room, his sword scraping across the floor next to him as he limped. "Ordo," Zeta gasped, recognising the scream. Onasi fired off four shots at Boyce – the Vice-Admiral using his sword to block three of them, the fourth catching his forearm. He roared and staggered forwards, only for a monster to tackle him from behind, grabbing the back of his head and slamming him to the floor before pummeling him into the stone

Ordo roared, savagely beating the Admiral long after his body stopped moving. "Stop! Stop!" yelled Thalia, tackling Ordo and holding him away, grabbing his head in a lock and pulling him away from the Admiral's corpse. Ordo snarled, his entire body pulsing as his heartbeat thundered through his swollen muscles and rushing blood. "Ordo! Ordo!" she cried, hugging his body tightly as he fought against her. "Please," she said quietly. "Fight it."

Ordo's flailing slowed, his heartbeat still thumping through his entire body and visible underneath his clothes. But the madness faded from his thin brown eyes and his body relaxed. He wheezed as he breathed, taking in deep agonal breaths as he slowly looked towards Thalia, a look of relief crossing his face. "You're alive," he said with a pained smile, as she continued to hold him. Thalia smiled weakly, nodding as she pressed her head into his sweaty neck. "We both are,"

she returned, before both of their eyes snapped open. "Doc!" they both realised, surging forwards to Yuthura's side as she lay on the floor, still mostly in two halves – connected only by growing strands of sinew.

She looked dead, but her chest was slowly rising and falling, a steady breathing coming from her as she slowly pieced herself back together. "Oh my!" Delta exclaimed, limping back to her wheelchair as the battlefield fell silent. "What? What's going on?" Onasi questioned, looking around as he stowed his pistols. Zeta looked towards Thalia and Ordo, wiping tears and blood from her face as she breathed a sigh of relief. "We won, but Doc's down for now," she stated. "And you both need to get medical attention," she added, looking at Thalia's exposed muscle and Ordo's red skin. "Agreed, but let's finish the mission first," Ordo stated, walking over to Vice-Admiral Boyce's body and removing the head.

Thalia remained by Yuthura's side as the rest of them moved away from the room, heading straight to the vaults. They stood outside of the doors, pressing the Admiral's severed head and hand into a receptacle in the stone before tossing it away as the doors rumbled open, revealing a mountain of pearl, gemstones and metal bars, countless magical items, and schematics for weapons and ship designs. "Holy..." Zeta muttered, her eyes shining in the reflection of the coin, a wide grin on her face. Ordo had no such expression, simply reaching to his belt and grabbing a bottomless bag before hoovering up the insides of the vault. "So much for our plan," muttered Onasi, walking around the empty vault before turning on Ordo and Zeta. "It's probably for the best," admitted Delta with a smile, taking her sister's hand and nodding approvingly.

"You two should get out of here, find somewhere to hide, or even better, leave the Capital if possible – at least until this is settled," Zeta warned. Delta nodded. "Agreed, we have a boat outside, hopefully it's still intact. What are you going to do little sister? You could come with us," Delta suggested, a genuine look of concern on her face as she saw the blood across Zeta's face and body. Zeta shook her head, looking towards Ordo as he stood wheezing next to her. "No, I have to get these morons back to the ship. They'd all be lost without me."

Delta smiled. "Okay. Stay safe, we'll find each other when this is all over." Onasi looked across Zeta and Ordo. "I'll look after her, I promise," he reassured. Zeta and Delta both rolled their eyes. "I think we all know who looks after who," Zeta returned. "Ouch," Onasi said with a smile, taking the handles on Delta's wheelchair and beginning to wheel her away. Zeta watched them for a moment before her eyes widened and she fumbled for her own bottomless bag, reaching

inside and pulling out her large coin bag. "Delta, wait!" she cried, racing after them and thrusting almost all of her personal wealth into her sister's hands. "It may just be the two of us now, I don't have any faith in our parents siding with us. Please take it."

Delta looked down at the large bag in her hands. "Zeta..." she said softly. Zeta leant down and hugged her sister. "Stay safe, big sis. I'll make it big, and you'll have backstage passes waiting for you. I promise," she said, backing away from Delta and running back to Ordo before her gift could be refused. "We'll be waiting!" Delta called after her, the pair of them disappearing into the darkness as they made their way to the exit.

"Ready?" Ordo questioned, picking up Yuthura in his arms and preparing to run as fast as he could. Zeta and Thalia looked at each other, a genuine smile spreading between the pair of them before Zeta leapt into Thalia's arms. "Forwards! Let's go home!" Zeta declared.

Seize the Seas Tales: An Alternate Life

The Iron Wall burned around the Capital, the sun falling down towards the ocean, as Zoya stood on the balcony of the Emperor's throne room, leaning against the railing and watching the battle. "Zoya, dear," chided the Pope from inside, but she ignored him. He had the Fleet Admiral and the three Warlock Grandmasters to entertain himself. That and the Emperor himself as he sat in cuffs by the base of the throne.

She let out a long sigh, looking down and shaking her head. She hated waiting, but everything was out of her hands... as it always had been, ever since her parents had died. "Soon," she said quietly, looking up and scanning the ocean – spotting the Stacked Hand amongst the chaos. She reached out and held it in her palm. "Soon it will all be over and all will be mine. The world will be mine at last."

"Zoya!" called the Pope with a bit more anger. Again she ignored him. There was no point wasting time on the dead. Instead, she lowered her hand and leant onto her forearms, her mind floating away into her memories. She thought about her first meeting with Jayce and his crew – the fun she had and the kindness they had shown her. Her face fell, replaced by sadness as she thought back to his offer for her to stay with him.

She shook her head. It never could have been, he himself had said it. But her mind flashed with images of him in the moonlight, the pair of them talking late at night,

the way she had leant towards him without thought, and the way he had leant into her... before he pulled away. Her face scrunched itself with pained embarrassment and frustration, and deep regret. She could have had it all then, all with a single kiss.

He could have been here by her side, looking over their empire together after he had freed her from those crones who had tortured and manipulated her. Or... she shook her head. It wouldn't have happened - could never have happened. She lowered her head, her eyes brimming with silent tears as she imagined a life had she stayed with him – dared to take his hand when he offered it. Had she become his Ace, what would the world have been like for her... for them?

She watched the skies as they darkened, an odd tear or two falling away into the smoky wind as she thought about what could have been. She looked down, watching fighting beneath her as a group raced towards the Imperial Palace. Jayce stood at their lead. It was almost over. She had to live with the reality. Fate had led to this path. It was her path to walk alone, no one was coming to save her... not even Jayce Exarga.

Chapter 149: The Broken Paladin

Arthuria didn't know whether or not to scream or to cry or to find something to smash. The only thing she did know, as she ran through the Imperial Palace in the direction of the Daughters of Shade Crypt with Mai Lu on her back, was that she hated everything she had stumbled into. The fact that she had broken her oath to spare a Demon girl. The fact that Elder Jeanne d'Arc was somewhere in the Palace being readied for a public execution. The fact that Morgana was somewhere within this war – and potentially already dead. The fact that the Sisters, of all people, were assassins in servitude to the Emperor. She hated it. It disgusted her and she had never felt so betrayed or spat upon by the Gods themselves – if they even existed and weren't just more Demons.

She raced down the stairs leading to the Crypt, a reverberating energy rumbling across the dark stone beneath her feet, a ghoulish chant singing through the passageway leading to the Witch's library. Mai Lu hopped off her back of her own accord, faltering as they stood outside of the final door. "What's wrong?" Arthuria asked, looking down at the child. "The ritual must be stopped, before it absorbs the souls of everyone around. I'll handle the Witches whilst you figure out how to stop it," she stated, biting her wrist to draw blood before creating a large crystal sword. She presented it to Arthuria, who took it with a look of disgust.

"Doesn't it make more sense for you to try to disable the ritual? Baal surely knows far more on magic than I do," Arthuria suggested. Mai Lu shook her head emphatically. "With all due respect, you're incredibly weak. You have no magic other than what the Sisters taught you, you're relying on a sword which I've made for you, and there's going to a lot of guards inside. You will die quickly and then they'll bombard me. Maybe Baal will stop the ritual and save everyone, but we'll both be dead in the process."

Arthuria grumbled an acknowledgment of understanding before turning to the wooden door, pressing the owl token in the centre. The door grated against its stone braces as it was lifted up, its chains rattling as it revealed the final set of uneven stone steps leading to the library. "Do not hesitate, regardless of who stands in your way," warned Mai Lu, her childish façade completely gone. "I won't," Arthuria stated, charging forwards.

A maelstrom swirled in the centre of the library, throwing books and paper around, as beams of purple and green twisted and spiralled upwards from each of the ten rings that made up the ritual circle. The three Councillors of the

Daughters of Shade stood in the centre, chanting as a ball of bubbling white energy floated above them. Numerous Witches stood around the room, observing the ritual. Arthuria let out an unconscious gasp of relief as she spotted Morgana stood amongst them.

“Morgana!” Arthuria yelled out, drawing her immediate attention with a look of surprise – as well as the rest of the room. “A Paladin, kill her! The ritual must not be stopped!” yelled a Witch that was presumably in charge. Mai Lu growled, scratching her arms and drawing blood before creating several large pointed tendrils. “Go!” she ordered to Arthuria, flinging several large shards of crystalised blood at the Witches as they took to the air on broomsticks and chanted spells.

Arthuria dashed forwards, vaulting over the ledge overlooking the library and dropping to the floor below. She surged towards the ritual circle, sword drawn as she prepared to strike down the Councillors. The air sizzled around her, her eyes widening as she heard a voice. “Stop!” screamed Morgana, Arthuria skidding to a halt. The tip of her blade crossed the edge of the circle, the blood melting and then boiling away as it touched the circle of pure energy. “Okay,” Arthuria stated exasperatedly, “that’s not good.”

Arthuria dived to the side as a bolt of green energy sailed past her, a Daughter of Shade rushing towards her with a wand in hand. Arthuria lunged at her, grabbing her and throwing her into the ritual circle. But the Witch rolled across the floor and then got back to her feet, unaffected by the circle. She then began to chant, throwing another spell in Arthuria’s direction. Arthuria swung her sword into it, the blade shattering and leaving her defenceless.

“Morgana, this has to be stopped before it’s too late!” Arthuria screamed, looking away for a moment in her sister’s direction. A bolt hit her chestplate, sending her sliding across the floor, the metal cracking. “It’s too late!” Morgana cried back. The Witch rounding on Arthuria faltered, turning and looking at Morgana. “Traitor!” she cried out, turning her wand on her. Morgana held up her hands and shook her head. “No, no!” she said quickly, but the Witch launched a spell at her. A glass-like shield wrapped itself around Morgana as a bolt of shadow sailed at her, the shield shattering and a glyph painted on her body fading away into nothingness.

The Witch began to chant once again but Morgana pointed forwards with her own wand, a raven diving across the room and piercing the Witch’s eye before burrowing far enough inside that her body seized up and then slumped to the

floor. "You just have to ruin everything for me!" Morgana yelled at her sister, storming over to Arthuria as she got to her feet. Arthuria shook her head, grabbing Morgana into a tight hug only to then push her away as a rattling of spells peppered the spot where they had been standing.

They turned to face their aggressors, but a giant wall of red-black crystal erupted from the floor, sealing off that side of the room. Arthuria raced forwards to the ritual circle, looking it over and desperately searching for symbols she recognised. There were several glyphs creating a series of wards surrounding the Councillors, sealing them inside and keeping out those not recognised as friends. She also recognised symbols indicating souls, vessels, and containment. Arthuria's eyes went wide and she turned on her sister.

"Morgana, it's not too late. We can change the circle! Please, so many people will die!" Arthuria begged. Morgana shook her head and Arthuria stepped towards the circle with her hand outreached. She screamed as her skin began to burn away, pulling her hand back. "Only a Daughter of Shade can enter," Morgana stated, hastily drawing protective wards on herself. "Sister, please," Arthuria begged.

Morgana looked at Arthuria as she pleaded, desperation in her face as the room continued to fill with magical energy and the orb above the Councillors began to pulse. She shook her head and turned towards the ritual circle. "I can't believe I'm doing this for you!" she yelled, stepping into the ritual circle. It burned, her protective wards fighting against the magic as she pushes further and further inside. Morgana let out a quiet sigh, some wards were counting her as an enemy – that meant she'd likely be consumed in the ritual.

She pushed forwards through the walls of magic, searching the floor for any glyphs that were crucial to the stability of the ritual. Most were protective, several specified targets, others purpose, and one detailing distance. In its entirety the spell was quite incredible – a spell that would absorb the life of all beings within a two-hundred-and-fifty kilometre radius, concentrating it into a singular philosopher's stone – one without a limit. It had been designed to ignore any Daughter of Shade – granting them ultimate power over what remained.

A ring lit up behind her before falling dull – the circle closing in as it neared its final steps. Morgana tried to smear a glyph beneath her foot, but it remained untouched. "Not good, not good!" she stated, the ring closing in once more and cutting off several glyphs she had been hoping to meddle with. She thought and looked desperately, another of the ten rings closing in. She stumbled forwards,

her skin burning, but her mind focused. She drew a knife from her belt, cutting her wrist and dropping to the floor as she painted over a glyph before moving to another – the three Councillors oblivious to her presence as she crawled towards them. Another ring collapsed, the ritual seconds away from completion. Morgana scowled, changing the nearest glyph she could. “I hope I’m wrong,” she muttered, flipping the target of the spell – potentially damning herself.

Arthuria stood on the outside, unable to enter the wards, even as the ring of energy closed in on the Councillors and the orb above them. Morgana was on the floor, crawling towards them, but she stopped and sat up, turning and looking at Arthuria with a desperate expression. She shook her head. “I’m sorry,” she said, finishing her glyph. Arthuria’s body went cold as she guessed what Morgana had done. “Morgana, no!” she screamed, the circle closing in completion.

The orb pulsed once before it detonated, expanding outwards in a clear bubble. The three Councillors breathed a sigh of relief, stepping away as it slowly spread out, but as it touched them their faces fell in horror – their skin turning greyer before beginning to crack as they froze in place. The bubble continued to expand, picking up speed with every inch and passing through Morgana, Mai Lu, Arthuria and the other Witches. It spread past the room, covering the island in a matter of seconds and spreading far beyond before it retracted in the blink of an eye. As it collapsed, the second wave shattered the Witches it had drained, turning them to piles of ash.

Arthuria took a sharp gasp of air as her life returned to her, a loud clink and the rattling of broomsticks echoing around the silent chamber as a large red orb fell to the floor in the centre of room. Morgana lay on her side, as one of the three remaining bodies in the now empty room. “Morgana?” Arthuria questioned, racing to her side and rolling her over. “Ow!” she groaned, several patches of absent skin across her body. Arthuria breathed a sigh of relief, as did Morgana. “I’m alive?” she questioned. Arthuria nodded, wrapping her arms around her and holding her tightly as tears streamed down her face. “I’m alive,” Morgana gasped, hugging Arthuria back. “What did you do?” Arthuria questioned, when they released each other. “I just changed the symbol for ‘all except’ to ‘only’. I flipped the target so it only absorbed us – well, the Daughters of Shade. I guess I don’t count because I didn’t perform the ascension ritual like you told me to.”

Eventually, Mai Lu waltzed over, her body covered in rapidly healing wounds. “Well done, you saved us all,” she stated nonchalantly, scratching her head and

looking around. Morgana sat up and looked at Arthuria. "Who's this?" she asked. "Mai Lu, this is my sister Morgana. Morgana this is Mai Lu, host to the Demon known as Baal?" Arthuria stated, discarding her ruined chestplate and standing up. "Oh, uh, how do you do?" Morgana stated, not quite sure as to how to respond. Mai Lu ignored her, walking over to the orb in the centre of the room. "I wouldn't touch that if I were you," warned Morgana, getting to her feet. Mai Lu held her hands up and backed away. "Okay," she stated. "You should probably go and rescue your Elder," she added, looking at Arthuria.

Arthuria's eyes widened as she remembered that was also on a timer. "Oh Gods, Jeanne. Morgana, we need to go now," Arthuria stated, turning and heading towards the exit with Mai Lu in tow. Morgana looked down at the red orb: souls swirled beneath its surface – the entire coven of the Daughters of Shade. She sighed and shook her head. "Oh well," she said quietly, taking off her cloak and wrapping up the ball before placing it in a backpack she found next to a fallen broomstick and running after Arthuria and Mai Lu.

They returned to the surface, exhausted from the climb and the previous battle. Arthuria forced it down, pushing through her pain and fatigue as she strode towards the Court of Oaths – the place where Jeanne would almost definitely be taken for execution. "This seems like a bad idea," Morgana muttered, as she followed after Arthuria with Mai Lu next to her. "Do we have a plan?" she asked. Arthuria shook her head, stopping as she neared a bend in the corridor – the Court and its tree nearby, and a clamouring echoing from the area.

Arthuria thought to herself: she had no weapons, no oath, they were outnumbered but not outclassed. She turned and headed in a different direction, picking up her pace as she headed to the stairs leading to the overlooking walkway that hung over the Court of Oaths. "We have to be smart about it - follow close, stay quiet and don't risk anything," Arthuria warned, moving quickly and quietly.

The noise fell quiet and Arthuria's heart stopped. She hurried forwards, keeping low until she spotted a Paladin Knight watching the event from above. Arthuria crept up behind him, channelling her Focus into her hands, into her fingers. She grabbed his helmet, pulling it back before she forced her fingers into his neck, curled them around his throat and then yanking out his windpipe. She caught his corpse, lowering him to the ground before taking his sword out of its sheath. She looked back towards Mai Lu and Morgana – the pair of them crouched nearby and watching. Arthuria then tilted her head, glancing towards another

guard stood almost directly over the Tree of Oaths. Arthuria dispatched that Knight using her new blade, sliding it in and under his breastplate in a surprise strike, similarly catching his body and lowering it silently to the floor. The blade got stuck, so she replaced it. Cautiously, she stood up and looked over the edge.

The Court of Oaths was full of at least a hundred Knights, all stood orderly as they observed the execution about to take place. They were stood across the cobblestone courtyard, all looking towards the Tree of Oaths as it stood on its small island surrounding by its large pond. The Order was far larger than the group assembled, so Arthuria immediately questioned where the rest had gone. A loud explosion shook the entire Palace. "Farah, take twenty men, go and assist the others!" ordered the furious voice of Sentinel Gilles de Rais. A Paladin at the front of the collection raised his sword and lifted it to the night sky, turning and selecting a group of Knights before rushing off to join the battle.

Arthuria gasped as she looked towards the Tree of Oaths. Elder Jeanne d'Arc knelt in front of it, with Sentinels Metz, Dunois and Pasquerel all next to her. Their hands were chained behind them, their armour and weapons removed. Sentinels Baudricourt, Dauphin and Cauchon had their weapons drawn and stood behind the chained Sentinels. Sentinel Rais stood in front of all of them, Cardinal Beauford by his side.

"And so your time comes to an end," stated Elder Gilles de Rais, looking down at Jeanne. "I give you one last chance, confess to your crimes. Admit your betrayal," he stated, nodding to Beauford - who stepped forwards to the water's edge. "Paladins, I stand before you today with the confession of Elder Jeanne d'Arc!" he called out. "She stands accused of heresy, treachery, treason..." Jeanne ignored it all, her head down, her eyes to the floor as she sat in the shadow of the tree she had built her order around.

Rais stepped forwards, grabbing her throat and forcing her to look up at him. "No, no, no, no, no - don't look away!" he growled viscerally, his red eyes glowing with malice. Jeanne glanced towards the Tree of Oaths - it's white bark and cyan leaves looked as beautiful as ever, but her eyes locked onto the sword embedded in the diamond-shaped black stone contained within the trunk. The sword in the stone could be her saviour, if she got to it. She knew its name, and therefore could form an oath - she always had, but no champion of the Order had arisen to be worthy of it.

Gilles de Rais saw her eyes lock onto the sword, a smile stretching across his face as Beauford completed his list of accusations. "You still hold hope, good," he

stated, throwing her down. "You bastard! You won't get away with this!" yelled Metz, trying to get to his feet, only for Baudricourt to hold him down. "Won't I?" Rais questioned, as Jeanne sat up. "If it's my last act, I swear I will end you!" Metz added. "On the Elder's glory!" yelled Dunois and Pasquerel. Jeanne's eyes widened as she looked at her Sentinels, the ones who had stood by her. Metz looked to her, a smile of reassurance spreading across his bloody and bruised face.

"How terrifying," mocked Elder de Rais. "Here's what I think of it." Rais looked at his Sentinels and nodded. They raised their swords and struck down in unison. "No!" gasped Jeanne, as Metz, Dunois and Pasquerel were beheaded, their corpses remaining on their knees. "Pathetic," growled Baudricourt, stepping behind Jeanne and preparing for his next strike. Jeanne stared at the heads of her Sentinels, a splattering of Metz' blood on her cheek. "Their lives are on you, Elder," stated Rais, looking at the severed heads with apathy. Cardinal Beauford cleared his throat. "Elder, hurry this up – the Pope is expecting you and your faction. This has gone on long enough!" he demanded. Rais looked at Beauford with a flash of challenging anger, his hand on the hilt of his sword. But he let it go - his plans were almost complete, and he had no need to be vexed by a mere Cardinal. "Very well," he stated, drawing his own sword and stepping towards Jeanne.

Arthuria tried not to scream as Metz and the others were beheaded, but she was in the wrong spot to intervene, a wrong leap and she wouldn't be able to get to Jeanne in time. She thought desperately, how could she possibly win now? Her eyes locked with Metz's, as his head lay on the floor looking up at her – his face was full of surprise, his eyes wide, but as the last flicker of life left him, she could have sworn he saw her. His face softened, a faint smile in the corners of his mouth.

Arthuria leapt from the walkway, landing in the shallow water of the surrounding pond, another splash following behind as Mai Lu followed her. "What? Impossible!" questioned Baudricourt and the others, spotting her as she raced towards the Elder and Rais, his sword already in motion. Arthuria screamed, her sword too far away to save her. "Jeanne!" she cried, red-black crystals striking out at Cardinal Beauford and the Sentinels, forcing them back as they tried to intercept her.

Something flew past her from above, striking Rais in the hand and piercing straight through his gauntlet – it looked like an arrow. Arthuria dove into him,

sending him bouncing off the Tree of Oaths as she then grabbed Jeanne. Mai Lu leapt next to them, creating a tight sphere of black-red crystal that surrounded them. She made the inside glow slightly, the three of them pressed together. "Elder," Arthuria said with relief, trying to open her shackles only to fail. Arthuria then placed the chain on the floor and used her blade to cut through it, by stabbing downwards through the link.

"You're here, you came for me?" Jeanne said in quiet disbelief, grabbing onto Arthuria the second her arms were freed. "Of course I did," Arthuria said immediately, holding her back. "As touching as this is, we have bigger issues," stated Mai Lu, the orb around them shaking as it was bombarded by spells and hit with swords. "The barrier won't last long. Do you have a plan, Arthuria?" Mai Lu asked desperately.

Arthuria looked down at Jeanne, her body small and more frail than she'd ever seen, but it was her eyes that worried Arthuria most: they were full of depressed defeat. Arthuria thrust the pommel of her borrowed sword into Jeanne's hands, a strange voice whispering in the back of her mind – a voice calling to her from outside the orb. "Jeanne, we need to fight. I need you to fight with me," Arthuria asked. Jeanne looked down at the blade, and she softly shook her head. "It's all over, Arthuria."

"No, it's not!" Arthuria yelled, the voice continuing to call and the orb beginning to crack. "If the Order is just the two of us, then so be it. As long as we're still alive, then Metz, Dunois and Pasquerel live with us, the Order lives with us! It's not over, I refuse to let those arseholes go unpunished. You gave me a mission, now I'm giving you one: fight! Fight and live, so the Order can carry on with you!" Jeanne looked up at her as Arthuria took command. "Okay," she said quietly, nodding in acceptance and taking a deep breath and shutting her eyes. When they opened again, her green eyes returned with a fiery, righteous fury. Arthuria looked towards Mai Lu, her face pale and nose dripping blood. "I'll do what I can," she said weakly.

"Fight for the right to survive," echoed the voice in Arthuria's mind. "Call my name," it asked. Jeanne got into a crouched and ready position, Arthuria and Mai Lu doing the same. "Take the sword in the stone," Jeanne told her. "His name is Caliburn." The crystal ball exploded outwards, sending large shards flying at the Knights that had moved to surround it. Mai Lu weaved the shards, drawing more blood from the Knights she killed, turning the detonation into a wave of daggers before she thrust it upwards, sending a colossal shard of crystal blood through

the Holy Palace. She then staggered away from the chaos, running away to safety before collapsing.

Arthuria dove towards the Tree of Oaths, grasping the gold and black hilt of the large sword stuck within the tree, the red gemstone embedded in its pommel glowed, a fiery eye emerging within. "I call upon you, Caliburn!" she yelled, the surviving Knights from Mai Lu's devastation pushing towards her. "I vow to use you now to avenge those that have fallen! Please, I need you for just a minute," she begged, holding the sword tightly. She felt the blade thrum with energy. "This is my oath to you," she said quietly, shutting her eyes and pulling the blade free from the tree. She swung, cleaving straight through four Knights in a single, Focus-enhanced strike. Their armour glowed red where she had cut through, as if the blade was burning hot. Arthuria grinned, turning towards the army before her. "One minute, starts now," Caliburn said in her mind, an explosion of energy erupting from within her.

"I vow to kill all who oppose me, to avenge my fallen Paladins, and to not rest until the battlefield has fallen still," Jeanne vowed quickly, using the blade Arthuria had given her. She felt her magic return to her, the antimagic shackles ineffective as she used the blade as a conduit. She raced between the Knights that had survived the Demongirl's attack, heading straight to the centre of the courtyard where Beauford, Rais and the Sentinels had retreated to. "Kill them!" ordered Rais, his right hand dripping blood.

Baudricourt, Dauphin and Cauchon surged towards her with their weapons drawn. Jeanne chanted quickly, leaping and tucking her legs into her body before she delivered a two-footed kick to Baudricourt's large helmet. He staggered backwards and she sprung off him, swinging as she moved. "Divine Smite!" she yelled, a golden aura extending across her body and sword. She cut diagonally through Cauchon, cutting through his armour and torso like butter before landing and rolling away from Dauphin as he struck down at her.

Arthuria moved towards the two remaining Paladins stood on the island. They yelled, raising their swords, but she lunged forwards, chanting, forcing her blade through the chestplate of one, before using him as a shield against the other. She withdrew her blade, her spell ready. She felt strange, a lightness to her body that she quickly realised came from the fact that she was floating off the ground, a pair of glowing, ethereal, feathery wings emerging from her back. Her sword was on fire, a golden flame that shone brightly – its glow spreading across her entire body. Although she couldn't see it, the Paladin in front of her stumbled

backwards in complete terror, her eyes glowed gold and fiery, a golden halo floating above her head – her entire image like some divine angel sent to punish the unfaithful and unholy.

“Cleansing Ray!” she yelled, extending her left hand outwards towards the Knight in front of her and the small army surging forwards towards her and Jeanne. The Paladin screamed, his voice disappearing as he turned to ash and molten metal – a huge tunnel of golden energy burning through him and through all other foes behind him. Arthuria flew forwards, chanting her next spell as she charged the traitorous Paladins.

A golden beam of light melted the floor next to Jeanne, Dauphin and Baudricourt, all of them turning and looking towards Arthuria as she temporarily unlocked the full potential of a Paladin’s magic. “Impossible,” stated Dauphin. They were his last words, Jeanne swinging her sword into his blade repeatedly like a bat, pushing him backwards before she ducked underneath his desperate and defensive swing. She channelled another Divine Smite, taking his head clean off from behind. A bolt of green energy flew her way as Beauford finished healing Rais’ wound and the pair of them joined Baudricourt in their fight against her.

Morgana didn’t know what to even think as she stared down at the battlefield below her. Arthuria was flying using a pair of angelic wings, cutting down Knights in swathes before blinding those around her or burning them away with her magic. Jeanne was dancing around with her sword, using precise poise and grace to keep Baudricourt and Rais between her and the Cardinal as he prepared spells to catch her unaware, all whilst provoking them into foolish errors that she could use to injure them further and further. Morgana reached inside her backpack, pulling out a pair of healing potions before throwing them down at Jeanne. She swung instinctively, shattering the glass and covering herself with the potion, reinvigorating her and healing her wounds. Morgana then pulled another out, carving runes onto glass using her wand before throwing it in Jeanne’s direction, but actually at Baudricourt.

Baudricourt saw the potion in the corner of his eye, the Witch up above helping Jeanne for one reason or another. He grinned, slamming an elbow into Jeanne, taking the cut from her sword and forcing her back before he shattered the glass bottle with his fist. It splashed across his armour, seeping in through the gaps, but it immediately felt wrong. “Argh!” he yelled, dropping a knee as a wave of exhaustion crossed him.

Jeanne didn't react, no smile crossed her face, or a sense of joy. She felt nothing, and her face reflected that as she kicked Baudricourt's helmet off his head, before thrusting her sword up through his chin. She then wrenched it free, splitting his face and pushing towards Gilles de Rais – the last traitor she had to kill. His eyes widened and he backed away as she swung and cut through Beauford's spells with her sword. "Hellfire!" he yelled, forming an orb of blue-black fire before throwing it towards Jeanne in an unblockable spell.

Arthuria counted in her head as she cast another spell: she was nearing the end of a minute and almost all of the Paladins were dead. She lunged towards the remainders, channelling her magic into powering up her sword, allowing her to cut through them like paper. She then turned, noticing Jeanne advancing on the two remaining survivors. Beauford was chanting. Arthuria chanted her final spell as well, flying towards them before landing between Jeanne and them. "Hallowed Ward!" she yelled, stabbing her blade into the ground, a bubble of golden light emerging around them and shielding them both from the flames.

Both spells faded and, as Arthuria pulled Caliburn free of the floor, a black and gold sheath appeared on her blade – it's powers fading from her. Beauford began to chant again as Jeanne raced towards Rais, but Arthuria threw the sheathed sword of Caliburn at him, stunning him and causing his spell to fail. He yelled in pain as the backlash rushed through him, knocking him off his feet. Jeanne knocked Rais' sword wide, piercing her blade deep into his stomach. He grunted, dropping his sword and grabbing Jeanne's shoulders before headbutting her with his helmet, and pushing her away – her sword remaining behind within him.

"You... this is not..." he grunted, staggering backwards as Beauford got to his feet. He tried to pull the sword out of his stomach, but it wouldn't move. Beauford stared at Arthuria and Jeanne in horror, both of them were without weapons, but the sheer volume of death around them told him everything he needed to know about the potential outcome of continuing the battle. He held up his hands. "I-I give up, the Pope will negotiate for my life, I assure you," he promised. "Beauford," growled Rais.

"It's over," Arthuria stated, stepping forwards as Rais held out a hand towards them, only for Jeanne to grab her and tackle her to the floor as a huge fleshy tendril launched towards them. "What the-?" Arthuria questioned, as Rais screamed, his bones cracking and flesh twisting as his body swelled in size into a towering grey and red monstrosity, with four fleshy wings and seven red and

black eyes on his face. Beauford turned towards Rais, but Rais extended his arm towards him, his large bony hand surrounding Beauford's head. "Rais, wait-" Beauford begged, only for Rais to clench his hand and crush his skull.

"He's a Warlock," Arthuria realised, as she and Jeanne stood before him. His torso was huge, his legs tiny and deformed compared to his large twisted arms and bloated chest. The wings flapped behind him, lifting his body off the floor, Jeanne's sword still embedded in his chest. "Jeanne!" he growled, his numerous eyes all locked onto her. "Rais, what have you done?" she questioned, looking up at him with horror. "What you weren't strong enough to do," he growled, numerous mouths opening up across his body and beginning to chant.

A bolt of black energy hit him from behind, carving a hole straight through his shoulder – the wound immediately began to close. He yelled out in pain, turning away and continuing to chant as Morgana ran along the walkway. He finished chanting, unleashing a rainbow of devastating spells at her – collapsing a huge portion of walkway and the Holy Palace beyond. Morgana leapt for her life, her broomstick flying down from the skies to catch her as she zoomed around the large courtyard and began to throw more spells against the Warlock.

Arthuria ran and grabbed a longsword as well as a large tower shield from a fallen body, racing towards Rais and slashing across his leg. Rais yelled, turning his attention down towards her and unleashing another technicolour assault of spells. Arthuria felt her body get shoved into the ground as she held her shield up – the metal hot on her arm and the ground melting around her. Jeanne picked up a spear and threw it, impaling Rais and ending his assault. He turned towards her but another spell hit him.

Frustrated and in pain, Rais let out a roar of anguish, hefting his huge arms and flying towards Arthuria and Jeanne, swinging wildly like some mad, flying spinning top. He crashed into what remained of the walkway, collapsing it and forcing him downwards. Jeanne seized on the chance, racing forwards as Arthuria got in position, raising her shield up and crouching. Jeanne leapt onto it and Arthuria stood up, propelling Jeanne upwards towards her sword. She grabbed it, tearing it downwards and cutting Rais open. He screamed in pain, swinging at her. Jeanne blocked with her sword but the weight of the strike sent her bouncing across the courtyard, crashing into and through a pillar.

Rais then turned on Arthuria and Morgana, pulling his body free and moving towards them. His insides had fallen out of the hole Jeanne had made in him, the wound struggling to heal. "Fuck it!" Arthuria said, throwing her molten shield

like a frisbee into the hole. She yelled in pain, her fingers burnt, but Rais was hurt far more, his insides burning. He staggered and flapped around, his many mouths letting out animalistic cries of pain and agony. Arthuria looked around for a blade, anything she could use to try to finish him off, but an arrow descended from the skies, entering the top of his skull before a burst of thorns erupted outwards through his flesh. Rais crashed to the ground, dead.

A loud cry from a bird called out from somewhere above in the dark skies, their unknown rescuer somewhere out there. Arthuria then turned, racing towards Jeanne, buried somewhere under a pile of rubble, Morgana landing to assist her. They pulled her free, Jeanne letting out a pained chuckle. "That was... exciting," she said in wheezing pain. Morgana pulled a healing potion out of her bag and gave it to Jeanne. "I owe you, Witch," Jeanne said softly, shutting her eyes and falling unconscious. Arthuria and Morgana looked at each other. "We need to get out of here, now," Arthuria stated.

Arthuria retrieved Caliburn, attaching the sword to her waist, before she looked over to the shattered Tree of Oaths. Everything her Order had been built around was gone. A small branch lay on the floor, its end still covered in cyan leaves. Arthuria picked up, perhaps a new one could be grown, perhaps the Order could still live. "Arthuria," called her sister. Arthuria looked towards Morgana, rushing forwards and helping to carry Jeanne. The pair of them then turned, Mai Lu emerging from a hole in the rubble and a figure dropping from the skies to the ground. Athena looked over the group of four, most of them on death's door and all exhausted. "You're still alive, good," she stated, smiling at Arthuria. "There's a ship at the northeast side of the Isle of Majesty – you need to get onto it before it leaves. Come on, I'll clear the way for you."

Seize the Seas Tales: Bird's Eye View

Falconer wasn't sure why he had felt the need to intervene with the execution of the Paladin Elder, but it was now far too late to change his mind. He and Wren flew high over the Capital, observing the battle for any changes. Jayce had made it clear to avoid intervening unless necessary. His role was to look for surprises, to keep the Rising Aces aware of anything that they needed to know. He and Wren flew over the Holy Palace once more, the giant shard of red-black crystal emerging from it of distinct curiosity. He had no idea where it had come from, or what it even was.

A bolt of purple lightning caught the corner of his eye, his attention immediately shifting towards the far south. He frowned as he and Wren circled above the

battlefield - a lone ship had appeared on the horizon. And it was sailing towards the Capital.

Chapter 150: Face to Face

Jayce, Alara and their allies pushed open the doors leading to the throne room, walking inside with their weapons drawn. The room was pristine opulence, a beautiful azure rug leading straight across the rectangular room, another connecting directly to it to form a cross on the floor. Banners hung from the ceiling - symbols of the Navy, the Guild, and countless imperial islands decorating the room. The floor was white and gold marble, and numerous ornate pillars lined the path. Long pieces of art hung on the walls, showing historical events and battles, as well as numerous portraits of the previous Emperors and Empresses. The Emperor's throne was an opulent pearl and platinum, with a matching blue seat to the surrounding décor. A huge circular stained-glass window sat behind the throne – the image displaying a map of the New World. The Emperor's seat faced a balcony overlooking the Capital.

Alara, Jayce and the others arced across the room, surrounding the throne and standing in front of the balcony. They were not hindered, or stopped, and that didn't fill Jayce with confidence. He, Alara, Astris, Bjorn, Wulf, the Weapon, Cyrenna and Beowulf all found themselves staring directly at the Pope – sat in the throne of the Emperor. "At last, you've come," stated Pope Alexander Borgia in a deep reverberating voice, his face brimming with arrogant confidence.

He was a slightly overweight man, and even from his seated position it was clear he was tall. He had dark brown, wrinkled skin, a thin white beard across his jaw and lips, and looked around sixty to seventy years of age. His eyebrows were narrow and hung slightly over his eyes, his nose large and flat, and he was bald. As he smiled, his teeth were a soft yellow colour and completely flat. His eyes stood out: a deep golden colour that matched the jewellery scattered across his body and hands. Each finger bore a gemmed ring, and his white robes were made of the finest materials.

To his direct right stood the Fleet Admiral, hunched over with a spoon-shaped back and leaning on his two canes – both made of a black, shiny wood. He too had wrinkled skin, but his was a far lighter, fair colour. He was far skinnier, his own bald head covered with a white, black and gold peaked cap – a ring of short grey hair around his head. His eyes were completely obscured by his wrinkles and a pair of bushy, grey eyebrows. He had grown a thick walrus moustache since Alara had last seen him, his chin still pointed. He wore his uniform: an Admiral's coat and trousers, black knee-high boots, and a cape that ran down to his ankles. His uniform was completely white, with gold and black highlights

and large gold epaulettes on his shoulders. His chest was still covered with medals. Alara felt his eyes on her.

At the Pope's feet, bound in a pair of cuffs was the Emperor – a man that most of the room had only ever seen in photos or from afar. He was tall and slim - an old man in his late fifties or sixties. He had a thin, wrinkled face covered in smile lines. A thin and long grey moustache hung down either side of his lips, and his hair was long – tied up out of his eyes into a knot at the back of his head. He wore simple clothes - a smart shirt and trousers - but his feet were bare. His hands were covered with a pair of white gloves. He looked up at Jayce, his narrow eyes a curious grey colour, and gave the slightest nod of acknowledgement before returning his gaze to the floor.

"Release the Emperor, you're surrounded!" Alara ordered, levying her glaive at the Pope. Jayce glanced towards the end of the room, quickly spotting four figures stood just out of sight behind the pillars. His eyes settled on Zoya, a poorly hidden look of surprise on her face. She quickly forced it away, stepping out from behind her pillar along with the three Warlock Grandmasters. Each of them looked as evil and twisted as the other: their skin grey, pierced and tattooed, their heads shaved, and their faces skull-like. "I wouldn't be so certain," stated Pope Alexander.

Cyrenna, Beowulf, Bjorn and Wulf turned to face Zoya and the Warlocks. Zoya's multi-coloured eyes remained looking towards Jayce, a look of sadness buried within them. He looked away, facing the Pope and the Fleet Admiral. "I applaud your endeavour. You've all fought incredibly hard to get here, I'm sure, but you must admit that you're outmatched," the Pope stated. Alara stepped forwards and the Fleet Admiral glared at her, an invisible and dominating force of Panic sending everyone apart from Jayce tumbling backwards away from the throne. Jayce's heart raced in his chest as he staggered – the brief burst of Focus that had emerged from the Fleet Admiral was overwhelming, like nothing he had ever seen before.

A look of anger crossed the Pope's face. "I won't stand for insolence! Anyway, as I was sayi-" Four figures crashed into the throne room through the balcony, bouncing across the marble and separating into two pairs. Jayce stared at his mother and Admiral Truth with a look of relieved surprise. She looked unharmed – exhausted, but unharmed. Truth was far more beat up, blood covering his uniform despite the fact that his body looked uninjured.

Comparatively Admiral Cynane had several cuts across her uniform, and Admiral Kai's face was battered and bloody. The Pope scowled.

"Did we miss anything important?" Cassandra asked, her and Truth remaining where they had landed. "No, he's just monologuing," Jayce stated, forcing an expression of confidence as his allies lay on the floor. The Pope stood up, his face burning with fury. "Your comments mean little, brat Exarga. This is all futile - you have already lost. A thorn in my side you all may have been, but come the dawn your names will be forgotten," he stated, looking to the Fleet Admiral and nodding.

Lord Gamble stepped forwards, Jayce cautiously holding Sola and Luna up in a ready stance, but the Fleet Admiral gestured behind him. "Take a look, boy - see what your war has yielded." Jayce didn't want to look, but as the Fleet Admiral looked directly at him - he sensed little choice. Jayce and the others looked towards the broken balcony, the burning Capital sitting beyond in the darkness of the night, the islands painted in an orange glow.

"You are far more insignificant than you can imagine, caught in machinations beyond you. You lost from the start," the Fleet Admiral declared, the bay of the Capital erupting as six Colossi emerged from beneath the waters. Their metal sizzled, and a loud building up thrum was audible, even from the throne room, before they unleashed six golden beams of energy towards all of the nearest ships around them. "Shit," Jayce muttered - one prototype had been tricky enough to fight, let alone six that had likely been perfected. The six giant metal golems began to march, walking towards the city and purging all in their path.

They could all hear the desperate calls for assistance from their allies across their communicators, pleas for help as they found themselves facing a renewed force of enemies, countless golems erupting from houses across the city. Jayce hated it; the trap had sacrificed so many of the Empire's Navy, but the Fleet Admiral didn't seem to care at all. He turned back to the Fleet Admiral and the Pope, raising his weapons once more as he prepared to fight. "It's over, admit it," stated the Pope.

"I wouldn't be so sure," Alara stated, stepping forwards and holding her glaive tightly. "Break out all anti-colossus weapons, support the Old Dogs with everything we've got!" ordered Witchford, taking command as the Old Dogs assaulted the Colossi. She smiled smugly. "Did you honestly think we wouldn't have something ready in case you had made more of those monstrosities?" Alara questioned, several beams of light emitting across the city and targeting one of

the Colossi – a hole being burned in its chassis before Xarga shattered its insides. “One down, five to go!” Witchford declared. “Lieutenant Riley, mop up the Church’s Palace with the Therians, the rest of you take down those machines!”

The Fleet Admiral looked from Jayce and Alara to the Weapon, his eyes cold and deadly. “I’m disappointed, Weapon, how dare you betray your Empire after everything it has given you. A defective mutt like yourself should have been put out of its misery long ago,” he goaded. Weapon roared in anger, charging the Fleet Admiral as the room remained in a cautious standoff. “No, wait!” Alara cried out, the Fleet Admiral avoiding Weapon’s wild fist before retaliating with a strike from his cane.

The Weapon flew past Jayce and Alara, bouncing across the floor before scraping to the balcony. The Weapon’s eye were wide with shock and fear as he slid over the edge, scrabbling for something to grab onto before he fell screaming out of sight. “No!” Alara yelled, Wulf racing to the edge and looking down. The Weapon had cracked the ground of the Palace courtyard far below, his body mangled and unmoving. “Kill them and be done with it,” stated the Pope, sitting back down in his throne. “As you wish,” stated Lord Gamble. Zoya and the three Grandmasters began to chant as Admiral Kai and Admiral Cynane lunged forwards.

Truth lunged towards Admiral Kai as he surged towards Alara. Cyrenna, Astris and Beowulf all moved to assist as they targeted their father, their eyes brimming with anger, and a deep thirst for vengeance filling their minds as they remembered what he had done to their mother. Sycilla Cynane and Cassandra Exarga charged one another, both seeking to conclude their duel. Jayce, Alara, Wulf and Bjorn turned towards Zoya and the Warlocks, as the Fleet Admiral returned to his position by the Pope – both of them guarding the Emperor.

The three Warlocks sprouted fleshy wings, leaping off the floor into the air as two additional mouths appeared on their bodies and seven black eyes covered their faces, each dripping with gunk and displaying a glowing red ‘IX’. Bjorn, Wulf and Alara assaulted them, weaving between spells and leaping to clear the distance between them and the Warlocks. Alara fired a bolt of energy out of her glaive, interrupting her chosen target before she leapt and cut off one of his wings. Bjorn got underneath another, leaping up and grabbing her leg before slamming her into the marble, swinging a heavy axe into her back as she tried to get up. Wulf used his claws to leap from pillar to pillar, crashing into a Warlock in the air – the pair of them toppling to the ground.

Jayce, however, found himself face-to-face with Zoya. She held a defensive stance, her body covered with glyphs and her wand in her hand as they circled each other. A white owl flew above her. "I don't want to fight you," Jayce said honestly, lowering his weapons as he faced her. She shook her head, the sadness that had been hidden in her eyes now plastered across her face. Her blue and green eyes looked empty, defeated. "Jayce, it's too late," she said, her words only heard by him amongst the chaos of the all-out battle in the throne room. "It's not too late, please Zoya, join us – join me. I know you're not... this," he pleaded.

Zoya looked past him, looking towards the balcony and the Holy Palace far beyond. A large bubble was expanding out of it. She dropped her wand and stepped towards him, his hands remained by his side as she reached for him. "I'm sorry," she said, placing her hands on his face before kissing him. He stared at her in shock and she pulled back, her green and blue eyes looking as his before the bubble passed through them. The look of sadness and shame turning into shock as her skin turned grey and cracked – the bubble retracting and her body turning to ash.

Jayce dropped to his knees, the rest of the room confused by what had just occurred. "Jayce!" Alara called out, delivering a finishing blow to her distracted Grandmaster and bisecting him before seeing Jayce kneeling on the floor with a look of horror on his face. She ran to him. "Are you hurt? Are you okay? Where's Zoya?" she asked quickly, but he shook it off, forcing himself to his feet – a deep sense of conflict filling him that he had to bury. Jayce turned his attention to the two surviving Grandmasters – one still flying around with Bjorn's axe in her back. He moved in a blur, channelling his fury as he leapt up, vaulting off a pillar, and in a downwards spiralling twister eviscerated the nearest Warlock with his swords. Astris appeared in a splash of red mist, her pistols both placed to the head of the remaining Warlock, as Bjorn grabbed his embedded axe and held her still, before she blew the Warlock Grandmaster's head open. Jayce wiped a lost tear from the corner of his eye, turning his attention to the others.

Truth swept his greathammer towards Admiral Kai, forcing him to block the swing with his enchanted gauntlets. Astris used this opportunity to apparate behind him, levying point blank shots at his right leg. Thorro Kai yelled out in pain, swinging a club-like backhand into her. She teleported away as he collided, bouncing into a wall from the momentum but safe from any immediate further retaliation. His legs spurted blood, his movement turning into a pained hobble as he tried to avoid Truth's continued strikes.

Admiral Arthur Truth leapt, lifting his greathammer up as he intended to slam the weapon down on the Blue Admiral, but Thorro pressed forwards throwing a heavy fist into Truth's chest. His chest collapsed as he was hit, his body flying backwards across the room and out of the throne room doors. Arthur lay on the floor, forcing his body to transform as he staved off the lethal wound, but as he tried to transform back, he found he couldn't – his body exhausted from the constant damage he had had to regenerate. He growled as he lay on the floor, forcing himself to his feet and grabbing his greathammer.

Admiral Kai let out a sigh of relief as he stumbled back, his body in pain and agony from his daughter's attack. His eyes immediately widened as he found two swords coming at him from either side. He blocked them both with his gauntlets, his son and eldest daughter attacking with intent to kill. He grinned as he saw their combined determination – it was all he had ever wanted to see, them working together at their peaks. Astris then appeared in a splatter of red mist, one pistol aimed at his face another at his chest.

He swore as he drew his arms in to shield himself, Beowulf and Cyrenna both using the lapse in his guard to draw their blades back and thrust them into his chest as Astris unleashed all the ammo she had in her pistols into his arms and body, screaming as she did so. He lunged outwards, grabbing the three of them and pulling them into a tight embrace, blood dripping down his legs and out of the corner of his mouth as he held his children. They stared at him in terror and panic, but he looked back at them with nothing other than pride and the only real smile they had ever seen from him.

"I'm so proud of you - all of you. You have finally united and I couldn't be any more happy to see it," he told them, an overwhelming range of emotions erupting from all of them as their father held them and finally acknowledged them. Cyrenna screamed, yelling in rage and shoving her father backwards as Astris sobbed and Beowulf shut down, his bloody grip slipping off of them. He staggered backwards, barely remaining on his feet.

Admiral Arthur Truth ran across the room, spotting Admiral Kai facing his children - his back to him.

Thorro looked at his children, the three of them looking back at him – together and united. His smile faded slightly, a momentary regret crossing his mind as he realised he would never get to see where they would take themselves – how they would continue to grow and rise. He let out a soft chuckle, all of their faces changing into one of shock. "Perhaps I was a fool to worry," he stated. Admiral

Truth swept Admiral Kai's legs out from underneath him with a powerful strike. Thorro stared up at the ceiling, his body parallel to the floor - he let out a final defiant roar. Truth wasted no second, immediately raising his greathammer into the air before slamming it down onto Admiral Kai's face, carrying his skull into the marble floor and splattering his head across the room.

A loud clatter of heavy weapons drew Alara and Jayce's attention away from Thorro Kai's corpse. Their stomachs dropped, their eyes wide as Admiral Exarga's weapons lay on the floor, her eyes wide in surprise and horror. But she looked unharmed - the Green Admiral, not so much. Sycilla Cynane had lost her left arm and a huge, deep cut had been made into her torso. She stared at Cassandra, her own look of confusion and surprise on her face. "Cass-" she whimpered, her legs falling out from under her.

Cassandra lunged forwards, catching Sycilla and holding her before lowering her to the ground, her head to Cassandra's chest and body across Cassandra's legs. Jayce had hardly ever seen his mother cry - he could think of only one or two occasions, and even then she had been quiet and contained. But Cassandra bawled as she held Cynane in her arms. "Why? Why? Why did you make me do this?" Cassandra cried, the pairing reminding Alara immediately of Roose and Cyrenna. Alara looked over towards Astris - would this have been their fate without Jayce?

Cynane reached up to her white ceramic mask, peeling it free from the burnt flesh on her right cheek and chin. Her jaw looked skeletal, the flesh and muscle mostly burnt away and her teeth visible. Her long, smooth black hair was stuck to her face, and Cassandra brushed it away, dripping tears onto her pale skin. "Why Sycilla?" Cassandra asked weakly. The Green Admiral tried to speak, but no voice came out. Instead her body relaxed and she gave a soft smile to Cassandra. "Please..." Cassandra asked, shaking her head. Sycilla opened her mouth and Cassandra leant forwards, a silent exchange occurring between them. Cassandra slowly pulled her head back, Admiral Cynane's brown eyes open but unseeing. She closed them, hyperventilating before letting out a heartbreaking scream.

Fleet Admiral Lord Gamble looked across the affair in front of him, letting out a long sigh as he took in the carnage. The three Kai children were stood around the body of their father, the Marines had butchered the Warlock Grandmasters, and something had killed Zoya the Witch Queen. Even Cynane had fallen to Exarga. "Pathetic," he stated, stepping forwards and unleashing a cold wave of unparalleled Focus across the room. The entire room shook, the Pope standing

up and drawing his large grimoire, as everyone apart from Jayce, his mother and Admiral Truth fell to their knees, unable to breathe.

"Fine, I'll do it myself."

Seize the Seas Tales: The Green Admiral

Sycilla Cynane took a long swig from her can of beer, emptying it out before throwing it off the rooftop she was sat upon and cracking open another from the small crate full of ice next to her. "Ow," came a voice from the streets below, drawing a smile from her. She shook her head, the setting sun on her face and the air cool - the enemy fleet sat directly ahead of her to the south of the Capital. She didn't know where it had all gone so wrong.

Her heart sank in her chest as she stared out at the Ursus Ultra – the only ship in the ragtag fleet that she actually cared about. But it wasn't the ship that bothered her – it was Admiral Cassandra Exarga. Sycilla emptied out her next can, throwing it away along with the others before tucking her legs up to her chest and resting her face upon her knees – only to jolt as it upset her burns, forcing her to tilt her head to the left.

"Here you are," came a familiar quiet voice, a pair of feet stepping almost silently onto the roof next to her. Sycilla didn't turn her head, she didn't need to – the one thing her Commander had yet to truly master was her ability to conceal herself from her. "Lynn," she said quietly, acknowledging the Killer Commander's presence. "Should we not be preparing for the upcoming battle, or getting ready for a pre-emptive strike?" Lynn asked, standing close but not next to the Green Admiral. "No," Sycilla stated, almost giving a physical response rather than a verbal one to her blind friend. "Why not?" questioned her Commander.

"Come sit," Sycilla stated, tapping the roof next to her with her nail. Lynn obeyed, sitting next to her. "Beer?" Lynn questioned, smelling it on Sycilla's breath. "Do you want one?" Sycilla asked. Lynn faltered, uncertain as to what was the correct response. She looked at Admiral Cynane, extending out her Focus to try to read the correct answer. "Um," she stumbled, Sycilla placing a beer in her hand anyway. "Thaank you-p," stated Sycilla openly, taking one for herself and opening it. Lynn opened her beer. "Thank you," she mimicked sheepishly.

Sycilla looked at the deep vertical scars on Lynn's face; she was otherwise beautiful – the pair of them cursed with their own imperfections. Perhaps that was why she had taken pity on her, all that time ago, and had formed such an attachment to her. "Admiral, is something wrong? I-I'm not really used to seeing

you so... casual - especially given what is coming," Lynn questioned. Sycilla smiled, leaning back on her arms and looking back at the Ursus Ultra. "What do you know of my time with the Old Dogs?" she asked.

"Not much, I know you sailed with them in your early years, along with the Exargas and several others," Lynn answered honestly, sipping her beer. Sycilla nodded. "I did... truth be told, they were some of the best years of my life – some of my happiest, at the least," Sycilla said quietly. Lynn tilted her head. "Not that I'm disloyal to the Empire, but then why aren't we siding with the enemy?"

"Careful now, Commander – that sounds treasonous," scolded Admiral Cynane. "But you're not wrong. They called me... 'Assassin', back then. Mainly because I used to creep around everywhere – my mother hated noise, and she could be violent if she got upset by it. I often caused people to jump without intending to, and people mocked me for being so quiet, until I met someone loud enough for the pair of us."

Lynn frowned, confused by why Cynane was being so unusually reminisce, and what lesson she was trying to teach her. "Others call her 'Pumpkin' on the ship. She was quiet when you didn't know her, but, when you did - or when she was angry - she was the loudest person imaginable," Sycilla said with a faint, unconscious smile. "Sounds unbearable," Lynn said straightly. Sycilla nodded. "Definitely... but I loved her, and I think she felt the same, but I was never brave enough to take that leap and someone else beat me to it. We remained close long after, and I did find someone else to love."

"Admiral, forgive me, but how is this relevant to the battle – we're at war," Lynn questioned. "Shh, just ignore that for now," Sycilla stated, laying back and looking up at the orange sky. "Sometimes I wonder how things could have been different, but the answer is always the same. It probably wouldn't have been." Lynn frowned. "It was at the end of the Blood Wars, we had all just ascended to positions of power and we felt on top of the world. My wife and I had made a family for ourselves, I was a Rear-Admiral, and we had a stupidly bright young boy at home – a war orphan."

"I didn't know. What happened to them?" Lynn questioned, surprised to hear of such a core part of Admiral Cynane's life that she had never mentioned before. "We were attacked. Not every baned took Crach's armistice well. He had a group, his War Hounds, feral youngsters that refused to give up the fight, or just

enjoyed fighting too much. They came for us, and I called for help... but Cass came for me, not my family. She saved me... rather than saving them."

"Admiral Exarga?" Lynn questioned. Sycilla didn't answer immediately. "I used to hate her for it, for not letting me die... For loving me just enough for her, but not enough for me. I... think I still do," Sycilla said softly, covering her eyes with her forearm. "Love her or hate her?" Lynn questioned. Sycilla didn't answer. "So, you want revenge – that's why we're on this side of the war?" "Is that so wrong?"

Lynn shook her head. "No. You taught me to use that anger and lust for vengeance as a tool. I've gotten my revenge, I wouldn't have without you, so I will always support you to get yours, Lady Cynane." Sycilla scoffed, shaking her head. "I mean it. Everything I am is yours, my lady – and the others would say the same. We are your Killers, your orders are the only word we follow." "Truly?" Sycilla asked.

"Of course, even until death," Lynn said fanatically. Sycilla let out a sigh and sat up, looking back towards the fleet assembled before her and the Iron Wall surrounding the Capital. "I took you in and made you into a weapon, a Killer, to help give you purpose, not to be my tool or servant. We're on the wrong side of this war, but I can't abandon my path now – I've lost too much of myself," Sycilla said, looking out across the water and finding Cassandra on her ship, staring back at her. "I remember a time where I had accepted that I was jealous, where I had been... happy for her. The day I stood at her wedding, the day she told me she was pregnant, the day I held Jayce in my arms for the first time and saw her within him..."

Sycilla stood up and turned her back on Cassandra. "Tomorrow I either take it all away from her, like she did to me, or..." Sycilla shook her head and took Lynn's hand. "I am not going to give you a single order other than this: survive this war, and if I lose and she survives, submit yourself to Admiral Exarga." Lynn pulled her hand away and shook her head. "What? No! You're my lady, my Admiral – not her."

"Then if you truly believe that, you will follow my order. Survive and if we lose, swear loyalty to her, on behalf of all of the Killers – they will follow you. Prioritise living for once. Victory doesn't matter anymore."

Cassandra looked down at Sycilla as she tried to say something. She leant in, placing their foreheads together. "I'm sorry..." Sycilla said quietly, finally in the arms of the person she had always wanted.

Chapter 151: From the Emperor's Shadow

The Fleet Admiral lunged forwards, pulling a pair of long, thin blades out of his canes and slashing at Jayce. Jayce stood stunned, the overwhelming presence of Lord Gamble's Panic disabling all in the room apart from him and the two Admirals. Jayce staggered backwards defensively as his mind rejected his instincts to flee or cower, allowing Jayce to raise his two swords to defend himself. But the Fleet Admiral knocked one sword to the side with his pommel, sliding the other along Luna to nick Jayce's shoulder in a fast and disabling strike.

Jayce grunted in pain, trying to escape away, but Lord Gamble gave him no quarter, a crescent shaped grin on his twisted face and his eyes wide and insane as he pressed into Jayce. He swung at Jayce's weak side with an unfathomable speed, forcing Jayce to desperately cross Sola across his body to block before he swung his other sword at Jayce's now-exposed neck – looking to end his life instantly.

"Woah," Jayce yelled, as his mother grabbed the back of his shirt and threw him aside, blocking the strike with one of her greataxes before calling the other to her hand from across the room. "I'm disappointed Cassandra, I expected more from you," goaded the Fleet Admiral, the pair of them pressing their blades into each other's, but - to Jayce's horror – Lord Gamble seemed to be overpowering her. A chanting drew Jayce's wounded attention away from his mother, the Pope's grimoire floating in front of him as he chanted – the book glowing a bright white colour in a manner Jayce had never seen before.

Admiral Truth threw his greathammer at the Pope, forcing the Mage to leap away from the throne as the weapon crashed through the stained glass window behind it. He didn't stop chanting, finishing his spell before anyone could intervene. His body glowed a blinding golden colour before splitting in two, forming two identical copies of himself. Both copies immediately began to chant and Jayce very much doubted these would be defensive spells.

The overwhelming aura of Panic from the Fleet Admiral continued to crush Alara and the others as Jayce got to his feet and rushed to assist his mother. Truth beat him to it, charging into the Fleet Admiral without a weapon and slamming him into a pillar. The old man cracked the stone, dropping to a knee before diving forwards as Cassandra leapt at him with her axes. His Focus broke, releasing Astris and the others – Cyrenna, Beowulf, Wulf and Bjorn immediately racing to face the Pope whilst Alara stood unsure as to where she was needed. Astris raced

to Jayce's side, placing her hands over his wound and forcing it closed with her blood magic. "Watch your head," she told him, racing off to join her siblings.

"Admiral Truth!" Alara called out, throwing her glaive towards him as the Fleet Admiral faced off against him and Cassandra. Truth grabbed the weapon, desperately blocking a heavy strike. "I should have known better than to trust you, those old fools corrupted all on board that damned ship!" growled the Fleet Admiral, slashing quickly at Admiral Exarga – and to everyone's horror and surprise – drawing blood as he cut open her leg. She yelped, stumbling away, leaving Truth exposed to the Fleet Admiral's lone assault.

"Those old fools were and will always be your betters, your petty ego got you removed then, and it will now too! I will see to it!" yelled Truth, kicking Fleet Admiral Gamble across the chest and sending him backwards before lunging with Alara's glaive. "Bastard animal!" growled Lord Gamble, twisting to avoid the blade before lifting his leg up and kicking the glaive away as Truth tried to pull it back across him. Gamble lunged, thrusting his blade into Truth's side. Admiral Truth yelled out in pain, stepping forwards further into the blade and grabbing onto Lord Gamble. "Your rebellion ends today!" Gamble yelled, concentrating his Focus onto his fist, letting go of the embedded blade before throwing a heavy fist into Truth's giant chest.

Truth flew backwards, Gamble grabbing the hilt of his sword as he pulled his fist back – retrieving the sword before it could be lost, and turning towards Admiral Exarga, Alara and Jayce. Astris squatted next to Cassandra's leg, piecing her flesh together as she sent her regenerative cells into the wound. Gamble snarled. "Damned monster!" he yelled, rushing forwards with his weapons. Astris apparated away and Cassandra swung her weapons, her body freshly healed. "That's my Marine you're talking about!"

"Alara, deal with the Pope," Jayce stated, stepping back as a beam of golden light flew past him. "Aye!" she yelled, darting cautiously around the Fleet Admiral, glancing towards Truth's crumpled body, and retrieving her glaive. She turned to the Pope and the others, his body enveloped in energy and both copies of him throwing spell after spell at the others trying to break his defence. Alara lunged forwards, pressing between the others as they distracted him before thrusting her blade deep into one of the two of them.

The shield around him shattered, allowing Astris to apparate behind him and fire a shot into the back of his head. Both golden Popes vanished, an unharmed one appearing back near the throne. "Nice one, Captain!" Cyrenna declared, only

to yelp as she was hit by a blast of golden light – her sword melting in her hands as it saved her life. Beowulf dove into her, forcing her aside as the beam continued to burn where she would have been, carving a hole in the wall of the throne room. She grunted in a contained scream as she lay on the floor, her hands burnt, but Astris appeared by her side, healing her as well. She looked up at her sister, Astris' eyes full of fear and worry.

They were losing, the Pope and Fleet Admiral were picking them off one by one, and once Admiral Exarga fell then they wouldn't stand a chance. "We've got this," Cyrenna forced, the pain fading, getting to her feet. Astris nodded, the pair of them looking to the pile of molten metal on the floor and then towards their father's corpse – his gauntlets still on his hands. "I can't," Cyrenna stated, looking at her sister. Astris teleported to her father's corpse, grabbing the metal gloves and appearing back next to her sister. "Do or die," she stated, returning back to the fray. Cyrenna held the heavy metal in her hands, the final remaining legacy of her father's violence in her grasp. He had spoken of giving them to her or Beowulf someday, but Cyrenna had never had any intention of touching them – let alone wearing them. "Dammit!" she yelled, putting them on and racing towards the Pope.

"Edward, protect me!" ordered the Pope, desperately using the Fleet Admiral's presence as a deterrent against the baned, the Kais, and Alara Vanathur. Lord Gamble growled, once again managing to injure Admiral Exarga with a quick and deep cut, this time to her side. But instead Jayce Exarga took her place. "I should have ordered your parents to end your reign of chaos the second you took to the seas in that relic!" he growled, Jayce matching the Fleet Admiral's sword blow-for-desperate-blow. Jayce had no space to respond, his mind desperately searching for any way to keep him alive.

Lord Gamble's eyes widened, his Gaze glancing towards Admiral Exarga as Astris once again healed her. Jayce slipped through his defence, cutting a shallow graze on the Fleet Admiral's skinny figure, but to Jayce's immediate horrified realisation – where he had been expecting a thin and elderly frame, the Fleet Admiral's body was almost entirely a thin and dense layer of solid muscle. Jayce drew the faintest speck of blood before he was kicked backwards across the room.

"We can do this," Astris stated, healing Cassandra once again as they hid behind a pillar. A cold breath scraped the back of her neck, Cassandra shoving her away as the Fleet Admiral turned the pillar to rubble with several instantaneous strikes. "I've had about enough of you!" he growled, turning on Astris. She yelped,

darting backwards as he pursued her across the room in a blur, the pair of them weaving between her allies. "Tris!" yelled her siblings, getting in Gamble's way - only for the Fleet Admiral to slam his pommel into Beowulf's jaw, dropping him with a crunch, and then swing both his blades at Cyrenna. She blocked with her father's gauntlets, trying to keep standing as a seemingly unstoppable force hit her.

"Enough games!" he growled, lifting his leg up and stomping down into the inside of Cyrenna's knee, breaking her leg. She cried out in pain, Astris apparating behind the Fleet Admiral. "Got you!" he stated, flipping the grip he had on his blades and driving his blades backwards into her sides before she had even finished reforming. Astris gasped, her pistols clicking empty as she tried to fire before falling from her grip and clattering to the floor, as both of the Fleet Admiral's swords impaled her just above her hips.

Feeling the touch of death on her soul once again she reached forwards, grabbing his shoulder and neck before forcing her teeth into his neck. He yelled out in pain as she drank his blood, the taste like venom. He tore his blades out through her sides in a wide sweep before he lifted a blade and angled it towards her face. Astris pushed away, staggering as she held her sides - her body barely kept whole from the two otherwise grievous wounds.

Astris grit her teeth through the pain, waiting for her body to regenerate as she stared at the Fleet Admiral in terror. But the wounds didn't close, the pain only increasing. She looked towards his blades, both shining in the darkness and the light emanating from the chandeliers. "You can never be too careful with creatures like you around," stated Lord Gamble, striding towards her with his silver swords. "Astris, get out of here!" Jayce yelled, intercepting the Fleet Admiral with his mother. Astris looked towards her unconscious brother and crippled sister before then at Alara. "Go, I've got them!" Alara ordered. Astris raced to the balcony, hugging her sides before she leapt away into the night.

The Fleet Admiral swung wildly with his swords, forcing Cassandra and Jayce back, his white uniform slowly seeping with blood from the wound in his neck. He watched Astris leap away. "Smart choice," he stated, turning his attention back to the Exarga's as they pressed him, forcing him backwards as his vision began to blur, his uniform turning a deep crimson. Jayce and his mother moved in near perfect synchronicity - Cassandra's heavy swings provided a clear, life-ending threat even to the perfect Focus of the Fleet Admiral, but she was comparatively shorter than Jayce, allowing the pair of them to attack at once.

Jayce's strikes were faster, and more precise, forcing the Fleet Admiral to open up his guard.

"You could have been my successor!" he growled, unleashing a wave of Panic, causing both Jayce and Cassandra to stagger. But this time Alara was ready for it. She charged an energy bolt through her glaive, striking Lord Gamble in the back. "Ugh!" he grunted, his Focus ending and his arms opening wide as his back braced itself. Cassandra cleaved downwards across his thin torso and Jayce swung his blade into the wound Astris had made in his neck, in a pair of finishing blows that followed one another.

Fleet Admiral Lord Gamble fell to the floor, his head severed from his neck and torso bisected. "Impossible!" uttered the Pope, backing away from Bjorn and Wulf towards the Emperor, the others in the room rounding on him. "My plan was perfect," he stated. A loud clatter drew Jayce and Alara's attention away from him, both of their eyes widening as the Pope's knees were kicked out from behind. He fell to his knees, a pair of gloved hands clasping the top of his skull and his jaw. He tried to scream as pressure was applied from above and below, but his head promptly crunched as it was crushed.

Jayce, Alara, Wulf and Bjorn all stared in horror, the Emperor stood over the Pope's corpse, his clothes and white gloves covered in his blood. "Emperor?" questioned Cyrenna, drawing Alara's relieved attention to her as she stood leaning on a dazed Beowulf, a limping Admiral Truth approaching as well. The Emperor flicked the blood off his gloves before he began to push back his sleeves to reveal that they went all the way up to his elbows. He then took them off. Jayce's stomach sunk, a cold feeling passing through him as he saw that the Emperor's hands were stained red. "You're not the Emperor," he realised, a small smirk crossing the assassin's face before he looked towards the throne.

The stone wall to the right side of the throne began to twist away, a concealed doorway opening. Truth and Jayce's mother both dropped a knee, kneeling with their heads low. The Puppet Emperor did the same, a small figure stepping out of the darkness of the concealed passageway into the light of the room. A scent of orchid overpowered the stench of blood. Her heels clicked on the stone floor, a victorious smile on her slightly wrinkled face, her soft brown eyes shining with pride. She had long, dark brown hair tied up in a bun, a silver and pearl hairpin holding it in place.

Jayce and Alara both stared in unease and horror as Damian and Ottar followed in behind her. Ottar stood in his giant otter therian form, and Damian looked

almost swollen with muscle, his huge forearms exposed and covered in countless scars. Corina Liu sat on her throne, wearing a simple blouse and a pair of smart trousers. "Hello you two, I'm so very proud of you both," she stated, looking down at Alara and Jayce.

"Corina?" Alara questioned in disbelief, whilst Jayce brimmed with silent fury. "What? I-I don't understand," she stated, shaking her head as she looked towards the kneeling Puppet Emperor like it was all some joke. "It's quite simple dear. When my father ruled this Empire, I saw countless... infestations spreading amongst our borders. Allies usurping positions, coveting power for themselves rather than utilising it to develop the New World. I saw..." She gestured to the corpse of the Pope. "A Church trying to drag us backwards into the darkness my family brought this world out of."

"The Empire was doomed to fall, but I'm no combatant and my father had made a public promise to tie our hands – to remove our Fists," she stated, gesturing towards the Puppet Emperor and gesturing for him to stand – he did so, and stood next to her. Ottar transformed into his human form, that of a large man with a big stomach and equally big muscles - his hands were stained. "With the end inevitable, I decided to do something about it – I abdicated, putting Jakob in my place – my biological cousin, and a good friend and servant. He ruled as was needed, whilst I organised a way to end the Church and those who did not fit the ideals I wished our Empire to uphold."

Bjorn and Wulf stepped forwards and she looked towards them with curiosity. "How could you let the Church torture and massacre us Therians?" Bjorn questioned. "Bjorn, Lieutenant Commander Wulf – understand that the..." She tilted her head, a soft smile on her face. "Therians...? So you've reclaimed your heritage, good. I am not omnipotent, nor am I omniscient - truth be told I didn't know of the full extent those cultists went to until it was too late. Instead, I trusted Arthur to help your kind. Stand, my friends, you need not kneel to me," she stated, looking to Cassandra and Arthur. Both of them stood up.

"I am sorry for what you and your people have suffered. Even when I was a child you were persecuted, feared for your abilities when they were granted to you solely in the service of others. Those Blood Wars were a pointless atrocity, orchestrated by the Church to weaken your standing, to create a target for them to demonise. You should be lauded, admired: you're descendants of heroes after all. Truly, Wulf, Bjorn, Arthur – today marks the end of your persecution, and

the beginning of the reemergence of the Therian Guard. I ask all three of you, heroes of this war, to stand by my side."

Wulf knelt immediately. "At your command, Empress," he stated, Truth nodding appreciatively before looking to Bjorn. "I have spent my life fighting for this Bjorn, join me, join us and let's bring a new age to our people," Arthur stated, extending a hand to Bjorn. "I need time to think this over," Bjorn answered diplomatically. "Very well," Corina stated. She looked back towards Jayce and Alara. "You have both grown so much under my guidance and free from it. To tell the honest truth, you strayed far from the path and plans I had laid out for you – both of you - but in the end you did exactly as I hoped. Exactly as your parents hoped for you."

"What?" Alara asked quietly, in soft confusion. Jayce snapped his head towards his mother, his face flushed with a cold rage. She didn't meet his gaze so he looked back at Corina. "You used us! Manipulated us! For what end?" Jayce questioned, drawing his mother's shocked expression. "Unity," answered Corina, standing up and look out towards the fires and war still raging across the Capital. "After today, the Marines will be the leading force of my Empire. The Church's influence will be reintegrated, returned to its original ideals and beliefs with the therians as guardians and beacons of hope. We will have a safe and secure future, ready to face what is coming from beyond the Frontier."

"Beyond?" Alara questioned quietly, looking from Corina to Cassandra. "Your parents are there, alive," Corina stated, stepping down the steps and slowly approaching. "They've been communicating with us ever since they left with their crews under a disguise, acting as spies. An enemy is coming, one the Empire was not able to beat – now we stand a chance," Corina explained, reaching into her bag. "They're alive?" Alara questioned quietly. Corina pulled out a stack of letters bundled together, all addressed to Alara in a handwriting she immediately recognised as her mother's.

Alara took them shakily, opening the first letter as Corina looked straight at Jayce – his fury evident. Damian stood next to the throne, leaning into it as he readied himself to take on his older brother – should it come to it. Alara gasped, covering her mouth with her hand as tears bubbled up in her eyes – the top letter addressed to mark her twenty-fourth birthday, an event that occurred only two months prior. Her knees gave out and she dropped to the floor, silently reading before opening the next. "Why didn't you give these to me?" she whimpered.

"The information was too dangerous to be leaked - the Frontier has been a mystery for five-hundred years, but now you'll be able to see them again," Corina stated. Alara let out a sob, her world crashing down around her. Jayce growled with anger, stepping forwards towards Corina. Damian appeared before him in an instant, a firm and confident hand on Jayce's shoulder. Jayce looked down at his younger brother: Damian was almost half-a-foot shorter than him, but even with Jayce's muscular frame they were likely similar weights. Corina had weaponised him, turned him into her personal hound.

"Sea Sovereign?" interrupted Cassandra, drawing Corina's attention. "The battle isn't over. Your orders?" questioned Admiral Exarga, Admiral Truth similarly standing ready. Corina remained with her attention on Jayce. "Do not underestimate how our goals aligned, Jayce. You chose this path, we all tried to convince you to take another, to use your charisma to turn the Navy against itself. I guided you, but you walked this path."

Corina turned her attention to Cassandra, opening her mouth to speak before a dull, steady, and quiet drumbeat cut her off. Jayce stared at her as swift panic and fear crossed her face. "No..." she said quietly, rushing to the balcony, the rest of the room following. Jayce pulled out his last healing potion, handing it to Cyrenna before following, stepping past Wulf and Bjorn to look across the Capital.

The islands were in flames, the Holy Palace in ruins with a large black-red crystal through its roof, the colossi felled, the leaders of the Church and the Navy dead, and the Marines and their allies seizing the Capital for themselves, but - through all of it - a lone, dark ship was sailing into the bay. A woman stood on its bow, the entire world seeming to silence as she looked around. "We need to run," Corina stated, shaking her head as she backed away. Jayce stared at the woman. He entered into Focus, trying to analyse her, but her entire body was shrouded in black flame - something he had never seen before. She glanced upwards towards them - Jayce's heart stopping in his chest for a moment, a cold sweat forming instantly.

"Unknown contact refusing to respond to communications," stated Riley, her voice coming clearly through their communicators. "Commander, I have a shot," she requested. Alara stood frozen, every instinct telling her to run away. "Take it," ordered Witchford. A cyan bolt of fire crossed the bay from the Isle of Sanctity, flying clear and true, straight into the strange woman's head. Her head lurched, her body staggering slightly before she straightened up. She scratched

her temple, taking a shot that would have been strong enough to kill the Fleet Admiral without concern or issue. "What in the abyss?" questioned Jayce.

The woman reached forwards into the night, a glowing red portal appearing before her. She withdrew a glowing red and black greataxe, the head dripping like it was covered in lava, she then turned to face the direction the shot had come from. "Riley, Soner! Get out of there!" Alara screamed into her communicator. The woman swept the axe through the air, a line of fire extending outwards before growing larger and larger as it crossed the bay, extending into a wave of fire almost as large as the Isle of Sanctity.

"Shit!" Soner yelled, leaping to his feet and grabbing Riley by her shoulders before pushing her forwards towards the edge of the roof they had been laying upon. She tried to grab her rifle but he gave her no choice but to run. "Leave it!" he cried, the pair of them breaking into a desperate and panicked run as they raced through the streets of the Isle of Sanctity. They could see their shadows, the wall of fire consuming the buildings behind them in a loud bestial roar and illuminating the darkness of the night in bright orange.

"Don't stop!" Soner yelled, Riley mere steps ahead of him, his back heating up as the edge of the island came into view. The waters came in sight, the drop their only chance for survival. Riley glanced back, the flames devouring all they passed, whether fleeing ally or foe. "Don't look back!" Soner yelled, his skin beginning to boil. They were so close, but they weren't going to make it. "Keep her safe," echoed Alara's final orders in his mind. He grit his teeth. "Jump!" he cried out, diving forwards with his hands outstretched. Riley leapt, still too far from the edge to make to the water, but a pair of hands shoved her from behind.

Riley turned as she fell through the air, her legs trailing behind her as her head fell down towards the water – her eyes wide in shock as she looked back at Lieutenant Chase Soner. He had a big grin on his stupid face, his eyes brimming with satisfaction. He gave a wink before the flames consumed him, turning him to ash in an instant. The flames carried onwards, passing across and through Riley's legs as she fell, before she crashed into the water.

"Riley! Soner! Come in!" Alara yelled into her communicator, before looking towards Wulf in fear as the flames from the axe settled. "Help!" cried Riley's voice, fear and pain immediately recognisable. "Go!" Alara ordered to Wulf, the therian immediately leaping from the balcony and using his sword and then claws to slide down to the courtyard. The Weapon let out a groan as Wulf ran

past him on all fours, his attention only on finding and saving Riley – the person he cared about most of all.

“Jayce, we need to leave,” repeated Corina in desperate panic, backing away into the throne room. “It’s all gone wrong,” she stated, shaking her head and pacing back and forth. “Sea Sovereign,” stated Admiral Exarga, drawing Corina’s attention. “Go, we’re staying here.” Truth stepped next to her, nodding in shared sentiment. Corina shook her head as she looked at Cassandra and Arthur. “Respectfully, you’re not the Empress yet,” stated Truth with a reassuring smile. “We’ll handle this and prepare for your return.”

“We’re staying too, Admirals,” stated Beowulf and Cyrenna, as Jayce and Bjorn looked across the room in disbelief. “Me too,” Alara added. Jayce shook his head and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Are you insane? Did you see what she just did?” he questioned. She nodded, her body trembling and fear radiating from her eyes. “I’m not leaving my people, my crew need me. Go, Jayce, go – take the Empress, take Corina, keep her safe,” Alara pleaded. Jayce shook her head and she grabbed his face, kissing him. “Go, Pirate Lord. We can pick up the pieces afterwards.”

She pushed him away, looking towards Bjorn. “Alara-” Bjorn grabbed Jayce’s arm and pulled him towards the throne. “Bjorn, no – we can’t,” he stated, a wave of exhaustion overwhelming his body. “Jayce, the others are waiting – we need to go!” Bjorn reminded, letting Jayce go and walking after Corina, Damian and Ottar, down the staircase they had come through. Jayce lingered for a moment, looking from his mother to Alara. Cassandra nodded to him, and Alara put on a brave smile. “Don’t die. Promise to stay alive,” he ordered Alara. She nodded. “Go.”

Jayce hated everything that had happened: Wicke getting injured, Zoya kissing him and dying, Corina revealing herself as the Sea Sovereign – the Empress, Alara and his mother staying behind to fight some unknown enemy, and the fact that he was running away. But he knew there was no point in arguing, Bjorn was right – his crew needed him and this sort of event was the exact reason he had planned a fallback. “All crew get back to the ship!” Jayce ordered, as he emerged into a garden by the side of the Palace. “My yacht is just down there,” Corina stated, pointing to a bay beneath the waterfall leading out of the back of the Palace.

Jayce looked to Damian and Ottar. “Our ship is further away to the northeast, go – we’ll meet on the water,” Jayce instructed, the pair nodding and guiding Corina

away. Jayce didn't want to see her face a second longer, so he was more than happy to see them go. "Come on!" Bjorn stated, breaking into an exhausted sprint as they raced in the direction of the Stacked Hand, and hopefully their awaiting crew. Another wall of flame drew their attention behind them, the top of the Imperial Palace sliding off as it was hit. Jayce forced himself to turn away and keep on running.

They raced through the streets, past countless corpses and malfunctioning golems until they arrived at the pier they had visited so long ago. But there was no time to reminisce. The Stacked Hand sat waiting, his crew on board. "Come on! Everyone's on board!" yelled Zeta, waving her hand as she spotted Bjorn and Jayce. They raced to the ladder built into the hull, climbing up quickly before getting on board.

Jayce and Bjorn froze. Astris lay slumped against the mast, her sides open and insides visible. Ordo was stood wheezing next to her, his skin red and body swollen. Thalia was moving around, a ring of folded over skin hanging across her waist – exposing her raw flesh underneath. Yuthura lay on a blanket on the floor, her lower body attached to her upper only by a thin veil of sinew. Jayce couldn't see Wicke, but Wam, Fenn, Ohno, and Caelie were racing around trying to help the wounded under Marisha's command. "Get us out of here!" Jayce ordered to Bjorn, his Quartermaster and Helm heading immediately to the wheel.

"Wait! Don't go! Please don't go!" called a voice from behind Jayce, somewhere off the ship. A cry drew his attention upwards, Falconer and Wren flying over the Stacked Hand. Jayce headed to the edge of the ship, looking over the side as he spotted four people limping towards the Stacked Hand. He frowned; they were injured and all girls – one wearing a torn and exposing piece of chainmail, another with the remains of a Paladin's armour. Another was a child dressed in a bloody and torn Archbishop's robes, and the other in what looked like a Witch's dress and hat. They all looked up at him in desperation. "Come on! Hurry!" he called out, waving them aboard.

The young girl picked her nose, flicking out blood that formed into a large black and red crystal ramp. The four of them ran up it as the Stacked Hand began to move, leaping aboard before it crumbled behind them – the group collapsing as soon as they touched the deck. Jayce hardly looked at them, turning his attention to his critically injured crew. "Exarga," growled a pained voice, forcing him to look back at who he had invited on board. His eyes widened as he recognised the blonde with golden eyes, a Paladin he had met a long time ago, but it was the

other that drew his focus. Jeanne d'Arc glared at him, her body mostly exposed, a large injury in her side. "There's clothes in my room. Grab some. There's a lot of injured so make yourselves useful and don't cause problems," he ordered, turning away.

Morgana leapt to her feet, stepping forwards. "Thank you for taking us in. My name is Morgana Le Fey, mister Pirate Lord Exarga," she said, ingratiating herself quickly to the strongest person around. "Now's not really the-" Jayce attempted. "I know how to make healing potions, do you have somewhere I can find ingredients and where I can work," she immediately offered. Jayce turned and looked at the Witch. "We are out of healing potions," Marisha inserted. "Okay then," Jayce stated. "Marisha, give her everything she needs. Morgana - I'm counting on you." She bowed and followed after Marisha. With a relieved sigh, Jayce turned and looked back at the Capital falling behind in the distance - the entire area painted in an orange glow. "Stay safe, Alara."

Seize the Seas Tales: The Biggest Fish

Thalia and Ordo raced across the ruined bridge between the Isle of Majesty and the Isle of Duty, Zeta and Yuthura in their arms. They had achieved their objective but Yuthura was on death's door, something that neither Ordo nor Thalia would let stand. They both owed her too much. Zeta hung onto Thalia for dear life as she lay in her arms, the pair leaping inhuman distances across the shattered bridge.

But as they crossed - Thalia and Ordo leaping onto the rooftops - a steady drumbeat drew their attention away from their destination. Thalia froze, standing still on the rooftop with Zeta in her arms as Ordo carried onwards. Her heart raced like a rabbit's in her chest, her mouth hung open slightly and her eyes focused in on the ship in the bay. Thalia stared in awe - she had never felt such a lust for combat, a pure and unfiltered sense of death flooding every atom in her body.

It was beautiful, an untapped, and unchallenged warrior awaiting her - and more of them scattered amongst the ship behind her. She took a step forwards, away from the Stacked Hand and towards the interloper. "No!" Zeta cried, reaching up and placing her hands over Thalia's eyes. "Thalia, snap out of it! We need to go!" Zeta begged. Thalia took another unconscious step, even with her eyes covered.

Zeta lifted herself up, wrapping her arms around Thalia's head. "Please," she cried, holding Thalia tightly. Thalia faltered, reaching up and removing Zeta from her head like she was little more than a child. She held Zeta out in front of her, the pair of them looking at each other. "Please, don't fight whoever that is," Zeta asked. Thalia stared at her before glancing past her, a wall of fire extending outwards from the ship and the person stood on its bow. "Thalia..." Thalia looked back at Zeta before letting out a sigh. "You're no fun," she said in defeat, wrapping her arms around Zeta and racing off in pursuit of Ordo – her mind thinking about the strange and strongest being she had ever encountered the entire way back to the Stacked Hand.

Chapter 152: Aftermath

Jayce turned away from the burning Capital; there was nothing more he could do, and his crew were too critically injured to think about anything other than them. Marisha returned quickly after providing Morgana a place to make healing potions, immediately approaching Jayce as he was told the results of his crew's missions. "Sorry to interrupt," she stated, drawing Jayce's attention away from Zeta. He turned and looked at her, only for a quiet groan to draw both of their attention to Ordo.

Ordo clutched his chest, Astris weakly looking up at him as she lay nearby. "Ordo?" she questioned, his face in deep pain before he let out a soft gasp and toppled forwards to the floor. "Shit! Ordo!" Marisha stated, rushing forwards with Jayce and rolling him over onto his back. She pressed her head to his chest before immediately pumping his chest. Jayce stared in horror as Marisha desperately tried to resuscitate him – Yuthura's absence was being felt hard. "Tempest!" Marisha called, summoning the djinn over as the Beastly Boys stood around her, asking how they could help. They parted for Tempest, the djinn lowering himself to the ground before placing his gauntlet on Ordo and charging a heavy shock into his body.

Ordo's eyes snapped open and he lurched, taking in a heavy gasp of air. "Gods!" he yelled, bolting upright with a red-faced look of panic. "Too close!" he added, Marisha and Jayce breathing a sigh of relief. "You're telling us. Get some rest but ensure someone is with you," Jayce ordered. Ordo tried to stand up but his body gave out on him. "I think I'll just... lay here... for a bit," he mumbled quietly, Jayce and Marisha nodding in agreement.

"Where's Wicke?" Jayce questioned, looking to Marisha. She pointed to his quarters. "In there, but Jayce – it's bad. Tempest removed the spell's curse, but the wound is still magical. She'll-" Marisha stated, placing her hand on his arm. "I know. She'll have to heal the old fashioned way – the long way. What's done is done, I shouldn't have taken her with me. We just need to keep her alive until Yuthura wakes up. Keep an eye on the Paladins."

Mai Lu cocked her head as she stood in the centre of the main deck, watching a not-much-taller girl with brown hair and glowing hazel eyes run around with blankets and bandages. There was something off about her, something that neither her nor Baal could figure out. Eventually Caelie turned, staring at the strange girl watching her – their eyes locked onto one another before both of them realised just what they were looking at. Baal and Belial emerged from their hosts,

Belial lunging forwards before dropping to his knees. "My lord," he stated, as Baal stood stunned.

"Belial? By the blood of our mother, is that you?" Baal questioned. Belial looked up, the two Demons staring at one another. "It's been too long, my liege," Belial said, with a strangely human expression of relief. "More than two-hundred years – I would certainly say so. What of the others? Are they here too?" Baal immediately questioned. Belial shook his head. "I have only seen Pursan, in the body of another Pirate Lord – Kitty Deliver." Baal let out a small chuckle of relief. "That is both excellent and distressing news. You must fill me in on everything I have missed during my imprisonment."

"Wait here," Arthuria instructed to Jeanne, as they stood by the edge of the ship observing their new compatriots. Jeanne nodded weakly, clutching her side – her eyes locked onto the Vampire near the aft deck, every-so-often glancing towards the baned moving around. She clutched the hilt of the shortsword she had liberated from a corpse. She was surrounded by non-humans: it was better to be safe rather than sorry.

Jayce stepped into his quarters. Wicke lay on his bed, almost her entire body wrapped in thick and wet bandages. She looked hardly recognisable, but to Jayce's relief she didn't seem in pain. She was hooked up to several intravenous drips, and several replacement bandages and a bowl of water were nearby. "I've used my magic to keep her asleep," Zeta stated, following Jayce inside, the pair of them looking over her. "I can only hope it'll help." Jayce nodded appreciatively and she placed a soft hand on his shoulder. "This isn't your fault," she stated gently. "It was a war – she's not the only one who was hurt." Jayce didn't respond.

Zeta observed the blonde Paladin as they crossed each other outside of Jayce's room. She seemed wary of her, but Zeta doubted she didn't have the exact same expression as her in that moment. "Hurt any of us and he will kill you," she warned, leaving Arthuria to watch her go. With the threat clear, Arthuria steeled herself and entered Jayce's quarters. He immediately turned to her. "Sorry, am I intruding?" she questioned. He shook his head. "Clothes?" she asked. He pointed to a wardrobe on the far side of the room. "Right, thanks."

She rummaged inside, taking something for herself and for Jeanne. "Arthuria, wasn't it?" Jayce questioned, causing her to flinch. She turned and nodded. "I'm surprised you remembered. I bet you've met thousands of people since back when we met," she returned. Jayce smiled, nodding once again before opening

the door for her. "Some people leave more of an impact than others," he answered, internally beaming that he and Bjorn had been right on their guess. "You look like you've been through a lot - is there anything else you need?" Jayce offered. She felt herself deflate, the long day's exhaustion continuing to overwhelm her, but she shook her head. "No - thank you. We're intruders here, is there anything I can do? I know some basic healing magic, so if you have gems I could try to help after I've rested." He nodded, gesturing for her to follow.

After ensuring the guests had somewhere to sleep, Jayce returned to the main deck as Corina and Damian clambered on board. The Heavenly Hand had been attached to the Stacked Hand via a tow rope, Ottar staying behind to ensure no issues. Corina looked around, her nose upturned and a distinct look of concern on her face. Her expression relaxed as she spotted Jayce approaching her. He stopped in front of her, his arms crossed. "Not going to kneel?" Corina asked with a tired smile. "Fuck you," Jayce stated bluntly. She shook her head and tutted. "I raised you better than that."

"You raised me to be your tool: a weapon to fulfil some clutch for power," Jayce returned. She shook her head once again. "That's not true, and it's not fair. You chose your path, you picked your enemies – you have been doing so ever since Valentine first picked you up. I raised you Jayce, in the hopes that you would become a figure of legends, sure - but more-so that you'd be a good person, and would help..." She gestured across the deck, eventually settling her hand towards Astris as Thalia helped move her into Jayce's quarters. "People."

"My plans were for you to join the Navy out of spite, to not need or want your parents' guidance – something Alara has always needed – to join their rival faction. I wanted you to be New Era, to be the catalyst that invoked others to turncoat with you, so we didn't have to shatter the military and open ourselves up for someone like that woman to waltz in and takeover. Wicke changed that, and she changed that because you loved Pirate Lord Valentine, ever since you set your eyes on him. He was your hero, but that's fine too – there was no way you'd have stayed in the Navy, you just skipped to the opposition. My plans were my plans, your plans were your plans, so accept it and move on." Jayce scowled and turned away, drawing a sigh from Corina. "Don't be a child. I am not going to apologise for doing as your parents asked and moulding you and Alara into champions."

Damian observed the conversation. His older brother had changed a lot, and - albeit things hadn't gone to plan – Damian was more than happy that he didn't

need to avenge Jayce, as had been a likely probability. He left them to it, looking over Jayce's injured crew and making his way to Jayce's quarters. A giant woman stepped through the doorway, looking down at him with curiosity. "So there are two of you, good. Are you as strong as your brother?" she questioned, a rather grotesque flap of skin hanging over her waist, exposing raw muscle underneath. Damian looked up at her: she was certainly strong – he could see the traces of her Focus, a level near his own or even above it. But Ottar and a dozen other trainers had taught him how to fight with precision and lethality. She was injured, something he could easily exploit. "Definitely," he answered confidently. She didn't look impressed, stepping past him without further word. He shrugged it off - she probably recognised she would most definitely lose.

"Can I help you?" asked a pained voice from Jayce's bed, as soon as he stepped inside. The Vampire girl, Astris Kai, was staring at him in the low light – her white and black eyes containing traces of red. But Damian faltered, looking immediately at the wrapped body next to her. A young girl – late teens. Her body was covered in burns - he could tell that much. "Uh," he half-answered, before his eyes widened as he spotted traces of singed red hair. "Wicke..." he realised. "Gods... What happened?" he asked, stepping to her side and looking across her, before looking back at Astris.

"She got caught out by a Cardinal. A nasty spell, she's lucky to be alive," Astris said, trying to sit up, before falling back with a groan of pain. Damian shook his head, the Wicke he knew would have never let someone best her. She was too strong, too smart for that. "Is there anything that can be done?" Damian asked. Astris shook her head. "Not until Yuthura wakes up, and she's not exactly in a better state than any of us." Damian nodded, looking down at Wicke before cautiously reaching out to her burnt hand with a single finger. "Get better. Don't die," he told her almost silently, gently tapping her palm before stepping back.

Astris looked him up and down: he looked very similar to Jayce, only shorter and far stockier – they both shared the same expression of worry. He turned and began to walk to the door. "Damian, right?" Astris called out. He looked back at her and nodded. "Can you stay for a little bit? I don't know if she can hear in her state, but... I've had a bit of rough day – we both have. Jayce has spoken about you a lot over the year and a bit I've known him. Can you tell us about Jayce as a kid? What you've been up to? Fill the empty air and pain with... something?" she invited. Damian smiled slightly, turning and sitting in Jayce's chair. "Where to start?" he asked rhetorically, only to immediately notice that Astris was asleep and he was sat next to Wicke. He shook his head, looking towards the girl who

had left him behind and had haunted his dreams ever since. "Hey," he said softly to her.

"We'll have a more productive conversation in the morning," Corina suggested after an extended back and forth, mostly full of hostilities from Jayce. "Fine," Jayce returned. "You can borrow Wicke's bed, it's downstairs." She nodded appreciatively, stepping forwards and placing a hand on his arm. "Thank you," she said earnestly, before walking away. As soon as she was out of view, Jayce covered his face with his palms and let out a long exhale, rubbing his eyes and shaking his head.

"Falconer's plotted a course for a supply hub about two days away. We can restock on medical supplies there. Are we good to stop for the night?" Bjorn questioned, looking out to the faint glow of sunrise on the horizon. Jayce nodded, placing both arms onto Bjorn's shoulder and leaning into him. "We survived," Jayce said quietly, shaking his head. Bjorn nodded in agreement, transforming out of his therian form. "We did. All of us - but let's keep it that way. I'll organise shifts to keep an eye on the wounded. Someone needs to watch Astris and Wicke, Yuthura and Ordo. Marisha's sewing up Thalia as we speak," Bjorn stated. "Tempest can watch Doc and Ordo, we'll set them up in the living quarters." "Aye Cap'."

Before Jayce could retreat to sleep he found a pair of figures searching for him. A tiny red demon, and Belial. "Have you been spawning whilst I wasn't looking?" Jayce asked, immediately curious as to where the other Demon had come from, until he recognised the torn robes that had been on the child that had come with the Paladins and Morgana. "Captain Exarga," Belial stated, almost nervously. "Please treat Lord Baal with reverence and respect." Jayce looked at the red Demon. "Baal? As in your king?" Jayce questioned, keeping the bemusement of the chest-high Demons to himself. Belial nodded.

It had always been a touchy subject - the information the crew had been given about the Demon's fall from Heaven had been stubbornly pulled out of Belial, mostly through Caelie's own insistence. And even then, it had been full of obscurity, and double meanings – the only exception being that Baal had been revered as king before being dethroned. Jayce caught the nervous demeanour of Belial, looking down at Baal before simply nodding. "Welcome aboard."

"I would expect most to kneel," Baal grumbled, his voice a mixture of a young girl's and a deep monotone. "I think I've recently gone off the concept of monarchs. Sorry. What is it that you need?" Jayce asked. Baal looked towards

Belial. "My king wishes to travel with us," Belial answered. "And to be included within our arrangement." Jayce shook his head, drawing an immediate look of fear from Belial and sharp anger from Baal. "You dare-"

"You dare?" Jayce corrected, turning on the tiny Demon in such a forceful fashion that he actually cowered away and took a step back. "You're on my ship – if you want something, you ask yourself. You aren't in a position to demand anything. Belial is no longer your subject, you are not a king anymore – you are a traveller in the corpse of a child. I only accept those I can trust. Why should I trust you?" Jayce pressed.

Baal looked towards Belial for support, but to his immediate surprise Belial was looking down before he faded away inside his host. Caelie folded her arms and stood next to Jayce. "I could kill you all in a heartbeat," Baal threatened. "Go on. Do it," Jayce goaded. "You won't live to see the sunrise, or I'll throw you overboard and you can swim back to wherever you came from." There was immediate change, Baal fading away and the pinkish-white haired girl within returning. She held her hands up in front of her face, genuine terror in her eyes. "No, please!" she begged.

"Why should I help you?" Jayce questioned more softly, crouching down slightly to meet her eyeline. Mai Lu stammered, trying to think up some way to take control – she had never truly been without power since joining with Baal, but now she felt helpless, at Jayce's mercy. She found nothing, eventually looking down at the deck and shaking her head before crouching down and placing her hands on her head – an internal argument shaking her mind. Jayce looked instead towards Caelie as she stood staring at the tiny girl. Eventually she looked at Jayce and nodded, her sympathy clear.

"Okay," Jayce stated, Mai Lu snapping her gaze to him with wide bleary eyes, her pink and red irises shining. "You can stay, but I have several rules – that are non-negotiable. I want a clear outline of your abilities, what you and Baal can do. I want you to sign a pact with me, stating that you will bring no harm of any sorts to my crew or my allies, for as long as we are travelling together, to which I will assist you in finding other Demons and getting you in contact with them to the best of my abilities. You will follow my orders, and you will internally agree that you are in control of the body. What's your name?" Jayce questioned. "Mai Lu Mina," she answered quietly, staring up him in stunned awe. "Mai Lu, it is an expectation that you are in control of your own body. She is

helping you, Baal – that is the least you can do,” Jayce stated. “Sort that out between you and then choose if you want to stay.”

Morgana wearily glanced around the laboratory she had been provided access to: resources were running low, but dense materials to be converted through alchemy were endless. She had several large cauldrons of healing potions on the go, each under her direct care and duty – one she had no intention of failing. She faltered for a moment, after once again using the giant philosopher’s stone created from the souls of the Daughters of Shade, staring down at the raw ingredients she had formed with a desperate desire. “Why am I so desperate to help them?” she questioned to herself out loud.

She couldn’t help but admit that she had nowhere else to go, and there were next to no places better than to be part of the crew of the Pirate Lord that had led the victorious side of the war. A cauldron began to broil and she rushed over to it, scolding herself for her doubt and lapse in concentration. “You did this to yourself,” she stated. “Zoya gave you the chance to join her and you betrayed her, betrayed them all for Arthuria.”

Urien cawed, drawing her attention. “Was it the wrong choice?” he questioned. Morgana shook her head and then shrugged, pacing back and forth. “I-I don’t know. I-I don’t know. Maybe?” Urien tilted his head. “Don’t look at me like that.” “Then make a choice. Make one for yourself, and only for yourself. No Arthuria, just you,” he advised. She thought to herself, thinking deeply on what she wanted. What she desired. “Okay. I’ve got it.”

Jayce and his tired crew gathered in the living quarters, helping themselves to any food they could make quickly, alcohol and caffeine. Ordo and Yuthura both lay on improvised beds, kept under a watchful eye. Jayce looked over his friends – Bjorn and Marisha were leant into each other in the kitchen, Thalia kept picking at the stitching across her stomach whilst Zeta kept scolding her, and Caelie was sat next to him on a sofa – with Mai Lu nearby, watching them closely.

“I don’t even know what to say,” Jayce stated, drawing the group’s attention, his body and mind exhausted. “We succeeded, for the most part, and...” he attempted, before simply letting out a sigh, unable to feel a sense a victory. “We wouldn’t have all lived without you, Captain – regardless of the outcome, this is a win for us. The Church is finished,” Bjorn stated, as Marisha played with her transceiver. The others nodded in agreement. The door opened and Arthuria stepped in, faltering as she looked across the group. “Sorry, am I interrupting?” she questioned, looking towards Jayce and then Mai Lu. “No, not at-”

A chime drew all of their attention to the Guild newscaster. "What the-?" Zeta questioned, a broadcast was surprising for the extremely early hour, but Marisha gasped, rushing over and turning it on. "You need to see this," she stated, stepping back as it produced an image. A face was staring intently at them - one that was slightly bloodied and swollen, a face that Jayce recognised immediately: the Puppet Emperor stared directly at them all.

"Go on, speak up, introduce yourself," said a high-pitched feminine voice from somewhere behind the camera. The entire room stared in complete stunned silence. "My... my name is... Jakob Sol Zin Liu, Emperor of the New World Empire, Sea Sovereign," he stated, his eyes locked on a figure behind the camera. They couldn't see much of his body, but his face was pale and clammy - as if he had lost a lot of blood. "And?" questioned the voice, the camera pulling away slightly, just enough for Jayce to spot Admiral Truth slumped on the floor in the background. "And, as Sea Sovereign, I declare the full surrender of my Empire to the Betrayers and their leader."

"Perfect," said the voice, passing the camera to another person before it pulled back, putting her in frame with two figures kneeling next to her. Jayce stared in horror as he spotted his mother and Alara, both with their hands behind their back. "Alara..." he muttered, his attention immediately focusing on the woman that had conquered them all. A grey-haired head bounced across the floor before landing at her feet, both Cassandra and Alara staring at it in horror. The camera then zoomed in.

"Well, how exciting! Here we are again, but this time on the other side of the world," she stated. She had similar dark orange hair to Jayce's mother - her hair however was more messy and layered, stopping above her shoulders with a tiny ponytail at the top of her head. Her eyes were a deep brown, with thick black eyeliner around them painted into points. She had fair skin, and was quite young, but - even on her grinning face - Jayce could see a deep darkness behind her eyes: the eyes of a killer. She had a lip ring on the bottom right of her mouth, and countless piercings throughout her ear and nose. She had faint freckles across the bridge of her nose, and a dark mole under her left eye. Dark tattoos covered almost her entire neck, spreading upwards to extend slightly over the edge of her chin like a cursed mark.

"Damn," Zeta muttered subconsciously, drawing several eyes. "Sorry," she quickly added. "For those who don't know me, my name is Atalana Scáthach: Sea Sovereign of the Old and New World - your new ruler and conqueror."

“Don’t listen to her!” yelled out Cassandra. The young woman rolled her eyes and shook her head, pivoting and throwing a heavy kick into Cassandra’s stomach. Admiral Exarga’s eyes and mouth went wide before she flew across the room crashing into and through a pillar. “Honestly,” stated the Sea Sovereign, tutting as she turned back to the camera. “Some people.”

“Now, I’m most certain you’ve got questions, and all in due time. But first of all, I call out to the so-called Pirate Lords of this side of the world. I hear you’re formidable soldiers, and I’d love to see proof of it. So to you, I extend an invite. Come to my palace at the south of this world, and take a seat as a Pirate Lord of the whole world! But this offer doesn’t just extend to those already with seats, oh-no-no, I offer the title to anyone who is brave enough to sit around my table. But be sure to bring the head of the seat you’re taking. You have a year today to get there, until then, I declare the disbandment of the Pirate Lords. And in its place I call for a new age of adventure!”

“She can’t do that,” stated Bjorn. “Tell me she can’t just do that?” he questioned. Jayce had no answer. “I invite you all to join me in this grand adventure. Come seize the seas for yourselves, take the world for a ride, live out your boring lives. The Frontier, as you call it, is open for business. The world on the other side is safe, mostly, and more than ready to welcome you all!” she declared. Jayce looked towards Alara, she was staring at the camera, mouthing something. “Not real,” it looked like.

The Sea Sovereign turned on her, squatting down and placing a hand on Alara’s head. Alara flinched, terror crossing her face. “Now, I had been intending for Admiral Exarga to do this, but you’ll have to do. As the current representative of the Marines and the Empire, do you surrender to me? Do you swear fealty forever and ever?” Sea Sovereign Atalana Scáthach asked. Alara stared at the camera. “We surrender, but you’ll never have our loyalty!” Alara declared, steeling herself and shutting her eyes.

The Sea Sovereign’s face fell before a firm smile returned. “You know what... that’ll do. What was your name again?” she asked. Alara opened her eyes as the hand was taken off her head, looking to her. “C-captain Alara Vanathur,” she said quietly. “Vana- huh, interesting. Well, you heard it here folks,” stated the Sea Sovereign, standing up and approaching the camera. “Captain Vanathur has surrendered the New World’s biggest military to me - take that as you will. But it’s not just me...” She took the camera, walking back to Alara and removing her hidden bindings without a single movement. “Hold this,” Scáthach ordered.

The camera slowly and shakily turned, pointing towards a row of twelve figures stood in front of the Emperor's throne. The Sea Sovereign walked through them and sat in her throne. "My Gods," Jayce muttered, both him and Bjorn lunging forwards to get a closer look as they stared in horror. "These are my Betrayers," she declared. The line-up of twelve people included a tiger therian with a scar on his mouth - that Jayce immediately recognised as Tanare, Jure Strigon - the Vampire Lord, a tall blonde with golden eyes that stunned Arthuria - her older sister Elaine, and near the middle, as one of the shortest members of the group, Vexx. "We own this world."

The camera cut out, leaving a dull whine. "That was..." Jayce and Bjorn stated to one another. "My sister?" stated Arthuria, her own face in pure shock. "Woah woah woah, Vexx? As in the Vexx? The one who left you guys?" Zeta questioned, pointing to his poster on the wall. Caelie nodded empathically. "Not just him. Strigon, Dick Valentine's first mate Tanare. I didn't get a good enough look at the others, but... this is bad, really bad," Jayce stated.

The broadcaster reactivated, this time replaced by a different face - one they recognised and one that only drew more horror from Jayce. "Hello world!" declared Holli, with a bright and beaming smile as she sat behind a large desk somewhere lavish. The symbol of the World Guild, a green mask with a crescent taken out of it was emblazoned on the wall behind her. "Oh no," Jayce muttered, a nasty thought settling into his mind.

"My name is Holli, currently representing Guild Master Phoenix and the World Guild as a whole. I'm sure all of you are as stunned by that broadcast as we are, so as a representative of the Guild, I would like to wholeheartedly offer our congratulations to the new Sea Sovereign. We offer our complete support in her reign and all of the new business prospects that will be created due to it. In celebration of our new alliance, I wish to also announce that the World Guild has recently completed a pair of outposts, manned on either side of the frontier by myself and my business partner Myra Yashiro - ready and waiting to provide travellers with everything they could need to cross the border from either side. And to provide information and guidance on what to expect and to see in this new open world. For those in New World, simply make your way to the island of Last Drop. We eagerly await your business."

The broadcast ended. "We've been played. The Guild were in on this attack the entire time," Jayce stated, stepping away from the broadcaster and rubbing his face. "Jayce," Bjorn stated, drawing his attention. Jayce looked towards him, the

pair communicating silently to each other. "We'll deal with it in the morning," Jayce stated, too exhausted to come up with anything concrete – his mind too occupied with Alara and Vexx. The door opened to the living quarters, Morgana stepping through and looking straight towards Jayce. "Pirate Lord Exarga, I think there's something you should know," she stated.

Jeanne couldn't get the tainted feeling out of her as she stood in the bowels of the ship she had boarded. No matter how fatigued she felt, how much the wound in her side hurt, her mind kept returning to the beasts around her – to that creature in Jayce Exarga's quarters. The Vampire haunted her mind: it was an evil monstrosity that did nothing other than bring harm to others and was lying resting on board, something she could not let stand. She waited for Arthuria to wander off in search of Exarga before slipping away back towards the main deck – Morgana's raven watching her from the railing of the aft deck as she approached Exarga's quarters. It was her duty as a Paladin to deal with the creature, it would be more than easy enough to say it succumbed to its wounds.

Astris' ears perked up a little as she heard Jayce's door open once again. It was most likely Damian returning, so she paid it no attention – until she heard the footsteps approaching her side of the bed. Astris peeked open an eye, both of them snapping open in fast alarm as she spotted the Paladin Elder – Jeanne d'Arc – stood over her with a large knife in her hands. Her green eyes were dull and devoid of emotion, her face cold and expressionless – apart from the tiniest of smiles at the corner of her mouth. "Don't you dare," Astris stated, surprising the Elder and moving her hand beneath the blanket covering her damaged body.

Jeanne faltered as she heard the click of a weapon beneath the Vampire's blanket. She kept her arms up, the knife poised and ready to strike down, but she glanced with only her eyes towards the Vampire's side. There was a clear object underneath – a pistol, most likely, probably one of the two that Exarga had handed to her when Jeanne had first seen them interact. "It's not loaded," Jeanne stated quietly. "You wouldn't keep a loaded pistol by your side as you slept." "If you were certain, then you'd have struck me. Move and I fire. We both die." "I'd make that trade more than willingly to slay a fiend like you." Astris smiled. "Coming from a war criminal that ran a cult that really shakes my soul."

The door opened behind them, drawing both of their attention. "Jeanne?" Arthuria said in quiet surprise. "Put the blade down," she asked, stepping forwards as Jayce stood behind her with Morgana behind him. "See," Morgana said proudly. "I do," Jayce stated, surprised that Morgana was both correct in her

prediction and was so readily willing to tell Jayce. Arthuria ignored them both, her golden eyes locked on Jeanne as she tried to disarm the situation. Jeanne stared back at her. "She's a Vampire, Arthuria, a monster."

Jayce locked eyes with Astris. "You okay?" he mouthed. She nodded – the second the Paladins had arrived she had been expecting conflict - she was more than ready to kill the Paladin Elder, even in her current state. "Jeanne, they saved us, even though we were their enemies. I get it, but I can't agree with you. We arrived with a Demon and a Witch, a Vampire is hardly anything different. Put the blade down, please." Jeanne looked back at Astris, the pair staring at each other before she let out a sigh and lowered the blade, handing it over to Arthuria who then handed it to Jayce.

Jeanne looked down at the floor, her face blank and emotionless. "I warned you," Jayce stated, stepping forwards and towering over her. "Whatever your feelings were before, get over them – or I will throw you all off this ship," he threatened. "Even me?" Morgana asked quietly. Jayce turned and looked at her before a smile crossed his face. "No, you can stay." She pumped her fist and then straightened up. He nodded and then turned back to the Paladins. "It's late and we will discuss this in the morning. Return to the rooms you were provided with. Arthuria – watch your Elder."

The Paladins and Morgana departed. "You've got something on your mind, what's wrong?" Astris questioned, trying to sit up only to fall back down in pain. "After we've gone back to the Capital, we're going to cross the Frontier."

Seize the Seas Tales: Betrayers

Alara looked up at the Sea Sovereign as the camera was turned off. She was not a particularly tall woman – shorter than Alara, but by no means small – yet Alara felt insignificant next to her, like an ant staring up at a giant. "You have your jobs - go do them," ordered the Sea Sovereign to her Betrayers. They began to move but Alara tried to stand, drawing the attention of several of them and the Sea Sovereign.

Alara stared directly at Tanare, the giant tiger therian shaking his head ever-so-slightly with a silent warning. "Going somewhere, Captain?" questioned Scáthach, turning to Alara with a pitying expression, her hands on her hips. Alara could hear the faint groaning of Cassandra, and Truth was still breathing. "Why?" she asked, looking at the Sea Sovereign but targeting her question elsewhere. "You should kill this one before it comes back to bite us," warned

Strigon. "If I care for your point, I'll ask for it," returned the Sea Sovereign, dismissing the Vampire Lord without even a look.

"Why? Why what?" she asked, forcing Alara back to her knees without even touching her. Alara strained against her body, her eyes glancing towards Vexx and Tanare in desperation. It was the briefest of glances but Scáthach noticed it, turning immediately to see both Vexx and Tanare looking at her. "Care to explain to me how she knows you two?" she asked, understanding immediately what was going on. "I don't," Vexx immediately answered, Tanare remaining silent. "Then kill her, she's no use anymore, and I don't want to mess up my clothes," ordered the Sea Sovereign, stepping away from Alara.

Vexx slowly and uneasily approached. He looked down at Alara, his body tense and uncertain as he looked at her. "I'm sorry," he said softly, forming a fist. "Wait!" Tanare called out, as Vexx pulled back his fist. Vexx faltered, shutting his eyes. Scáthach approached him first, placing her chin on his shoulder and looking down at Alara. In the shadow of the dark skies above, her brown eyes glowed purple, the glow moving slightly as they stared menacingly down at Alara. "She knows you, Vexx. How?"

"Atalana!" called out Tanare. She held a hand out behind her, before holding up a single finger. "Wait your turn," she warned. "Well?" she pushed. "Kill me and there won't be anything that will stop Jayce from coming after you," Alara warned. "Jayce Exarga, I'm guessing?" asked Scáthach. Vexx flinched. "And why would he care about someone like you?" she asked. Tanare stepped forwards desperately. "They grew up together, nothing more," he answered. "Same as that Guild girl, Holli."

Scáthach didn't break her gaze on Alara, eventually letting out a sigh and rolling her eyes. She took her head off Vexx's shoulder, his entire body untensing, spinning on her heel and facing Tanare. "So that's why you know her – through Valentine - through Jayce, hmph - okay." She looked back at Alara. "You should be careful throwing names around, it can get you in trouble. Take that as your only warning."

She unleashed a flash of Panic, Alara toppling to the ground unconscious. "You both know your deals, and I'm not looking to create anymore of an enemy out of Jayce Exarga, so I'll leave her be. Happy?" she asked. Tanare nodded appreciatively, but Scáthach was looking at Vexx, his eyes on Alara's body. Eventually he nodded.

Chapter 153: A New Age

It was an uncomfortable night's sleep for all who had seen the broadcast of the Sea Sovereign, and a long and quiet morning as the reality of it set in for everyone. There had been no fatalities during the night, but both Yuthura and Wicke were still deeply wounded, and Astris was likely days away from being able to leave Jayce's bed - leaving the rest of the injured to fend for themselves. Jayce had been expecting for Corina to find him, but instead he had to go and find her.

To his surprise, he found her hidden away in the crow's nest, her chin on her knees and tears dried on her face as she stared out across the ocean. "Jayce?" she said quietly, as he peered his head over the edge of the crow's nest and spotted her. "I'm surprised, Corina, I didn't think you were the type to run away and hide," Jayce stated condescendingly. Corina wiped her face and looked away from him, remaining silent.

Jayce looked down to the deck far below, swearing silently to himself before climbing up to join her. "Sorry," he said quietly, sensing now was not the time to be snarky. She didn't react or respond, not even moving to give him a better place to stand or sit. "So what comes now?" Jayce questioned. She let out a soft sigh and shook her head, eventually shrugging before wiping her eyes once again. "I... I don't know. But it's over, more than thirty years of planning ruined in a heartbeat. Without Jakob I have no way of reclaiming the throne. Not that I could without Scáthach killing me."

Jayce nodded in agreement. "Serves you right," he stated cruelly. She glared at him and then cracked a small smile, shaking her head. "Maybe you're right." She stood up, looking up at him and placing her hand to his cheek. "You've suffered a lot to fight for what you believe in, and it's made you a strong and powerful man - but I still see that boy in you, Jayce. I always will. I am proud of who you've become, and I will always love you as my own. So - I wish you luck against her," she stated. Jayce looked down, his intentions easily betraying him.

"The second I saw Tanare I knew you wouldn't be able to resist her bait. And that's not even thinking about your ex-crewmate. Take care in the Old World, look for Alara's parents - they will guide you, should you need it..." She turned and looked out towards the rising sun. "I'm leaving Damian in your care, he's no use to me anymore." Jayce nodded, somewhat insulted, somewhat impressed by both the ruthlessness, harshness and honesty of Corina Liu. "Great, another teen to babysit." Corina chuckled, before stepping past him and climbing down. Jayce

stayed up there for a moment afterwards. He felt his anger subside: she had used him - they all had - but he could understand why.

"Corina, why?" Damian questioned, as he watched Corina stride to the edge of the Stacked Hand where Ottar stood waiting. "I've trained you well, you are more than capable of standing on your own two feet. It's time to grow up Damian, time for you to figure out your own path," she stated, turning and looking at him with cold and uncaring eyes. He shook his head. "Corina, please, you can't just abandon me. What happened to ruling the world?" he questioned in disbelief. "Sorry Damian. I've now got to find another way to achieve that and I can't do that whilst worrying about you. Goodbye - Jayce will take care of you." She climbed over the edge, Ottar giving Damian one last nod before looking towards Jayce. "Take care of your brother, and yourself." Jayce smiled at him. "Look after each other," he returned, Ottar turning and beginning to climb down. His head returned a moment later. "Watch the waters, something's been following you ever since we left the Capital."

Jayce frowned as he watched the Heavenly Hand turn and sail off on its own journey. He sensed nothing, had sensed nothing, and saw nothing following the Stacked Hand, but Damian drew his attention away from the water. "What the hell did you say to her?" he demanded, loudly and irritatingly. Jayce looked down at his younger brother. "I didn't tell her to dump you on me, that's for sure. Make yourself useful, go ask Bjorn for some jobs to do." Damian stared up at him, eventually scowling and storming off.

Several hours passed before Arthuria went to find Jayce. She found him expecting her. "Truth be told, I thought you'd have come sooner," he stated, reading over the list of supplies Bjorn wanted to buy, for when they arrived at the nearest supply hub in a day's time. "Then I guess you know what I'm going to ask?" she stated, standing at relative attention whilst dressed in clothes that had been lent to her. "One of those blondes was your sister. Which one?" Jayce questioned, taking out a photo that had come with the day's mail – the headline and almost every page talking about the war and its aftermath, and what was to come with the Old World. "Do you really need an answer?" Arthuria questioned, looking at the tall, broad-shouldered, blonde woman with golden eyes that looked distinctly like her.

Jayce smiled, shaking his head. "No, not really, but Morgana doesn't look all that similar to you so I just wanted to be sure. You want to join my crew? Hunt down your sister like we plan to with Vexx and Tanare, I'm guessing?" Arthuria

nodded. "How and why should I trust you? Your Elder tried to murder my crewmate, and only a day ago you belonged to the Church," he asked. Arthuria thought for a moment and then shook her head. "You shouldn't," she answered honestly. "In all truth, you had no reason to bring us on board, but you did – and that tells me a lot about who you are. Your crew tells me a lot about who you are. I can see the respect and care they have for you, the way they turn and look at you whenever you arrive. You look after them. And I need help to get to Elaine – I'm weak, you're strong. I will swear a new oath, one to you, if you want – one I will not break," she stated, pulling out a white stick with some cyan leaves attached to it.

Jayce looked at the stick with bemusement before looking towards Arthuria as she stood with a desperate expression on her face. "Okay. Truth be told I was always going to let you stay. I've already added Mai Lu and Morgana to the roster, and they both asked on your behalf. You, however," Jayce stated, looking past Arthuria to Jeanne as she stood in her shadow. "Why should I let you join, Elder?" he asked.

Jeanne looked back at him, her face devoid of emotion apart from the tiniest expression of fear in her eyes as she looked to Arthuria. "I... I'm not an Elder anymore. Arthuria is all I have..." she muttered almost silently. Jayce looked at her – her reputation was formidable, he had been expecting far more of her, but all he saw was a young adult in a big scary world. "How old are you both?" he asked. "Jeanne's nineteen, I'm twenty."

Jayce let out a sigh. "Fine. You said you make oaths. I don't need one, but it looks like you do. How do you make them, what do you need?" he asked, standing up from the living quarters sofa. Arthuria held up her stick. "This was the Tree of Oaths, it was our conduit, but I don't know if it'll still work." "Okay, speak to Falconer. He'll repot your stick and will try to revive it. I want nothing but the best from both of you. That means following orders, no matter what they are. You will make yourselves useful, and I will help you get to your sister. Understood?" he asked. Arthuria nodded immediately. Jayce then looked towards Jeanne. "Yes... Captain," she said quietly.

"Woah there," Bjorn stated, as Ordo staggered away from the Stacked Hand to help move cargo. His skin was still slightly pink, but he looked healthier than he had been, albeit with a few stretchmarks and scars from his fights and overdose on stimulants. "I'm tired of doing nothing, let me at least haul cargo," Ordo growled. "Absolutely not. It's been two days. You shouldn't even be out of bed,"

Bjorn returned. "Come on Bjorn," Ordo attempted, only for Bjorn to point back to the Stacked Hand and transform into his therian form. "My orders are clear," Bjorn stated, pulling rank. Ordo looked up at him before he turned away, grabbing a crate and then running off with it whilst giggling childishly. He almost immediately had to set it back down, clutching his back and hissing through his teeth in pain. "Let that teach you!" Bjorn called out to him.

Ordo wasn't the only Ace struggling to accept their wounds. Despite her injuries still not fully closing, Astris too was hobbling around, forcing Jayce to chase her down and carry her back to her bedroom – often by following the trail of blood she left behind her. "I'm fine!" she protested, only to yelp as he prodded her, swiftly slapping his arm in gentle retaliation. "Stop hurting yourself. You're not missing anything," he reiterated once again, placing her down gently. She scowled at him and then looked away. He shook his head as he left, half-certain she was doing it just for the game of it.

They stayed at Pantar Outpost for a little over a day, resting and gathering information. Jayce also ensured his crew were looked over by a doctor, but they could do nothing for Wicke or Yuthura. With the ship restocked with everything they needed, and a heavy amount of excess materials and medical supplies purchased, the Stacked Hand turned back around, heading back the way they had come. Back to the Capital.

Jayce sat in meditation. He had thought about it all for days, agonised over everything as he processed all that had happened. But his mind kept returning to one moment, one repeating moment: the moment that Zoya had kissed him. He channelled his Focus, diving deep into the Underworld as Caelie watched him – ensuring that nothing went wrong. He found himself back in the Abyss, floating over the dark grey, sandy seabed surrounding the black pyramid. Countless souls surrounded him, all slowly making their way towards the bell hanging over the pyramid.

He frowned as he revived some time later. She hadn't been there. He had been expecting her to have been there, but the more he thought about it the more he couldn't help but accept that it was unlikely she'd had a reason to wait. Still, it bothered him so he went to the only person he thought might have had some answers. "Say again?" Morgana questioned, as she paused her brewing of potions. "Zoya. What happened to her and the other Daughters of Shade?" Jayce asked.

"They were making a ritual to collect the souls of everyone around them, they planned to eliminate their enemies in one swift move and then use their souls to fuel their magic. I flipped the spell, absorbing their souls instead," Morgana stated proudly. Jayce tilted his head. "You... absorbed their souls?" he asked. She nodded, pointing to the large red orb sat nearby on the workbench. "Is that-" "Yep, a philosopher's stone containing all of the Daughters of Shade."

"Are they still... alive?" Jayce asked. Morgana stepped over to it and tapped it with her wand. The orb glowed slightly within, countless shadows swirling beneath the crimson surface. "I don't know, Alchemy isn't really my area of expertise. Falconer said Yuthura would be able to explain more about it to me when she wakes up. But, I'd say so. Think of them as a living battery." "Is there any way of getting souls out?" Jayce questioned. Morgana turned to him, a look of confusion on her face. "Why?" she asked, curious as to why he cared. "Um, so they can rest in peace. It seems... cruel," he answered. Morgana shrugged. "I can try, but... all of them? It seems a bit wasteful." Jayce faltered. "Could you get Zoya's soul out of there?" he asked. She looked back at the orb and then nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

The air was electric with a nervous tension the morning of their arrival. A week had passed since the war had ended, enough time for the debris and corpses to sink, buried under the shallow surface of the surrounding ocean. As they approached, Jayce looked down beneath the waters - the ocean was murky, full of scavengers feasting on the remains. He could smell blood in the air, and with the dampness of the morning he felt like he was covered in it.

"What's the plan?" Astris asked, snapping him out of it. He turned to her, a few others glancing over to listen. "There isn't a plan. I have no idea what's waiting for us. We'll help out where we can, I'll talk to whoever's in charge and we'll go from there," he answered. Morgana raised her hand shyly, drawing a small smile from Jayce. "Captain, um, can I go to the Holy Palace? There might be Serving Girls still beneath there - they deserve more than to die down there, scared and alone," she stated. "There also could be artifacts and treasures we could loot," she added, to entice him. Jayce nodded. "That's not a bad idea." Jeanne met Jayce's gaze and she nodded silently to him, asking the same. "Okay. Morgana, Thalia, Marisha, Jeanne and Tempest will go. We'll stay as a group first, I'll see if you guys can get an escort - I also need to get you three pardons first," he declared, looking towards Arthuria, as well as Jeanne and Morgana.

They docked inside the main bay. Although the fires across the city had been put out, a strong smell of smoke floated on the winds. The Sole Survivor still lay beached on the shores of the Isle of Majesty, it's body gutted and insides torn out. Numerous other ships were also beached, but alternatively several newcomers had also arrived. Jayce spotted his father's ship, as well as numerous floating barges carrying building materials and supplies.

The Rising Aces disembarked, leaving the Beastly Boys behind to watch Yuthura – her body now whole, but still unconscious – and Wicke. "Greetings!" called out a surprisingly cheery dockworker as soon as Jayce landed on the pier below. She bounced over, stopping in front of him before her eyes widened with recognition. "Oh, wow. Uh, Jayce Exarga and the Rising Aces, welcome." Jayce immediately noticed her hands were stained red. She chuckled nervously as she watched his gaze, putting her hands behind her. "I'm guessing you've heard of the recent calamity?" she questioned. Jayce nodded, folding his arms and glaring with suspicion. "Why are you here?" he asked.

"Well, with the Emperor... dead, we received a final order: to retire. Some of us, have stayed to help. Vice-Admiral Exarga thought it a good idea if we watched the docks and to let him know of anything concerning. Are you concerning?" she asked with a grin. "Very. Where's the Vice-Admiral?" Jayce questioned. She turned and pointed to the ruins of the Imperial Palace. "A headquarters has been set up in the remains of the Palace." Jayce nodded appreciatively, taking out a very hefty tip from his money pouch and giving it to her. "Thank you." He then stepped past her, the others following closely.

On the way to the Imperial Palace, they came across the ruins of a large market square. Rows of corpses lay strewn across it, covered in thin sheets as Sisters walked amongst them, trying to identify them, along with Marines standing guard. Arthuria surged forwards, heading straight into the arms of a blonde woman with a scar on her mouth. "You're alive!" Meredea gasped, holding Arthuria tightly. "I am. The children?" Arthuria questioned, pulling back and analysing Meredea's face. "They're fine – scared - but fine." Meredea looked past Arthuria to the group she had arrived with. "I see you found allies?" Arthuria nodded. "Yeah, I have."

A large man waddled over towards Arthuria and Meredea. "Proctor Gujin? You're alive!" Arthuria questioned, diving into him as he chuckled. He held her tightly. "I am, as are many others. They are waiting for a command to return, but I figured the other Proctors and I could find a way to... patch up the damage

we've caused, in the meantime. Unfortunately we've not yet had a chance to speak to any of the Marines with authority. Have you heard from the Elder?" Gujin asked.

Arthuria turned to the group, Gujin's eyes widening as he spotted Jeanne amongst them. "Elder," he stated, stepping forwards towards her and preparing to kneel. Jeanne shook her head and placed her hands out in front of her. "Elder?" he repeated. "Not anymore. It's over," she said bluntly, stepping behind Jayce and poking him in the small of his back. "Are you sure?" Jayce asked her quietly. She nodded. "E-elder I don't understand, the Order can survive this, I know we can."

Jayce stepped forwards. "The Tree of Oaths was destroyed," he stated, covering for Jeanne. "And as of the moment, Jeanne and all other Paladins are criminals. Your Order is finished," Jayce said harshly. Gujin flashed red, looking up at Jayce with anger. "You do not have the right to speak on the Elder's behalf," he growled. "He's right," Jeanne stated quietly. "Go home." Jeanne began to walk onwards, heading across the square with her head low. Gujin looked towards Arthuria in confusion. She let out a sigh, watching as the Rising Aces headed after Jeanne. "We'll speak to the Marines, but the Order isn't coming back. I'm sorry."

Jayce left Arthuria behind, heading onwards to the Imperial Palace. Countless manned checkpoints had been set up, the numerous Marines not questioning him as he passed. He spotted admiration and awe in their faces, but he ignored it. The Palace courtyard was full of several large tents: an impromptu hospital, a command centre and a morgue. "Exarga?" questioned Kask, as he stood somewhat lazily by the final checkpoint, a large cluster of Marines and Navy standing guard. "You're back!"

"What's the situation?" Jayce questioned, as his crew moved forwards. "Your timing is almost perfect, your father arrived only a few hours ago. A meeting is about to held by the Admirals and other Imperial command, I'm sure you'll be welcome amongst them," Kask stated. Jayce nodded appreciatively, looking around and spotting Alara stood with Wulf next the hospital tent. "I'll see you there."

Astris looked around before racing over to Alara and Wulf. "Thank the Gods you're alive!" she cried, tackling Alara in a surprising hug. Alara looked down at her in surprise before hugging her back. "What are you doing here?" Alara questioned. "We came to find out the situation. Are you hurt? What about the

others?" Astris questioned. Both Wulf and Alara's faces darkened. "No..." Astris said quietly. "Soner didn't make it," Alara said quietly, pulling out a melted dog tag from her pocket. "Riley?"

Wulf gestured to inside the hospital tent, Astris immediately stepping through to find several rows of injured Marines on beds. Riley immediately noticed her, waving her over. "Gods, Riley... your legs," Astris stated in shock, looking at the stumps just above Riley's knees. Riley forced a smile. "Yeah, it's going to be hard finding shoes in my size," she said darkly. Astris shook her head, hugging her friend tightly. "I'm sorry about Soner. I'm so glad you're alive," she said softly. Riley nodded. "Me too," she said quietly.

"Captain," said a voice, drawing Alara's attention away from Riley and Astris. Several gasps and mutterings alerted her immediately to him, if his easily recognisable voice wasn't enough. She turned and looked up at Jayce, wanting nothing more than to grab him and hold him tightly, but also aware of her responsibilities as a Marine Captain. "Ex-Pirate Lord Exarga, I'm glad you're here. You have impeccable timing."

Jayce smiled, reading her genuine expression of relief and the thousand words she was speaking to him through her brown eyes. "I'm glad you're alive." Wulf cleared his throat, drawing their attention as their faces flashed red. "The meeting, Captain," he reminded. Alara nodded appreciatively, looking back towards Riley. Jayce looked as well, spotting Riley's stumps. He reached up to his necklace. "Tempest, can you come to the medical tent, I need you to make some prosthetics. The best you can."

The djinn floated in, Jayce quickly alerting him to Riley's condition as well as numerous others before leaving him to it. They stepped out, Astris spotting her siblings and rushing over to them before Wulf excused himself. Alara and Jayce quickly found themselves alone as they crossed the courtyard to the command tent. It was mostly empty, apart from Vice-Admiral Exarga and a few analysts. "Jayce," he said with soft relief, immediately approaching his son and hugging him tightly. "Dad. Damian's here too. Mum?"

"She's fine. Inside the Palace with the others, preparing to discuss our next steps." Jayce nodded appreciatively. The analysts left the tent, leaving the three of them alone. "It's a mess, but one we can survive," Philip told them. Jayce's father looked exhausted. "I've brought some additional supplies, and we negotiated to get more sent here," Jayce stated. Vice-Admiral Exarga cracked a small smile. "Perfect, thank you. Come on, we have a meeting to attend to."

Astris, Cyrenna and Beowulf all stared down at the corpse covered in a blue cape. It was one of many, but they knew immediately who it was. They stood in silence, none of them ready to speak, or even aware of what they wanted to say. Cyrenna stood with Admiral Kai's gauntlets still on her hands. She had hardly taken them off, preparing for another disaster to come her way. Eventually she looked towards Astris. "Does anyone want to say anything?" she questioned. Beowulf spat on his father's corpse, shaking his head and storming off, leaving the two sisters behind. Astris shut her eyes, feeling tears bubbling up once again. Cyrenna gently placed an arm around her shoulder. "It's over," she said softly. "Then why don't I feel happy about it?" Astris asked.

Jayce and Alara hovered inside the command tent for a moment as Vice-Admiral Exarga left to go to the meeting. As soon as the entrance closed, they grabbed each other in a tight embrace. "You have no idea how worried I was," Jayce said quietly, as Alara buried her head in his chest. "I'm okay, we're okay – we're alive," she returned, staying there for a moment before pressing away and then reaching up to plant a kiss on his lips. "Jayce, she's unfathomable. I-I don't even know how to begin describing her presence," she said with a shudder. Jayce shook his head. "We'll talk about it later. We shouldn't miss this meeting."

They left the tent, Jayce immediately reaching for his communicator. "Astris, Ordo, Bjorn, I want you inside for this meeting. The rest of you stay nearby and help out where you can," he ordered. Alara looked at him, a faint smile on her face. "So commanding," she stated with a chuckle. He scowled and bumped into her, the others appearing behind him almost instantly. "Captain," Bjorn and Ordo greeted. "Gentlemen," responded Alara.

They headed inside to the nearest dining hall. Alara looked around: she had once had a birthday dinner there – it felt so long ago. A very long table had been set up, the seats occupied with the surviving Admirals: Chika Blackwell, Marcus Barome, Hai Koga, Luka Brawne, Harper Otrera, Cain Armstrong and Vixen Vito, all near the middle. Only three Old Dogs were present: Xarga, Kelborn and Bralor – Cassus and Katan had both perished in battle - all three of them heavily wounded and scarred. Commodores and Captains filled the other seats, whilst numerous Commanders and some lesser known Captains surrounded the outside. Jayce also spotted Commander Lynn of the Killers stood in the shadows.

Vice-Admiral Exarga made his way to the middle, sitting next to Admiral Exarga as she sat opposite Admiral Truth in the direct centre. Alara stood by the Kais and Kask near the middle of the table. A Captain near the Admirals spotted Jayce

approaching, standing up and offering his seat to him. "Thank you," Jayce stated, taking it for himself – numerous eyes observing him with curiosity, caution, and some ire. Bjorn, Astris and Ordo stood nearby with the New Era.

Truth cleared his throat, silencing the quiet background conversations. "Let's get this meeting underway," he declared. "First of all, given all that has happened and the deterioration of our command structure, I think we should settle our internal hierarchy first. Anyone opposed?" Admiral Truth questioned. No one spoke up. "All in favour for Truth to become the new Fleet Admiral?" Cassandra immediately called out, beating Truth to it and raising her hand. "Aye," echoed countless voices around the room, all other Admirals raising their hands as Truth scowled at Admiral Exarga. "It's unanimous," stated Cassandra with a smirk.

Truth let out a sigh, shaking his head. "Very well. Please forgive me if I skip a ceremony. I'm honoured to have your faith and trust in my abilities," he stated. "Let's get right to it. The Sea Sovereign has laid out her claims clearly, and unfortunately they are undeniable. With no claimants willing or able to take the throne, the Empire is formally dissolved as of this moment. In its place I propose the remnants are reforged into the New World Republic. We shall let the civilians sort that out for themselves, but until such a time that stability is assured, the New World Navy shall manage and organise the affairs of our Republic. We are in command."

"Unfortunately, the Sea Sovereign in her raid has stolen our ability to forge new currency and our vaults have been robbed. The World Guild has taken control of global finances, they have offered a loan to help us rebuild, so I will-" Jayce cleared his throat, drawing Truth and the room's attention. "As a... private citizen of this New World Republic, I may have some funds available," Jayce stated. Ordo stepped forwards, dropping three bottomless bags onto the table in front of Jayce. "This contains the contents of your vaults. This one is donations from my crew in exchange for their pardons. This one is a donation from me. The total is several billion Pearl."

Eyes widened, and Truth stared at it in disbelief. "Probably for the best I don't empty them out here," Jayce stated. "Do I have your pardons?" Jayce asked. Truth nodded. "To you and your entire crew," he responded, the bags quickly getting taken away. "With that settled," Truth stated, "I wish to turn our attention to the plans of our military going forwards. With this... unparalleled threat of the Sea Sovereign and the dangers unknown from across the Frontier, I propose an expedition to set up a base beyond the wall. A fleet shall go and

establish a forwards operations base, one that will control all operations in the Old World." Cassandra let out a sigh. "As such, I immediately place that responsibility in the hands of Fleet Admiral Exarga. Do you accept this charge?" Truth asked, getting his own back. "Do I have a choice?" Cassandra asked.

"No. Congratulations Fleet Admiral. As such, we shall forge a Home and an Away Fleet. The Home Fleet will consist of myself, Admiral Barome, Admiral Koga, Admiral Blackwell and Admiral Armstrong. Fleet Admiral Exarga will be supported by Admirals Vanathur and Vanathur, both already on the other side of the Frontier, Admiral Yashiro and Admiral Exarga. The Away Fleet will send a vanguard first before their Admirals are sent as well. I need you all here to secure our Republic. Fleet Admiral Exarga will then remain here until the New World is secured."

Truth looked to Cassandra. "The vanguard will consist of twenty Captains and Commodores. You are to find a suitable position to establish a base and secure it. I need volunteers," he said looking around the room. Alara and the Kais stepped forwards, several others doing the same. "Commodores Cyrenna Kai, Osiris, Guin, Zahn will go. Vanathur, Kai, Kask,... Thank you for volunteering." Jayce stared at Alara. He had been hoping she wouldn't volunteer, but it had been inevitable.

"We face an unknown enemy," stated Truth, taking back the room. "The Sea Sovereign and her Betrayers are a mystery, but there a few faces that are known." A board covered in images and notes was brought into the room, the faces of each Betrayer displayed, most with question marks. "Tanare, First Mate of ex-Pirate Lord Dick Valentine. He hasn't been seen since his crew crossed the Frontier, almost three years ago. Jure Strigon, Pirate Lord, Vampire, chased away by Jayce Exarga. Vexx, crewmate of Jayce Exarga." Several eyes all looked towards Jayce. He stood up, immediately walking around the table to the board before grabbing a pen.

"This is Elaine Pendragon, she used to live in the New World, disappeared at a young age," Jayce stated, writing Elaine's name next to her photo. "Her sisters are within my crew." Jayce's mother looked at him warningly, silently gesturing for him to sit back down. Jayce hesitated and then reluctantly accepted it had to be done. "I intend to cross the Frontier with my crew. I intent to go and reclaim my Pirate Lord title, and find out why Vexx, Tanare, and Elaine are with the Sea Sovereign. It is my hope to get them away from her."

“Bold to declare such an intent so readily after securing a pardon. I had my hopes you’d join us, join your parents,” stated Truth. Jayce shook his head. “Sorry to disappoint, but you’re going to be tied up in a whole world of problems. My crew and I will have a better chance of infiltrating and learning more about the Sea Sovereign from within. I will funnel that information through Captain Vanathur, utilising Commander Kai as my contact. We’ll do what we can to contain the Sea Sovereign.”

Jayce reached into his bottomless bag, pulling out a thick tome containing several loose pieces of paper. He then stepped forwards, placing the tome in the centre of the table, between Truth and his mother. “Inside are schematics, modifications to equipment to better serve your therians, magical enchantments, training techniques, et cetera. I would advise you utilise the Paladin Proctors within the Capital to help implement and enhance your troops. There are also countless Mages displaced from Caedom who will similarly be willing to help if invited. Undo the ban on magic and you’ll stand a chance of achieving of your goals. Otherwise you’ve already lost. The world has changed, it’s time to move forwards and embrace the past.” Jayce turned and walked towards the exit, Bjorn, Astris and Ordo following after him.

Seize the Seas Tales: In the Ruins of Religion

With the all-clear given, Morgana, Jeanne, Marisha, Thalia and Tempest made their way to the remains of the Holy Palace with a sizeable escort. “So what do you want from us?” Riley questioned, getting used to the prosthetics Tempest had made her. It felt strange, like she was constantly about to fall over, or they were going to fall off, but with each step she took, she was beginning to feel more confident.

Riley was looking towards Marisha. “Jeanne?” Marisha questioned, prompting a hesitant glance from Riley towards the ex-Paladin Elder. “There’s vaults in the Palace, protected with magic,” Jeanne answered. Marisha and Riley looked at each other. “I need to go to the crypts underneath, there’s elevators we can take,” Morgana inserted. Riley nodded, looking back to her twenty Marines and Navy. “We’ll split into two groups, you four with me, Marisha and the Witch. The rest will go with Thalia, Tempest and the Paladin,” Riley ordered.

“Do you trust her?” Riley asked Marisha quietly, as they walked through the darkness of the crypt, the area lit up by their torches, her glowing blue legs and Morgana’s wand. “She’s been useful, and she did save us all,” Marisha returned. Riley wasn’t exactly reassured. “Movement,” called out a Marine, aiming a torch.

There was yelp of panic, a figure scrambling away from the corner of a bend into the darkness. "Careful, there might be children here," warned Morgana.

They turned the corner, a droplet dripping from the ceiling onto Marisha's forehead. She reached up and touched it, pulling her hand down and looking at it in the light. It was blood. Marisha's eye widened as they shone their torches around. The floor had several corpses - Priests and Warlocks, given their robes - their bodies torn open by something. "Safeties off," Riley ordered, raising her rifle, her Marines closing in on Morgana and Marisha to form a defensive wall. "You said there was only going to be children down here," Riley growled.

"I thought there would be. The surviving Priests and Warlocks must have retreated down here," Morgana answered. Marisha crouched down, looking more closely at the body of the Warlock - unlike the others it looked like whatever had torn its chest open had come from within, several organs missing or fused together. She drew her spear, stepping out of the tight group and leading the way. "I missed my chance to settle the score with the Church - let's bury them once and for all."

The vault door rolled open as Tempest finished disabling its locks. "Holy..." muttered one of the Navy with them, but Jeanne was unfazed with the towers of pearl, or the large bars of precious metals. Instead, her eyes were focused on a large glass case in the middle of the room. A longsword was displayed inside - a large black metal blade marked with five golden crosses. She approached it, lifting up the case and taking the hilt of the sword - her sword, the one she had had to give up to the Church as terms of their treaty. "I've come back for you," she said quietly. "Old friend."

Chapter 154: A Moment of Peace

"Are you sure that was the right move?" Bjorn questioned, as he, Astris and Jayce sat on the ruined fountain outside of the ex-Imperial Palace. Jayce shook his head. "Truth to be told, I don't know what the right move is anymore. We were so close to being free, but now I feel like we've been dragged straight back into another conflict – into another danger that is out of our depth. Following orders won't get us answers, and it won't get us closer to Vexx, or Tanare, or Elaine. They'll just slow us down."

"So we're going this alone, then?" Astris questioned. Jayce nodded, looking out across the ruined city. "So our first objective is going to be to secure our seat amongst the Pirate Lords, then? We'll probably have people hunting us down," Bjorn stated. "What are we going to do about Wicke and the Dungeons?" he then asked. Jayce thought for a moment; it had been a choice he had been putting off thinking about. He didn't like either option available. "I'm still thinking it over."

Jayce was pleasantly surprised to find Yuthura on her feet when he returned to the Stacked Hand. She was hobbling around on a cane, and each step seemed to bring her great pain, but she was awake and active. "You should be resting," Jayce immediately stated, as soon as he saw her. "And leave Wicke like that, absolutely not. Explain to me why we have Paladins and Sisters on board," Yuthura immediately growled, gesturing wildly with her cane in Arthuria's direction as she stood with Meredea – the one who had revived Yuthura.

"We've had some new crew join us," Jayce answered quickly, as Yuthura hobbled down the stairs to retrieve more medical supplies. Jayce followed after her. "Explain Wicke's wounds, and anyone else's that I need to know about," Yuthura ordered. "Magic induced – Hellfire - we broke the curse, and followed your instructions for burns. Everyone else is fine, for the most part." Yuthura looked over to him with a stern glare. "Define 'for the most part'." Jayce held up his hands. "Ordo collapsed, he was resuscitated. Astris was injured with silver, she's mostly healed. Thalia has been stitched up. Wicke is the main concern." There was a noticeable expression of relief. "Okay, good. Leave me to my work, I'll talk to you later."

Several hours passed before the first New World Republic meeting finished, and once it was over, Alara wasted no time sending Jayce a message to meet her. He arrived only with Damian to the Navy's temporary headquarters, the rest of his crew long having spread out to find something to occupy themselves with. "Alara," greeted Damian. She hugged him tightly. "It's good to see you, Damian.

You've really... grown up," she said somewhat awkwardly. He had changed a lot, and she could see on his face that he had been through a lot. It unnerved her slightly: gone was the teenage boy, replaced by a young man. "Your parents are inside, they'll want to see you." He nodded, glancing towards Jayce before smiling at Alara and then leaving them alone. "Shall we walk?" Jayce questioned, offering his hand. She took it.

They walked in comfortable silence for a while, enjoying the lack of pressure and the freedom they had both earned, but eventually Alara broke it. "So..." she said softly. "So..." he returned, squeezing her hand and looking towards her as they meandered slowly towards the Stacked Hand. "Pirate Lord again?" she asked. He nodded. "Why? You could easily become a Captain in the New World Navy, if not higher. Your influence is... overwhelming, and your leadership skills, combat power, strategical mind... You'd make Commodore, if not Admiral, in months."

"I know... but there's things I still need to do before I can consider it," he answered. "Vexx? Tanare...? Elaine?" she questioned. Jayce nodded, looking around at the devastated buildings around them. "I need answers. I need to fix my mistake. But once I've done that, then I will join you, or at the very least retire." She smiled appreciatively, before nodding to the patrolling guards eyeing them both. "I'd like that."

They returned to silence until a scattering of rubble drew their attention to a row of devastated houses. "Murderers!" yelled a young voice, a stone catching Alara across the temple, drawing blood. Jayce let go of her hand, stepping in front of her as more rocks flew at them. Sola and Luna formed into swords and Marines rushed forwards to assist. "No!" Alara called out, stopping the Marines as they raised their rifles and Jayce prepared to attack. Her head hurt, but she could tell it wasn't that bad of an injury – and she could see her attackers clearly. They were young: older teens and young adults. They ran away as soon as they saw Jayce's swords and the Marine's rifles. "Captain, should we pursue?" asked one of the Marines. "No! No," she repeated more quietly. "They're just afraid."

Jayce cleaned her wound using supplies from his bottomless bag, his face full of concern. But she too held the same look. "Were you really going to kill unarmed civilians?" she questioned, his expression of sharp and cold anger painted clearly in her mind. He let out a soft sigh and shook his head, but she wasn't convinced. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, sensing her discomfort and worry. She shook her

head, placing her hand to his cheek. "The war is over, we won – I need you back, not the Pirate Lord, or the General you became."

He helped her up, the pair of them continuing their slow walk to the Stacked Hand, until a voice called out to Alara. "Captain! Captain!" called Violette Bancroft, limping towards Alara as she leant into Raine Delex. "Alara!" she yelled, forcing Alara to turn towards her. "Oh, hello," she said, somewhat surprised. "Shouldn't you be on bed rest?" Alara questioned, looking at Violette's injured leg. "About that, Alara," Raine began, only for Violette to shush him. "Is it true you're going across the Frontier?" Violette asked.

Alara nodded, stepping away from Jayce to speak to her friends. "Why?" Violette asked almost silently. Alara tilted her head in confusion. "What do you mean?" "How can you keep going?" Violette asked, her body shaking slightly. "Chase is dead, Silas too... Axel, Ryker – how can we keep going like they didn't even exist?" Violette asked, tears filling her eyes. Alara felt her legs weaken slightly, but she forced it down. "I don't know. I just have to," she answered, as honestly as she could. Violette nodded, looking back to Raine before backing away towards him.

"Captain Vanathur," he stated formally, reaching up to his collar and pulling out his tag. "I wish to request permission to leave active duty?" he asked, taking his tag off and presenting it to her. Violette did the same. Alara's face fell as she looked at them. "I'm sorry," Violette said quietly. "I can't lose any more friends. I can't lose him," she said, looking to Raine. Alara slowly reached out, taking the two tags from them. "Okay, permission granted," Alara said quietly, stepping forwards and hugging them both. "Thank you," they both said, hugging her back before stepping away. "We won't ever forget what you did for us," Violette said. "We'll name our first daughter after you," Raine added, Violette turned and glared at him. "Absolutely not!" she stated, the pair of them limping away.

Alara watched them go, their tags hanging loosely in her grip before she turned to Jayce. Tears fell from her face, tears of relief, tears of joy, as well as tears of sadness. "Come here," he told her, holding her as she quietly cried into him, another two Wolves gone from the pack, but for better reasons. Eventually she pulled away, taking his hand and picking up the pace. "Want to talk about it?" he asked as she pulled him along. "No."

Bjorn sat on one of the few remaining rooftops with a crate of beers and a melancholic atmosphere to his thoughts. He let out a sigh, thinking all the way back to when he had left the arena, when he had first met Jayce, when he had

first joined the arena and met Vexx. His memories had felt like a lifetime ago, and with Vexx's return to his mind, now they felt fresher than ever. He cracked open a beer, raising it to the setting sun before pouring it out on the rooftop. "We're coming for you. Wait for us."

"Who are you speaking to?" asked a soft voice, stepping quietly across the rooftop towards him. Bjorn defensively transformed into his therian form, looking back to see the Commander of the Killers. "I thought I saw you in that meeting. What are you doing here?" Bjorn asked. Lynn faltered, sensing a hint of animosity to his voice. She let out a soft sigh, reaching up to her veil and discarding it to the wind. "We lost. I serve Fleet Admiral Exarga now." "Why? How?"

"Can I sit?" she asked softly. Bjorn hesitated before nodding, patting the rooftiles next to him. She stepped forwards and sat down. "Beer?" he asked. She smiled painfully, taking it. "Admiral Cynane gave me one last order before the battle. If we were losing... If we lost... I'd prioritise my life, I'd surrender to Admiral Exarga. We all would. And... we did." Bjorn looked at her, reading the pain on her face. "You really cared about Cynane, didn't you?"

"She was... like my mother. I still don't know how to feel now that she's gone, I don't know whether to feel glad that she's at peace, or angry that Fleet Admiral Exarga took her away from me." Bjorn simply nodded, turning back to the sunset before he felt her lean into him, silent tears dripping from her face. Cautiously he wrapped his arm around her shoulder. "It's okay... it's okay to be sad or angry," he reassured, as she bit her lip trying not to make any noise. "You don't have to hold it in."

She cried for a while, eventually settling as he quietly comforted her. She grimaced as she pulled away, holding her side. "I heard you were hurt, are you okay?" Bjorn questioned. She nodded, gently pulling her hand away from her injury before pulling her legs into her chest. "We'd be pretty useless as agents if we didn't know basic surgery and medical care, it'll heal with time," she reassured, reaching for another beer. "Let me know if I can help at all. Yuthura is very capable, she may take some time as she's only just back on her feet but-" "I'm fine, Bjorn. It'll heal." He smiled, reaching out and placing his hand on her head. "Okay."

"So, you're leaving for the Frontier?" she asked eventually. Bjorn nodded. "We are. We'll be here for a day or two more and then we're off," he answered. "Are you not... afraid?" she questioned. Bjorn chuckled, cracking open another

beer. "I'm absolutely terrified. But my family are on the other side of those trees. And I trust my crew. We'll... figure out how to survive, and figure out where we now fit in the world." She smiled, leaning back into him before nodding. "Just... promise me you won't die. I lost you once, I only just found you again." "I promise. We'll come back, or more likely I'll see you there. But if we're talking promises, I want you to start thinking for yourself. You're not a... 'Killer', you're more than that, capable of more than that. Find a reason to live again, for yourself - not for anyone else - please." She thought for several moments, just enjoying his presence. "I'll try."

Evening had come and gone, Wicke had been moved to Yuthura's infirmary, and Little Witch had been locked out of Jayce's quarters – a distinct 'do not disturb' sign stuck to the door. Alara held Jayce tightly, his body warm and bed comfortable. She didn't want to let him go, they could both feel a sense that this was the last time they would see each other for some time. He kissed the top of her head, squeezing her reassuringly as they both thought about what they needed to say to each other.

"You're not staying in the Capital for long, are you?" she asked. Jayce truthfully didn't know. He wanted to: there was plenty that he and his crew could do to help with the reconstruction, and Wicke was still far from healed... but there was an invisible timer counting down. He had a year until he had to be seated at the Sea Sovereign's table, and he had no idea what awaited him in the Old World. It would take a month to get to the Frontier, and from there it was all a mystery. "I'm sorry," he said quietly.

Alara let out a sigh, playing with the blue pearl he had given her almost three years prior. "I thought we said this was it. The end of being at the forefront of it all, the end of being on the other side of the world from each other... I thought it'd finally be the two of us, actually the two of us," she said with a hint of anger, grief, and fatigue. "Alara..." Jayce said softly, placing a hand on her back and trying to pull her closer to him. She sat up, looking down at him – tears in her eyes. "Do you know how worried I was, all that time that you ran around the world as a Pirate Lord? You're free, pardoned – and now you want to go back? Why? Why Jayce? Will you only be happy when I'm... burying you?"

He looked up at her, tears falling onto his chest. "Alara... I... This is the last one. I'm only going there to find Vexx and Tanare, and Valentine, I promise." "You promise? Jayce – she's... a monster. One who plays with your mind, one who is untouchable. She didn't take down your mother, or Truth – it was her

Betrayers. They are all as strong as her, even Strigon – it's too dangerous. Vexx and Tanare aren't worth the risk."

"To me they are. I can't leave it be, I need to know what happened and why they are with her," he stated. She shook her head, taking his hand with both of hers. "We could do that, together - with the protection of the Republic. You don't have to go this route," she pleaded. He shook his head, meeting her gaze and smiling softly. "We wouldn't be fighting together, we would be far apart from one another. I couldn't ignore you if you were in danger, regardless of orders. I need the freedom I have to protect you, to keep the Sea Sovereign away from you. I'm sorry, but I will find a way for us to find peace – you just need to wait a little longer. Can you?" he asked, offering her a way out. She faltered and then shook her head. "I hate your stubbornness... fine."

"I'm waiting for a refresher to my crew, a new ship as well. We should be leaving in about a month. My orders, Captain, as your girlfriend, are that you will find a way to talk to me – no matter how far apart we are, so I know that you're safe. You won't do anything stupid, you won't die on me, and afterwards you join me, or I join you, or we walk away from it all. This is our last adventure alone. I will find my parents, you will find your friends, and we will guarantee a safety for us, for our future. Understood?" she commanded, wiping her eyes and looking down at him dominantly. He couldn't help but grin, seeing the spark ignited in her eyes. "Yes, ma'am."

Alara watched Jayce and his crew depart early that following morning. She hated it, but she understood him, and she understood his feelings. She could feel his farewell kiss on her lips, could smell him on the clothes she had stolen from him, and could see his reassuring smile - even as she watched his ship disappear. Eventually she looked down, to the photo he had forced her to take with him: an image of her, and several members of the Wolfpack that he had dragged into it, along with him and his Rising Aces. She smiled, turning to Riley, Brett, Wulf, Witchford and the Weapon. "We have a week to figure out who we want to take with us. A week to build a crew that can rival them. A crew that can chase the Rising Aces across the world, and a crew that can put Pirate Lords either in the ground, or under heel. A crew that can steal back the world from the Sea Sovereign."

It was a quiet morning, the weight of their incoming adventure pressing heavily down on the crew of the Rising Aces. Wicke still remained catatonic, under the close care of Yuthura as she slowly used skin grafts to help heal her burns, but it

was going to be a long process – and there was only so much Yuthura could do to help her. It unnerved them all, seeing her still so badly hurt. Damian couldn't sit still, but for a different reason – he couldn't hide his excitement.

"So, what should I expect?" Damian questioned, as he followed Jayce around the ship, looking for something to do. "What do you mean?" Jayce questioned. "Well are we going to be hunting the Sea Sovereign down, challenging her for her throne in an epic battle, or looking for some awesome treasure?" Jayce shook his head. "Look, that's not what we normally do – and it's not what I'm intending to do. Relax a little, Bjorn's got jobs for you to do, and if you're feeling lucky I'm sure Thalia is up for a duel," Jayce stated, gesturing to her as she sat on a chair in the sun, picking the giant scab around her waist. "Gross," Damian stated, shuddering slightly. Jayce too looked away in disgust. "It's a long journey to Last Drop. I want to celebrate Caelie's belated birthday to boost morale, so go help Marisha make a cake," Jayce ordered, walking away.

He let out a sigh as soon as Damian was out of sight, some of Alara's words from the previous night still ringing in his ears. "What are you going to do about Damian and Wicke?" she had asked. He hadn't really given her an answer. And he really didn't know for himself. Caelie and Mai Lu both housed Demons. Wicke and Damian were just teenagers: they would be targets for Jayce's new enemies. "Dammit," he muttered, leaning against a wall and making his final decision. They were going to have to stay behind.

Seize the Seas Tales: Monsters Below

A gargling screech startled Riley, Morgana and Marisha as they hurried through the Crypts beneath the Capital. "There!" called out Fallon, one of Riley's four New World Republic Navy squad, pointing ahead to a creature scuttling towards them. In the pure darkness they saw only a pair of white, beady eyes as the creature rushed towards them. "On it," declared Boze, another one of the four Navy, stepping forwards with his rifle and firing off several accurate and fast shots into the creature. It curled over, letting out a gurgling, high-pitched, death cry before falling limp.

In the torchlight the creature was far more clear, an amalgamation of human flesh – as if a person had been bent backwards – arms and legs were the wrong way round and broken and bent to create additional joints. There was no jaw, only an open hole where the mouth had been, and several rows of jagged bone pushed together into teeth. The eyes were the most disturbing: they looked unnaturally wide – their pupils incredibly small and the eye almost entirely white. "My

Gods,” muttered Marisha, Boze stepping forwards towards the monstrosity to ensure it was truly dead.

Morgana looked around, her eyes focused not on the body but on their surroundings as she tried to identify where they were. They widened as she spotted an alcove in the wall up ahead, an alcove that led into another corridor. “Wait!” she yelled out, too late to stop Boze as a large tendril launched from the alcove. The long piece of flesh, tipped with a monstrous spear of bone, thrust itself into Boze, almost silently hoisting him into the air. It then retracted, dragging his body away into the darkness.

“This is insane, I’m out of here!” yelled Jager, turning on her heels and running away. “Marine, get back here!” yelled Riley, keeping her sights on the last location of the thing that killed Boze. Morgana turned to look, but Marisha grabbed her shoulder and forced her behind her. A scream filling the air before being cut off with the sound of a heavy slice. “Fuck!” Riley stated. “What are these things?” she questioned, firing off a Focused shot and causing a cave-in. “Doesn’t matter, just shoot!” Marisha ordered, reaching into her bottomless bag and igniting a red flare.

She jumped backwards, her heart lurching in her chest as she found herself face-to-face with a heavy, legless body – it’s torso bloated and torn open, arms large and swollen, and a large bony tail dragging behind it as it used its arms to move. Morgana touched her wand to a glyph she had printed on her thigh, pointing the wand towards the creature before firing out a narrow beam of red light. The small head of the creature burst open, the body collapsing.

Gunfire boomed across the caves, more and more creatures emerging as they swarmed the group. “Riley, we need to move!” Marisha called out, using her spear and Morgana’s dwindling spells to defend the rear. “Agreed, ideas?” she questioned, looking around the blood painted Crypt. “Is there any chance there are any survivors?” Marisha asked as Morgana collapsed the path behind them. “Maybe - the Serving Girls’ quarters are a little out of the way, the lifts are our best way out of here.”

“Give me a plan of action, not ideas!” Riley yelled, stepping back to reload – Fallon and Lieutenant Stat pressing forwards to cover her. Morgana stuck her finger in a pool of blood on the floor, painting her clothes with a rough route. “Forwards,” she ordered, Marisha stepping past the two Navy and weaving through the remaining monsters with her spear. “Right!” Morgana reinforced, racing to stand in Marisha’s shadow, a torch getting thrust into her hands to light

the way. Marisha began to run, Riley following behind Morgana and shooting behind them. "Fallon, close in!" Riley commanded. Fallon stepped backwards, tripping over a corpse and crashing to the floor. He rolled over onto his front, his eyes wide as he looked up towards Riley, before a claw grabbed his leg and dragged him screaming away into the darkness.

They ran for their lives, each creature they felled getting replaced by another that was larger and far more grotesque. They cleared some distance from the monsters, eventually ducking into a cavern filled with rows of vials and potions. "I've got the door," Riley stated, kneeling down and resting her rifle across her leg. "What are we looking at and how far away are we from the exit?" she asked, trying to calm her heartbeat. "Health potions mostly," answered Morgana. "We sold them to the Guild on masse: it's how the Daughters of Shade were funded." "Anything we can use?" Riley questioned, glancing temporarily towards Stat as she crouched with her head in her hands.

"Us? No. Above ground, definitely," answered Marisha, moving the potions into crates before containing them in her bottomless bag. "We can come back for them," Riley stated. "Marisha, what's your orders?" she asked. Marisha frowned. "You're the Lieutenant Commander, you tell me," she answered. Riley shook her head. "You're my senior, and I'm guessing something like this is more like the adventures the Rising Aces get up to. I'm out of my depth, but I will do what I need to to keep you alive."

Marisha looked at Riley, her body was shaking slightly – her ammo was likely dwindling, and she was not a close quarters combatant. "Dammit..." she muttered, turning towards Morgana. "How close are we?" she asked. "To the Serving Girls' quarters or the nearest lift?" she asked. Morgana weighed her hands. "Either." Morgana thought to herself, a croaking growl coming from outside of the entrance. "We're close," Morgana answered.

Marisha didn't like Morgana's definition of close, and she also didn't like which of the two Morgana had chosen for them to go to. "I'm out!" Riley yelled, wielding her rifle like a bat and bashing a monster's skull in before drawing her backup pistol and dagger. "Open up!" Morgana commanded, hearing a cry of alarm from behind a large bookshelf that had been moved to block the entrance to a room. "Are you here to rescue us?" whimpered a voice from beyond. "Yes, open up – now!" ordered Marisha, desperation and anger filling her voice. "It's too dangerous!" cried a voice from inside.

Morgana and Marisha looked at each other before Marisha let out a sigh and readied her spear. She extended her senses outwards using Focus, pairing it with her sight to see seven girls on the other side of the barrier. She channelled her Focus into her spear, carving a hole through the wood and startling all inside. "This is it, girls, do or die!" Marisha ordered, looking at them through the hole before turning her back on them. There was a few moments of hesitation before slowly the bookcase toppled over. "Now the exit!" Riley commanded.

They made their way carefully, the Serving Girls a range of ages but all only teenagers. "It was horrible," mumbled the eldest, walking closely to Marisha and Morgana as she held the youngest's hand. "It wasn't immediate, there were arguments – fighting between the Warlocks and Priests, and then all the Warlocks screeched in pain, begging for mercy from their Goddess. It turned them inside out, made them into..." She shuddered, squeezing her eyes shut. "It's okay," reassured Marisha, using her Focus to sense ahead. "We're nearly out of here."

"Tell me that's it," Riley questioned, as they rounded a corner and spotted an entrance to a small chamber at the end of a long corridor. "Yeah, that's it," assured Morgana, taking a step forwards only for Marisha to stop her. There were bodies, lots of them – all piled up and left relatively intact compared to the viscera that otherwise painted the Crypts. They were cold, dead corpses, but Marisha and Riley could both see something within them. "I don't like that," Riley muttered, Marisha cautiously stepping forwards. There was no reaction.

They cautiously edged forwards, Morgana taking the lead with Lieutenant Stat, the Serving Girls following them closely. There was a crunch, one of the Serving Girls letting out a startled yelp as she stood on a hand hanging out from one of the piles. There was no reaction. "Go, go, go!" Marisha hurried, the girls picking up the pace and rushing to the lift. Marisha and Riley glanced to each other as they passed the pile. They then both spotted one of the corpses glance over towards them. "I don't like that at all!" Riley stated, the creature opening its mouth before letting out a frenzied screech.

"There's not enough room!" Morgana yelled, as they crowded onto the lift, Marisha and Riley still stood outside of the entrance as the hive awoke. "Go!" Riley ordered. "Commander!" called out Stat, throwing her rifle to Riley and her remaining ammo, just before the lift shot upward, the stone grinding behind them as it moved. The corpses rushed towards them, an invisible countdown beginning until the lift returned. "Cover me," Marisha commanded, stepping in

front of Riley and sweeping and thrusting with her spear towards the skeletal undead. They fell one by one, Riley taking potshots with her borrowed rifle to protect Marisha.

Marisha reached outwards with her hand, grabbing a collarbone and yanking the body past her. Riley stepped to the side, the corpse shambling straight into the grinding wall. She immediately placed her metal leg onto the creature's back and sanded the monster against the stone. The lift stopped moving, its direction changing moments later as it began to descent. "It's coming, hang on!" Riley yelled, the pressed corpse getting dragged down between the thin gap at the edge of the lift. She reloaded her rifle and stepped forwards as one of the creatures bit Marisha's arm.

Marisha splashed a healing potion across the wound, grunting aside the pain and clenching her teeth before stepping back into position. "You okay?" Riley checked. "I hope so," Marisha answered, a croaky screech announcing the arrival of a monstrosity following the sounds of their fighting. The grinding stopped behind them, alerting them to the arrival of the lift. "Get in!" Marisha stated, continuing to stab and slash the creatures. Riley stumbled inside, looking desperately for anything that looked like a mechanism to control it. Marisha leapt inside. "Get us moving!" she yelled.

Riley lunged for a near invisible rune, placing her palm to it as several of the corpses staggered onto the lift with them. It lurched, shifting quickly upwards, the stone platform grinding against the walls around them. Riley screamed as one of the creatures grabbed her, biting her collarbone before she pushed it off her, the monster staggering backwards before bumping into the wall. The creature folded, crushed in an instant before getting smeared between the lift and the walls. "Mind the gap!" Riley warned, lunging into another creature, throwing it backwards to the same fate before Marisha did the same with the final. The creature staggered away, its back foot dropping into the tiny gap between the wall and the platform before it was torn cleanly in two in a viscous display of spraying gore.

Riley dropped to her knees, pain coursing through her body as she clutched her collar. "It's over," Marisha stated, reaching down and throwing Riley's arm over her shoulder, helping Riley to her feet and giving her something to lean on. A squirming drew their attention to the torn apart corpse still on the lift, a black tadpole-like creature exiting the remains. Riley kicked the rest of the corpse along

with the tadpole into the grinder. “Now it’s over,” she stated, the lift coming to a stop and opening out into fresh air and the setting sun.

Chapter 155: New Arrivals

It was the day after Wicke's birthday that she awoke from her slumber. A mixture of pain medication, magic, and her body shutting down to heal had kept her asleep for just over two weeks, and she awoke to an unbearable wave of pain. Jayce raced out of the living quarters as soon as he was informed, heading down to the infirmary where she had been housed. "Wicke?" he questioned, as he stepped inside, finding her writhing in pain as she sobbed in agony. Yuthura administered something and Wicke slowly began to settle into a stupor. Yuthura then looked towards Jayce, shaking her head. "Not yet."

Jayce let out a sigh as he leant on the railing of the Stacked Hand, watching the world go by. The journey to Last Drop was slow, partially intentionally, partially not. The highway went in the opposite direction they needed to go, forcing the crew to sail at an ordinary speed, and most of the Mages were still depleted of their magic. Due to the cascading effect of their internal spirit fonts, their most powerful spells would only start to return to them once their basic ones had been refilled. Jayce had no intention of picking any fights without his crew at full strength, and he was certainly not willing to risk whatever awaited them on the other side of the Frontier.

But it was the cohesion of his new, larger crew that mattered most to him. The additions of Morgana, Mai Lu, Arthuria, Jeanne, Wam, Fenn and Ohno had almost doubled his crew, and he needed them to trust him, he needed to trust them, and he needed them to trust his crew. His eyes settled on the three Beastly Boys: the three therians followed Bjorn around like a troupe of hard-working ducklings. They adored Bjorn and - through him - also Marisha. Wam spotted Jayce observing them, raising a hand and giving a salute. Jayce chuckled, looking away and shaking his head. They would do fine.

"Ahem," came an utterance from behind him. Jayce looked back, Morgana standing somewhat awkwardly in his shadow. She stared up at him, dressed in a short black and red dress, with a tall pointed hat to accompany the look. Jayce didn't recognise the outfit, so there was only one place it could have come from: Zeta. She had Little Witch in her arms, the young black cat looking settled in her grasp.

"Hey, everything okay?" Jayce asked. Morgana nodded, her golden eyes looking up at him with distinct curiosity. "Yes, thank you," she answered nervously and somewhat awkwardly, her ears turning red. "Something you need?" he pressed, turning to face her properly. She nodded, clearing her throat once

again. "Yuthura – uh – Doc wanted me to go and get you," she stated. "Okay," Jayce said simply, gesturing for her to lead the way.

As he followed her, he glanced over towards Mai Lu as she emerged from the deck below, walking quickly and purposefully towards the living quarters – her eyes locked on the door. He frowned - they weren't locked as such - she was refusing to look at her surroundings, walking perfectly in the middle of the deck. "Problem, Captain?" Morgana questioned, looking up at him from the stairs as he watched Mai Lu. He shook his head, following after her.

"What's up?" Jayce questioned, stepping into Yuthura's infirmary to find Wicke conscious and sat up on her bench and Tempest in the room as well. "Wicke," he said with a relieved smile. She smiled weakly towards him before gesturing with her bandaged hand towards a large red orb sat on Yuthura's workbench. "I figured it was best that we had this conversation now, before one of us did something you might dislike," Yuthura stated bluntly, closing the door behind Jayce and sealing them all inside. "Okay..." Jayce stated.

"You do remember our previous conversation on the usage of philosopher's stones, right?" Yuthura clarified, looking directly at Jayce and folding her arms. He nodded. "That they're batteries that use souls - yes, I do," he answered, looking towards the giant battery in front of them. "Good, then what do you want us to do with this one?" Yuthura questioned. Jayce shrugged. He had initially disliked the idea – especially given the task he had given Morgana, but the sheer resources it provided were almost limitless, and that was something they couldn't afford to waste. "Morgana has told me of what you asked," Yuthura clarified, Wicke staring at the new Witch with curiosity and suspicion. "Ah," Jayce said quietly.

Yuthura tapped her cane on the floor, glaring at him. "We will most certainly discuss that at some point too," she warned. Jayce waved it off, looking towards Tempest. "What are your thoughts?" Jayce asked. Tempest shook his head, his armour fizzing. "I have been warned before of discussions of ethics and morality, and that I am not the one to ask about them. This tool is useful to us, that is all I know to voice," Tempest stated diplomatically. Jayce nodded in simple acknowledgment. "Fair enough," Jayce stated, turning to Morgana. "Have you figured a way to get her out?" he questioned. Morgana nodded.

"I'm going to start forging soul stones from it, eventually one of a high enough quality will form. That will contain La- Zoya." Wicke turned her head towards Jayce, wincing in pain as she did so but still carrying a potent glare. "Then there's

my answer. Once she's out, use it in a way that is the most beneficial to us," Jayce stated somewhat harshly. "Fine," Yuthura stated, looking towards Morgana. "All yours." Morgana smiled, reaching out, taking it with her bare hands – now confident in its safety. Jayce then turned towards Wicke. "How are you feeling?" "Like I've missed a lot."

It took a long time to fill Wicke in on everything that had happened, and Yuthura hobbled after her and Jayce the entire way. "I'm fine," Wicke stated adamantly, as she rested against the wall of the Stacked Hand, outside of her room, as she slowly regained her sea legs. "Wicke, you're still really badly hurt," Jayce stated bluntly, staring at the countless bandages across her body. Wicke shook her head. "I'm fine!" she snapped. Jayce and Yuthura looked towards each other, exchanging silent words of concern that were not unnoticed by Wicke. She grit her teeth, forging onwards up out onto the main deck. "Get her settled and then come find me. We need to talk," Yuthura commanded, turning and hobbling away.

Jayce followed Wicke, only to immediately find his attention drawn elsewhere as he heard shouting. "Zealot cow!" yelled Astris, her hands hovering over her holsters. "Undead bitch!" yelled Arthuria, Jeanne standing quietly in her shadow. "Woah woah woah!" Jayce stated, joining Ordo between the two parties ready to fight one another. "What's going on?" Jayce questioned, looking towards the Paladins. "She attacked Jeanne without prompt or cause–"

"Cause? Cause! That racist zealot salted my room!" Astris screamed. Jayce let out a sigh, shaking his head and turning to Astris. "Do you have proof it was her?" he asked. Her eyes widened in disbelief. "My room is covered in specs of silver! What more proof do you need?" Astris questioned. Jayce looked past Arthuria to Jeanne, an emotionless expression on her face that only broke with the faintest of smirks. Jayce grit his teeth. "Jeanne, did you do it?" he asked. She looked away from the floor towards him, her eyes cold. She nodded.

Astris drew her pistol and levied it at the Paladins. "You were on thin ground to begin with!" she growled. Jayce held out a hand, placing his palm to the barrel and causing her to hesitate, his gaze remaining on the Paladins. "Why?" Arthuria questioned quietly, looking down at Jeanne with disappointment. "She muddled the name of the dead," Jeanne said simply. Jayce groaned, turning and looking at Astris. "What did you say?" he asked. Astris looked at him with feigned outrage, but he continued to glare until she swore under her breath. "Caelie, Zeta and I were just talking – that's all..." Jayce continued to glare. "Look I'm not

going to shed tears because her dogs were put down! Metz and Baudricourt had it coming to them!"

Jeanne ran straight into Jayce's pre-emptive arm, her eyes full of rage and hands ready to grab Astris. She growled at Astris, eventually looking up at Jayce, expecting him to permit justice. Like he was moving a child, he span Jeanne by her shoulders, returning her to Arthuria. "You were both in the wrong. Astris, be mindful of who is present when talking about the dead – previous enemies or not – be empathetic that to Jeanne and Arthuria they were their friends," Jayce stated. Astris looked down. "Jeanne, you escalated a dispute that was only words into something physical. You used an allergen against Astris and could have put her life in danger – for which I can only assume you stole the materials. You need to tell someone if something has upset you, nothing will change otherwise." Jeanne looked unapologetic.

"You were both in the wrong, but I can tell this won't settle on its own. If you want to fight so much, then do so, but do it in the training hall. Beat each other raw, just put it aside afterwards. I expect to not have to discuss this again. Ordo supervise them, Arthuria go as well," Jayce ordered, as diplomatically as he could. There was hesitation from both of them, each now uncertain as to whether or not they actually wanted to fight the other – or receive a potential beating from their adversary. Thalia vaulted down from her seating position on one of the main mast yards, landing with a heavy crash. She cracked her knuckles. "How about I take you all on?" she proposed, winking to Jayce. He nodded back to her and walked away.

He spotted Wicke stood next to the helm with Bjorn, the pair catching up. She deliberately ignored him, so instead he turned and headed below deck, heading straight to Yuthura's infirmary. He knocked and opened the door, finding her absent. He then headed to her room, knocking once again. "Come in," she ordered, Jayce opening the door and stepping inside. She was laying on her bed, stretching her leg above her with an expression of discomfort. "How are you feeling?"

She grunted a response before an audible click let her straighten her leg fully, causing her to yelp. Jayce winced as she slowly sat up. "It's a cruel thing to get old: eventually you run out of new grey hairs and start finding new sources of pain instead," she half-joked. Jayce forced a smile and she shook her head. "You don't need to coddle me, it's okay Jayce, it's not normal to survive a bisection." "Doc--"

"Shut up," she said simply, holding up a wrinkled hand to stop him. He closed his mouth, taking a seat in her desk chair. "Let's talk about you first. I need a few more moments to think." He nodded. "Zoya? Why?" she asked. Jayce looked down and she immediately straightened up, sensing a maelstrom of conflicted emotions within him. "Before she died... she kissed me," Jayce said quietly. Yuthura raised an eyebrow. "Kissed you? When?" she asked.

"A second or two before the ritual occurred. In the throne room," he answered. Yuthura shook her head, letting out a soft exhale. "Does Alara know?" she asked. Jayce shook his head. "Why didn't you didn't tell her? You had more than enough time alone together," she questioned, drawing an unconscious smile from Jayce that he quickly forced down. "I didn't really know how to say it. Or what it was... or what it meant. She just kissed me and then... died." Yuthura nodded. "I'm sorry, Jayce – that's rough." He smiled appreciatively.

"What did she mean to you?" Yuthura asked. Jayce thought to himself, trying to piece together an answer that made sense. "I don't know." She looked at him, pressing for a better answer. "She... I don't know how to say it without feeling like I'm hurting Alara, hurting my relationship." Yuthura gestured around the empty room. "Who's going to speak about it? It's not like Vanathur and I are pen pals."

"Fair point," he acknowledged. "Zoya felt unobtainable," Jayce slowly answered, fidgeting with his hands. "When I first met her, I... I liked her. She was-" "Beautiful, powerful, mystical," Yuthura inserted. Jayce nodded. "And nothing happened between the two of you then, right?" she asked. He nodded, but then faltered. "We spent the night together – not like that – just talking. And there was a moment where... something could have happened, but I pulled away."

"She was already the Witch Queen, do you think you could have changed that?" Yuthura asked. Jayce didn't answer. He didn't have an answer. "Ah," she said softly. "There is only so much a person can do to influence another without imprisoning them. You couldn't have controlled a woman like her. You couldn't have changed her. Even if she had stayed with us - with you - do you think you'd have been her Captain?" Yuthura asked. Jayce shook his head. "That's what I said that night. But I don't know anymore."

"She's the only who can answer your questions, but do you really want those answers? She's dead Jayce. If you speak to her and there was more there, what does that mean for you? She's gone, you can't bring her back." He nodded in acceptance. "But I can put her at peace. I... don't think I'm going to forget feeling

like this – am I?” he questioned. Yuthura shook head, offering an expression of sympathy. “Life is full of ones that got away. Full of what-could-have-beens. I’m sorry, but I don’t think you could have changed things. I don’t think there was a happy story there for you. Talk to her, when Morgana pulls her out of that orb, but be careful... and be kind to yourself.”

He nodded, slowly looking towards Yuthura’s cane. She let out a sigh, leaning back on her bed. “You just can’t leave things alone, can you?” she questioned. “How are you?” he asked genuinely, his face full of concern. Yuthura shook her head as she lay on her bed. “I’m broken, Captain, kaput. Happy? I don’t think I’m going to heal fully from this one.” Jayce shook his head, and she looked over towards him. “Is there nothing we can do?”

“There’s limits to physiology, Jayce. I’m old anyway, throw in ten-thousand injuries from thousands of lives and it adds up. I’ve done good, but this is my last ride. Once that little clown is back where he belongs, I’m retiring. Somewhere warm, with a lot of attractive people that like a few wrinkles,” she stated. Jayce smiled. “Glad to see your sense of humour is still intact.” She sat up with a groan and grabbed her cane, poking him with it. “And don’t you forget it. I don’t want any eulogies to refer to me as grumpy, grouchy or unfunny. Understood?” Jayce nodded. “Yes, Doc.” The door opened, drawing both Jayce and Yuthura’s attention to Arthuria as she stood there with a swollen lip and a dazed Jeanne and Astris under each arm. “Sorry to interrupt – Thalia went a little overboard.” Jayce looked towards Yuthura. She simply sighed. “The things I put up with.”

“How much longer will it take to heal?” Wicke questioned, a few days later as she sat in the infirmary. Yuthura looked at her with pity. “Be blunt, I can take it,” Wicke stated immediately, hating the looks she was getting from Jayce and Yuthura – and Damian, who for some insufferable reason had tagged along to her medical appointment like some lost puppy. “Three months, and even then you might still have some scarring,” Yuthura stated plainly and clearly. Wicke felt her heart stop in her chest. “Is there a way we can speed-” “No. Three months, and that is speeding. You’re lucky to be alive, Wicke. Luckier still to be able to maybe heal from this,” Yuthura stated clearly. Wicke didn’t feel lucky. She glanced towards Jayce; she could see his crestfallen expression before he hid it away. “Thanks Doc,” he answered in her stead.

“It’ll be okay,” Damian reassured, as the three of them slowly headed up to the main deck. Wicke shook her head. “Three months... what if we get into a fight and I’m needed?” She looked up towards Jayce for reassurance, but he shook his

head and forced a smile. "Don't worry about it, it'll be fine," he told her. She tried to read his face but he looked away, carrying onwards to the main deck. Wicke faltered, her heart racing in her chest. She shook her head. "He wouldn't," she told herself, much to Damian's confusion before following after him.

"What do you think?" Arthuria questioned, giving a small twirl in her new set of plate armour. It shone strongly in the bright sun, the metal a shiny silver and decorated with gold embossing – giving imagery of feathers and runic symbols across her body. The armour itself was formed of numerous overlapping plates that combined across Arthuria's joints, allowing for a greater layer of protection and mobility. At the shoulders, elbows, knuckles and knees the armour extended outwards into sharp points that added a layer of intimidation to Arthuria's build. A black and gold cape ran down from her shoulders to just above her heels, tearing into large strips at the base, and a layered metal and leather skirt sat over her greaves in a similar fashion. There were minimal gaps in the armour, but where there were, Jayce could see a black underlay covering her body beneath. A winged helmet completed the look, her eyes visible behind two subtle hawk-eye lenses, a large golden crest of hair extending up and over the back of her helmet.

"Looks good," stated Zeta, dressed in a black bikini as she applied sun cream to herself and Marisha – dressed in a similar fashion. Arthuria span on her heels and turned towards Jayce, taking off her helmet to reveal a big grin. "Well, Captain?" she asked. He nodded in approval as she shadow-boxed, showing off its mobility. "Looks great, I'm guessing Tempest made it?" he asked. She nodded, approaching the mast and collecting two swords that were resting upon it, as well as a bracelet. She placed the bracelet on her left wrist before equipping the swords to her waist.

"That djinn is a master blacksmith, I've never had armour that's felt this light, comfortable, or manoeuvrable – and do you know what the best part of it is?" she asked. Jayce shook his head. Arthuria flicked out her wrist, a large and heavy tower shield appearing in a flash of golden light. "Tempest thinks with time I could have the entire suit vanish just like this shield. How cool is that?" "That is pretty cool," Jayce acknowledged. "Has Jeanne got a suit as well?" Arthuria's face fell. "I... I tried. She said she didn't want one." Jayce frowned. "Any reason why?" Arthuria looked away, not wanting to answer. "Give her time," Jayce stated in her place.

"You coming Arty?" called Marisha, from further down the deck. Jayce rolled his eyes as he immediately spotted a small gaggle of women arranging deck chairs to best utilise the sun, along with a large bucket full of ice and drinks. "Uh – permission to go?" Arthuria asked, not exactly certain if she needed to be dismissed. "You don't need permission – enjoy," Jayce told her. She nodded, hurrying over to them and beginning the slow process of taking off her armour. Jayce couldn't help but notice both Jeanne and Wicke's absence from the social group, but Morgana seemed to be enjoying herself, and even Astris didn't seem to mind Arthuria's presence.

He turned and immediately jumped as he found Mai Lu staring up at him. "Gods!" he yelped. "Where did you come from?" he questioned, as she tilted her head curiously. She folded her arms and shook her head. "Am I not allowed to walk this way? You're in my path," she stated, pointing past him to the stairs leading down. Jayce frowned – there was plenty of room to move around him, but for some reason Mai Lu wanted to move only along the centre of the ship. "Can't you go around?" he asked. There was a brief moment of terror in her eyes, that she quickly forced away.

Jayce's eyes widened, sensing a deeper issue. He pointed towards the starboard side of the ship. "Do you see that?" he asked, pointing out to the empty expanse of ocean. She looked and immediately turned her head away, distinct apprehension in her face. "What?" she asked. Jayce crouched down, meeting her eyeline. "How did you die?" he asked, bluntly and suspiciously. Mai Lu opened her mouth but nothing came out.

Her skin turned red and horns sprouted from her head, Baal emerging from within. "She drowned," he answered in her stead, confirming Jayce's suspicions. "Ah, and sailing the world on a ship was the best idea for her?" Jayce questioned. Baal didn't answer. "We need to face this sooner rather than later, so any context you could give will help," Jayce stated, standing back up and looking down at the tiny Demon. "It was the great floods, a little around one-hundred-and-seventy–"

"She's nearly two hundred years old?" Jayce questioned in loud alarm, looking down at the body of the tiny child in disbelief. Baal nodded. "Are you telling me Caelie's not going to age?" Jayce asked, a feeling of horror in his mind that he'd have a teenager following him around for the rest of his life. Baal faded away, remaining only as a mouth on Mai Lu's cheek. "Baal stopped me from developing

to protect me," Mai Lu answered, her words not exactly comforting to Jayce. "Why?" Jayce asked suspiciously.

"It was easier to go unnoticed with Mai Lu as a child, she needed less food, was smaller, but when we were caught by the Church it became obvious how they viewed females of your kind." Jayce grimaced, immediately understanding the reason for remaining as a child. "Although that only worked so-" Jayce held up his hands, stopping Baal from continuing. "Understood. So you could grow up whenever you want to?" Baal moved to Mai Lu's hand, a pair of eyes appearing. The pair looked at each other, a silent conversation occurring before Mai Lu looked over towards the sunbathers.

Mai Lu sat down on the floor, grabbing her ankle with her arms and pulling. There was a grotesque crunching, tearing and twisting sound as she extended out her joints, before moving onto her other leg. Jayce turned away, sticking his fingers in his ears as she twisted and moulded her body – growing up in an instant. "Woah," Mai Lu eventually stated, alerting Jayce that she was finished as she staggered into him. Her voice had changed, becoming much lower. He turned around, and she grabbed on to his forearm for balance.

She looked up at him somewhat nervously, a distinct look of confusion on her pale face. The freckles on her pointed nose had faded somewhat but were still otherwise present. Her eyes were still large and mono-lidded, her red and pink pupils mixed more together than they were before. Her chubby cheeks had fallen away slightly, revealing a pointed chin but otherwise soft features. She was tall – surprisingly so – nearing Arthuria's height – and very petite, but somewhat voluptuous. Her shoulders were broad and she had long fingers – her nails overgrown and curled. Her hair was long, and where it had been white with a pink hue, it was now a deeper blossom pink colour. She looked around twenty years old.

"Are you okay?" Jayce asked. She nodded, unbalanced and pale, before shaking her head and racing to the edge of the ship and then throwing up over the side. She immediately pushed away from the railing, crouching down and facing away from the water. Jayce approached and crouched next to her, placing a gentle hand on her back – her clothes now several sizes too small for her. "You're okay, it's okay," he reassured. She looked up at him with an expression of self-pity and disappointment. "How do I look?" she asked, cracking a nervous smile. "I really don't even know where to begin," Jayce answered, not exactly sure what to say to the one-hundred-and-eighty-year-old woman in a twenty-year-old body

who had been a ten-year-old girl only minutes ago. "That bad?" she questioned. He offered a hand to her, shaking his head. "A definite improvement." She took it, standing up and looking cautiously over towards the sunbathers. "Do I fit in more with them now?" she asked. Jayce nodded, a few stunned and confused expressions glancing their way. "Definitely."

Jayce left Mai Lu to join the others, an eager excitement filling the air over her new form and a definite relief - that they no longer had a ten-year-old amongst the crew - filling the rest. "Find us an island or sand bank," Jayce told Bjorn, as he approached the helm, Damian at the Stacked Hand's wheel. "Why?" Damian asked. "Mai Lu drowned, that's how she became a Demon," Jayce answered simply. "Ah," Bjorn stated softly, nodding in quick understanding. "What?" Damian questioned, missing what Bjorn had immediately grasped. "Demons create pacts with those who have just died. We're in the middle of the ocean, Mai Lu won't know how to swim."

"Jayce - I really, really don't want to do this," Mai stated, simply and nervously as they stopped next to a tiny island covered only with a small spread of grass and a few palm trees. "Okay," Jayce stated in response. She tilted her head, frowning and folding her arms. "Okay?" she questioned, before adjusting the red bikini she had borrowed from Zeta. "Yeah, okay. I'm not going to make you. You're one-hundred-and-eighty, you're old enough to make your own choices. I don't need to force you, but it puts pressure on us to support you in battle - that's fine, it's not an issue, but it's just something we need to be cautious of. I'll keep you away from water, and we'll jump in after you if you do go overboard," he stated. "Oh," she said softly, not sure how to react.

Jayce smiled and began to walk away. Mai Lu immediately deflated, biting her thumb and pacing quickly back and forth. "Wait!" she called after him, falling straight into his trap. Jayce dropped his smile, turning and looking at her with feigned curiosity. "Okay," she stated cautiously. Jayce tilted his head. "Okay?" he questioned, raising an eyebrow. She sighed, nodding. "Okay, teach me," she said definitively.

"That's far enough!" Mai Lu practically screamed, the ocean up to her knees, one hand in Arthuria's, the other in Jayce's. "Okay," Jayce said softly. "Sit down." Mai Lu looked towards Arthuria for reassurance, Arthuria sitting first in the water before she then copied. "See, not that bad," Arthuria reassured. Mai Lu forced a smile, before her smile faded as she looked past Arthuria - the ocean curving and rolling towards her. Her heart raced in her chest, the world growing

cold and dark as the wave came closer and closer to her. She shut her eyes but nothing happened, nothing changed other than a splash of water touching her chest. "You're okay," Jayce said gently, Mai Lu opening her eyes to find him sat next to her as well as a few others scattered in the shallow water. "We've got you, you're safe," reassured Zeta with a big smile.

"The water's not going to hurt you," Jayce told her. "It's a dangerous thing, true, but it's not going to harm you unless you let it. And you're in control." Thalia shunted a large wave of water their way, soaking the group around Mai Lu. "Thalia!" snapped Jayce and Zeta, turning and glaring at her, but Mai Lu simply laughed, brushing the water out of her eyes. She was safe – they were right. Mai Lu stood up, looking towards Thalia as she stood in a deeper part of the water – up to her neck in the ocean. "I'll get you back!" she declared, racing forwards before Jayce or Arthuria could stand up, and jumping at Thalia.

The water went straight over her head and she sunk like a rock, her eyes wide as she found herself underwater, unable to breath and quickly sinking into the depths that Thalia had been treading water in. She gasped for air, but there was only cold water, hands reaching down to her as she continued to sink. Panic filled her immediately as she frantically grabbed for something to hold, but nothing came to her. Her mind immediately filled with memories of the first time she had drowned – the rising waters and the rotten roof above her. She shut her eyes. Something grabbed her from beneath, a pair of rough, yet slimy, fingers grabbing her waist and thrusting her upwards out of the water back into the shallows.

Jayce breathed a sigh of relief as Mai Lu coughed out water. She had sunk fast, but had emerged from the depths almost immediately, as if she had been thrown out of the water. "Thank you," Mai Lu coughed, turning and looking towards Thalia, her presumed rescuer, but Thalia was still underwater. The surf erupted, a large figure getting propelled out from beneath. Thalia then climbed out onto the sand, the entire group staring in shock at the stranger amongst them: a jiaoren – an ocean crawler.

The ocean crawler was distinctly alien: a bipedal, humanoid being with a very large head-tail trailing behind from its head to the floor, tipped with a bony point. A slimy carapace covered its chest, legs, and arms – akin to an exoskeleton or armour, with brief gaps exposing a scale-like skin underneath. Both its hands and feet were webbed, and numerous hard-looking fins extended off its elbow, calves and face – creating a headpiece. Unlike other ocean crawlers Jayce had seen or read about, he was a deep red colour, blending with additional lighter colours of

white and yellow across his muscles. His eyes were opaque, with no iris or pupil, instead only a flat jade green. He smiled somewhat, revealing a row of sharp teeth, and stood before all of them in a very tight pair of armoured leggings. "Red," Jayce stated with a soft chuckle, in disbelief that the jiaoren had followed him all this time.

"Saviour, it has been sometime," he snarled, his voice translated by Jayce's necklace, before he immediately turned and raised his hands defensively towards Thalia. "Wait wait!" Ordo yelled, rushing into the water and getting in front of Thalia. "He's with us," Ordo stated, saying something that only confused Jayce further. "Ordo what are you talking about?" Jayce questioned. Ordo turned. "Huh? You didn't know? Really?"

Jayce glared at him. "No – of course not. Why would I know?" Jayce questioned in disbelief. "He was following you when I first joined. I thought it was some sort of pre-arranged deal. It's why we haven't had to deal with sea monsters on our travels," Ordo explained to Jayce's distinct and deep frustration. Jayce scratched his head. "From now on, assume I don't know everything. Did anyone else know?" he asked. Bjorn slowly raised his hand.

Jayce turned to Red. "Why have you been following us? You don't owe me anything," Jayce stated. The ocean crawler shook his head, his head-tail flopping behind him. "I owe you my life, a debt that must be paid by custom, but one I was cautious to reveal, until now," Red explained. Jayce looked towards Bjorn and glared at him. "I had no idea either," he said in defence of himself. "Ordo only told me recently, I thought you knew."

Jayce sighed. "I appreciate it, truly, and your timing here is... perfect, but freeing you was a small act – nothing that needs you to risk your life for. Red, go home." "I cannot do that, not until the debt is paid. And not for other reasons also. If you do not wish my presence, then that is fine, I shall continue to serve as I have - from the depths. But I have seen that you are a great warrior, and a great ruler, and in that I feel that we may serve each other."

"How so?" Jayce asked. The ocean crawler smiled, gesturing to himself before bowing. "Red is the descriptor you have named me by, but my name is Forgotten Prince Chalakon Lorre of the Crushing Core Clan, heir to the northern realms." Jayce tilted his head in mild confusion. "You're a... prince?" he questioned. "In a manner of speaking. I am currently disgraced due to my capture and now debt, so I hope you can appreciate my predicament. I cannot return home until the debt is paid due to my people's customs, and that is more true due to my

status as shown by my royal colours. In order to return home, you must free me from my debt, which can only be done by repaying the life you have granted me or gifting a life unto you through my first-born... I do not have a child to gift-"

"I'm not accepting gifted heirs!" Jayce stated immediately. Red chuckled, nodding in appreciation. "Then I must earn a story of valour, and you must tell it with me to my people. Only then shall I be able to claim my lineage. Is this acceptable?" he asked. Jayce let out a sigh, having Red along to defend the ship would be extremely helpful – or he'd be an extremely dangerous weapon – something that could be crucial in the Old World. He shook his head: it felt too convenient, too helpful, but also too risky for someone he felt didn't actually owe him anything. "Okay," Jayce agreed reluctantly, unquestioning in the fact that Red would follow him anyway. "You can join."

Seize the Seas Tales: New Accommodations

Jayce was truly astounded by the accommodation Tempest had created for Red, as was the rest of the crew. The additions of the Beastly Boys, the Paladins, Mai Lu, Morgana – and somehow Damian, who had conned Tempest into creating a room for him – had begun to lead to a lack of space for extradimensional doors to be placed on the second deck. And with the third deck delegated to the ship's unused pens and crew stations, Tempest had decided to create a room for Red there, away from the rest of the crew – which Jayce wasn't too happy about – but Red was delighted by.

It had taken a short trip inside the Stacked Hand's bottle, but Tempest had forged a small hole on the hull of the ship, creating a door leading to an extradimensional space full of ocean water, another doorway then opened up into the third deck in the form of a horizontal latch, allowing Red to seamlessly transition from inside the ship to his underwater quarters and from there to the outside of the ship. The huge room itself could be flushed of its water at a moment's notice, and refilled nearly as quickly. With Red's assistance it had been filled with all varieties of coral and sea plants, along with a bed of seagrass to rest on, and Tempest had even provided a means for Red to adjust the water's temperature. The djinn hadn't stopped there.

Arthuria stared in awe at her colossal room. When Tempest had asked her for ideas, she had been half-joking with her answers. It had been styled after a royal bedchamber – with hardwood floors, a huge canopy bed, a giant mirror and luxury bathroom, and windows that showed an image of the ocean around them. She could even move a latch to let fresh air in from the outside. She had a place

to sharpen her two swords – although Caliburn remained still sealed away inside its sheath, awaiting the Sapling of Oaths to grow big enough to forge a new oath.

Morgana's room was styled after an old wood cabin, containing a fireplace, a large library ready for books, and a small and simple bed. Jeanne's was a small and simple room, containing nothing special other than her own bathroom and single bed. Mai Lu's matched Arthuria's in size, but every surface was soft to the touch, awaiting the addition of an endless supply of stuffed toys. Jayce was certainly not surprised when Tempest received another batch of orders for upgrades.

Chapter 156: Farewell For Now

"Settle down. Settle down," Bjorn attempted, trying to quieten the Rising Aces as they all gathered in the living quarters. "Quiet!" Astris yelled, silencing the mob as they found scattered seats in their selected individual groups. Bjorn, Jayce and Astris were stood in front of the door leading to the rear deck, with a large board plastered with newspaper clippings, string and photos behind them. The 'mature' ones: Yuthura, Ordo and Falconer had sat together on one of the comfortable sofas. Marisha and Bjorn's Beastly Boys were stood in the kitchen with various bowls of pre-prepared snacks. Jeanne, Arthuria and Morgana were sat on the other of the two sofas, with Jeanne hiding away in the corner of the busy room. Tempest and Red were stood by the doorway, RK and Wren both outside of the open door on the main deck. Thalia was sat at the end of the dinner table, leaning backwards on her chair with her feet up in front of her. Zeta and Mai Lu were both sat on beanbags on the floor next to her, in front of the door, with Caelie on her own beanbag in front of them. Wicke and Damian were sat at the table, both equally frustrated that they had only been informed of the meeting as it was starting. Little Witch sat on the table in front of them, moving from crewmate to crewmate in search of food and petting.

"All yours," Astris stated quickly, gesturing for Bjorn to take lead. He held up his hands and shook his head. "No, all yours – I insist," he stated with a hint of irritation. Astris rolled her eyes and let out a sigh, stepping forwards as Jayce watched the exchange with bemusement. "You all know why we're here!" she called out. "We arrive at Last Drop tomorrow morning, and from there—" "The Old World!" Bjorn stated, taking over. Astris turned and glared at him, but he just chuckled, stepping forwards.

Only for Jayce to cut the pair of them off. "We don't know what awaits us. We don't know the environment, the people, the seas. Hopefully Last Drop will give us some clues, but at the moment our information is limited," he stated, looking across his entire crew. "We have a very simple objective: reclaim the title of Pirate Lord, and a not-so-simple objective: make contact with Vexx, Tanare, and Elaine," Jayce stated. "We don't know why they're allied with the Sea Sovereign, so figuring that out is top priority," he said, pointing at their photos on the board behind him.

Tanare looked huge in the photo. The tiger therian was very muscular, with huge shoulders, arms and legs, and a giant pair of clawed hands. His eyes were a bright orange, matching the colours of his fur. A deep scar sat across his mouth where

one of his teeth had been pulled out in his younger years. Elaine similarly looked tall in her photo, standing far taller than several of the men dressed in strange grey uniforms around her. She looked very similar to Arthuria – their familial resemblance immediately obvious. She had the same golden eyes as her sisters, but her eyes looked colder, and more serious, as she stared directly at the camera. Her skin was fair, her hair long and blonde and wild. Her features were slightly more rounded than Arthuria's, but her nose was more pointed. She wore a simple black breastplate, her muscular arms exposed and thick legs covered in tight, brown leather trousers. Across her lower back sat the hilts of two very large swords.

Vexx had hardly changed since he had left the Stacked Hand. He had grown his hair out a little, the messy blonde mop tied back into a tiny ponytail. His skin was ghostlike, his skinny yet muscular frame noticeable underneath his baggy clothes. His hands were stained orange, like all of the other Emperor's Fist assassins. A red jewel hung from his left ear, matching his blood-red eyes. He was also still incredibly short, at only a little over five foot tall. Jayce couldn't help but glance towards Vexx's wanted poster, still hung on the wall with the rest of the Rising Aces – bar the new members. He shut down his feelings, turning back to his crew.

"Getting these three out and away from the Sea Sovereign is not going to be smooth sailing, and it's almost guaranteed to turn her and the other Betrayers into our enemies. But we all knew that already," Jayce concluded, looking to Astris. "The Guild, officially and unofficially, has been releasing information on the Betrayers to the world, both as a warning and as an identifier for civilians, so that tourists don't get themselves killed. Marisha has gotten us some of that juicy unofficial information," she stated, stepping up to the board.

"First of all: Jure Strigon, Vampire Lord," Astris stated, turning to the room. "Last we saw of him, he was running for the Old World with his fangs broken and tail between his legs. Now he's back, and seemingly a lot stronger. For reasons unknown, the Sea Sovereign picked him up, providing him with a ready supply of victims and recruits." The image of Strigon showed him sat on a throne made of skulls. Several strong looking Vampires were stood around him, all wearing the same strange grey uniforms as the men with Elaine. He had dark skin, that was almost grey in colour. His pupils were bright white, but Astris knew from firsthand experience that they could turn to a deep crimson like hers. He had pointed ears, and fangs that peered over his lip. His black hair was short and curly, his features sharp. He was dressed in a blood-red, high-collared suit.

"Is that an ogre?" questioned Zeta, pointing to a clipping of a blurry figure connected with string to Strigon. Astris nodded. "Rumours are that Strigon has begun experimenting with his creations, expect to find non-humans in his roster. Sunlight burns them, silver stops their regeneration. Strigon has the ability to destroy his creations at will, be wary of him using them as bombs and do not get bit by him," Astris warned. She then pointed to a drawing of a giant bat. "The True Vampire is the source of his powers, and his life. Kill it, and he will probably die with it."

"As another creation, would it not also kill you?" queried Mai Lu. Astris didn't immediately answer. "It might. The True Vampire burst most of its cells within me last time, but... maybe. If the chance comes, do it – don't worry about me," she declared. Jayce didn't like that idea at all. "On the note of things that go bump in the night," Bjorn stated, taking over and pointing to a woman that created little other than a sense of unease.

Her bloodshot eyes were bulbous, almost falling out of her head, and her right eye was much larger than her left – giving a sense of illness to her boulder-like head. This was only accentuated by her blueish-grey skin, covered with a spiderweb of dark veins. Her black, string-like hair was patchy, her scalp visible and scratched raw. She was short, incredibly so, with a twisted spine and hunched back. Her hands were clawed, tipped with cracked and sharp nails, and she wore little more than rags. The creature was smiling vaguely at the camera – her mouth full of broken shards of teeth.

Jayce felt the scars on his neck twinge – something that was a rarity – the image of the woman bringing back memories of the twisted cannibals he had faced in the arena. "Gross," stated Zeta plainly and loudly, several others nodding or speaking in agreement. "Alberta Armin," Bjorn stated. "Take a guess as to why she's deemed dangerous," he stated to the open room. Several voices called out: "She's a Warlock, Alchemist, Wizard..." Bjorn shook his head, shutting them down. "Nope, nope, nope," he said.

"Cannibal," Wicke called out. Bjorn nodded in acknowledgement and pointed at her. "Bingo!" he declared. "They used to be more of a problem in the New World, but the Navy cracked down on their numerous cults, wiping them out." Jeanne shook her head, enough for Bjorn to notice. "It was us," she said plainly. "Then you have our thanks. Anything you can tell us about them?" Bjorn asked. Jeanne looked around nervously before clearing her throat.

"They're creatures of darkness, like Vampires. They probably have their own 'True Vampire', but we never found one – they only spoke of their 'Grandfather', something they... worshipped, and were terrified of. Slaughter them like any other monster," she said quietly, the group listening intently. "That is all." Bjorn nodded in approval but she looked away, continuing to hide away in the corner of the room. "There we go. We know very little on her, just be careful – there's likely more than meets the eye."

"I'm going to group some of the next ones, as we have minimal information on them," Jayce stated, taking over. He pointed to a djinn, its armour glowing with heat, and molten in some parts. Tempest floated forwards for a better look. "We have a sky knight, another djinn like our own Tempest. This one has mutated to have an affinity for fire – earning the name: Destructive One, for presumably obvious reasons." The Destructive One didn't float in the photo, it was stood on two legs, its armour covered in large spines, its demonic visor glowing orange from within.

"We also have an ocean crawler, a jiaoren like Chalakon, Ura Soruk," Jayce stated. This time Red stepped forwards with distinct curiosity. "Something up?" "I know this one, she's infamous amongst the seas: 'The Despoiler'." Jayce and Astris looked at each other. "Chalakon, care to explain?" Jayce asked. "Red will suffice, since you struggle with the correct pronunciations." Jayce didn't quite know how to respond to the comment. "She's a conqueror, one that uses the beasts below. We should be extremely cautious." Jayce looked towards the purple ocean crawler, she looked almost identical to Red, there was no distinctly noticeable differences between them, other than a few frill-like appendages on her neck. "We'll take your word for it."

"We also have Alice, ex-princess of the one of the major nations of the Old World – supposedly she was instrumental in the Sea Sovereign taking power." The image showed a plainly pretty young woman with pale skin, blue eyes and long blonde hair, dressed in a layered blue and white dress. A tall, athletic man stood next to her, leaning on a spear. He had long dark hair, tied back into a thin ponytail. He had defined, pointed features and narrow brown eyes. He wore a simple open shirt and trousers, an otherwise aloof attitude to him. "Next to her is Sétanta. He's nicknamed Scáthach's hound. Very little is known on him, but he's often paired with Alice."

"Next," Astris stated, "We have Myrddin - Mage Supreme, supposedly the most powerful Wizard of this era." Wicke sat forwards. The image showed a tanned

man, with long grey hair and a very big beard. "If he's an enemy, take him down first. Anti-magic weapons - do not let him cast!" Astris warned. "Then we have Kaina." The image showed a middle-aged woman with short golden hair that curled around her neck. Her eyes were a deep gold colour that made several members of the crew look towards Arthuria. "Not a known relative," she stated quickly. "But I do see the resemblance," she added, not particularly fond of the idea of another half-sibling – especially if it explained Elaine's disappearance. "Nothing is known about her. Even the Guild couldn't find anything," Marisha stated for Astris. "Be highly cautious."

"Last of all, that we are aware of, is Barca Khalid. He is a very well-known General on the other side of the Frontier, now in charge of the Sea Sovereign's Null Legion. He has an entire armada of Focus-capable Soldiers under his command and the capabilities of using them to their full potential. If we can take him out, then the Sea Sovereign's global presence will drop significantly," Astris stated. He was a large, broad-shouldered man, with a finely cropped grey beard, light-brown skin, and salt and pepper, military-styled hair. His eyes were a confident reddish-brown colour.

"Twelve Betrayers and the Sea Sovereign, all of them extremely dangerous. But we're no pushovers ourselves. We take this carefully, tactically, and we'll all make it out of this alive. Keep your eyes and ears open for information, we need all the help we can get," Jayce concluded. "Meeting adjourned. We'll have one day at Last Drop so make sure you have everything ready – we cross the Frontier, tomorrow."

The following dawn came quickly, the island of Last Drop settling into view deep in the morning. Or at least it was what Jayce thought was Last Drop. The island had changed significantly since he'd last been there: the village had almost doubled in size, and with it so had the harbour, but it was further away that Jayce saw the greatest difference. Extended to the south of Last Drop, amongst a sea of vessels, floated a town of sorts.

It was a fleet of floating platforms connected together to create its own settlement, with countless buildings surrounding a central castle-like building. Even from afar, Jayce could see signs for shops, a mobile shipyard where workers were upgrading and outfitting vessels, armaments galore, all bearing the colours and emblem of the World Guild – its signature green crescent mask on everything. "What is that?" Bjorn questioned, pointing through the sea of ships visiting the outpost to a trio of vessels docked nearby.

Jayce frowned, he didn't recognise the giant ships – he didn't the recognise the style of ships. They had two outrigger hulls – a pair of extensions sitting behind the central bow, leading to a three-finger design that made the ships look like they were beaked. There were gaps between the main hull and its extra two that water could pass through, and the ships themselves sat far higher on the water than the Stacked Hand. They were mostly metal, and were covered in heavy guns, but still had large sails. "Look at that," Jayce stated, pointing to the back of one of the vessels facing away from them – there were several of the flying machines that Phoenix had flown, kept in a rear-attached hangar of sorts. Bjorn and Jayce looked at each other – the Guild had been busy, and the designs weren't of the New World.

They docked at Last Drop, Jayce calling his crew together for a quick meeting. He looked across them as they stood in the hot tropical sun of the Frontier Archipelago, the group curious as to what he was going to say, what he had say to rally them as they all prepared to cross the Frontier. "We're not staying long," he warned. "Find out any information you can, make your final preparations. Watch your backs." His crew departed, breaking up into their usual groups, other than a few stragglers, and Tempest and Red. The djinn said something to Red, the jiaoren nodding before they both headed to the other edge of the ship and left for the ocean.

Bjorn and Astris looked towards Jayce, all three of them silently communicating with one another – glancing every-so-often towards Wicke and Damian as they waited for Jayce. "What's going on?" Wicke asked. Jayce shook his head, forcing a smile and turning to her. "Nothing. Don't worry. Come on, let's go," he stated to her, heading to the edge of the ship before looking back to Astris and Bjorn. "At the end," he told them, stepping off the ship.

It didn't take long for word of their arrival to spread, and before long, the islanders rushed to greet the Rising Aces. But where Jayce had been expecting a happy and joyful reunion, he instead saw faces of concern, worry, and grief. His heart sank in his chest as he saw absences, his people's words falling silently on his ears as they spoke to him. "No..." he said quietly, blinking and finding himself stood amongst the numerous graves in the island's graveyard, a few new additions to the rows.

"The Sea Sovereign arrived in an instant, we didn't even realise what was going on until we saw Tanare," said the village chief, holding his blue hat decorated in coloured pearls in his hands. "She wanted information," stated Marcia, the local

pub owner, leaning on her wife Dola. "Information about you," she added, as Jayce looked towards her. "We never stood a chance," stated Lucas, the old leopard therian, Kiro the goat therian by his side. "But Lieutenant Vanto managed to send out a message. Did it reach the Capital?" he asked. Numerous eyes looked towards Jayce as he looked down at Sara's fresh grave, eyes of hope, eyes questioning that her death hadn't been for nothing. He nodded, bringing the smallest relief to his people with the softest of lies.

"Did Tanare say anything?" Jayce asked, a hint of anger in his voice. The chief stepped forwards, reaching up and placing a hand on Jayce's shoulder. "He asked for our lives. He said that we weren't worth the effort it would be to kill us all. And when he left... he apologised. But nothing more, no mention of Valentine. He... he hardly reacted when Sara was burnt alive." Jayce nodded, he had heard enough.

He stayed in front of Lieutenant Sara Vanto's grave with Damian for quite a while, even after almost everyone else had left. "We'll avenge her," Damian eventually stated. Jayce looked down at his younger brother, seeing only anger within him. "She's gone, Damian. Vengeance may or may not happen - it doesn't matter. Can we just... appreciate the memories she gave us?" Jayce asked quietly, as Wicke watched the pair of them with Caelie by her side. Damian shook his head, turning and striding away. "You're a coward, Jayce!" he stated, stopping and looking back at him. "We can't let her get away with it." Jayce didn't respond, instead thinking back to the countless scoldings he had gotten from Sara, and the influence she had had on him and, more significantly, on Alara. "Thank you," he told her quietly, well aware that Sara was unlikely to be waiting in the afterlife and that this was goodbye.

Jayce stayed a little longer before he turned and found only Caelie waiting for him. She smiled as she looked up at him, before silently hugging him tightly. "Thanks," he told her, as she released him. "Do you see that outpost over there?" he then asked, pointing out towards the Frontier. She nodded. "Can you get us there?" he asked. She again nodded, creating a portal for them both with the faintest of gestures. "Let's go see an old friend."

"Excuse me, sir? Excuse me! Sir? You need an appointment! Sir!" called an attendant, trying to stop Jayce and Caelie as they barged through door after door of the castle in Fringe Outpost. "Guards!" cried the exasperated young woman chasing after them. But the numerous armed figures lining the corridors didn't move, they stared at Jayce nervously – none brave enough to challenge him as he wore an expression of deep, controlled rage.

He pushed open a final set of ornate doors, emerging into a throne room of sorts, except the throne was sat behind a colossal wooden desk. Holli sat in her throne, sitting up straight as she saw him, and taking a nervous gulp. He strode towards her. "Woah woah woah woah, remember our deal," she stated immediately, standing up and lifting up her hands. Jayce stopped in front of her desk, looking around at the luxury decorations painting the large room: the maps, the statues, the suits of armour, the carpets, the tapestries – it all stank of wealth and status. "You used me," he growled, leaning onto her desk and placing his hands upon it.

"It was nothing personal Jayce, just business," she rationalised. "You-" Jayce glared at her with enough impact to force her to unconsciously sit down in her seat. "Why do I get the feeling 'just business' is going to be a phrase I hear a lot of?" he questioned. Holli took a deep breath, shaking her head and straightening up once again. "How about we try this conversation again? As Holli and Jayce, or as Master Guildsman and Ex-Pirate Lord? Your choice," she attempted. Jayce just sighed, taking his palms off her desk and stepping back. He paused, and Holli's heart stopped in her chest. "Holli, why?" he eventually asked, making his choice.

She gestured and her guards left, the doors closing. "Because it was going to happen one way or another. It was inevitable, we may have... pushed it along – true - but it was always going to happen. This way the damage was minimal. There was no grandiose battle between your parents and the Sea Sovereign, minimal death, minimal damage, minimal losses. This way, Jayce, we win." "I don't see how 'I' win," he stated.

She simply gestured around. "Look at Last Drop, look at how it is flourishing. Jayce, the Frontier has fallen, everyday numerous ships travel between the Old and New World. This was everything you wanted for ages, to go and chase after Valentine, and now you can. Magic is free to use, you're not a criminal anymore, and if you become a Pirate Lord, the Guild will offer you deals that will guarantee a future of luxury and status. We can be anything we want now."

Jayce shook his head. "Jayce, open your eyes and stop being stubborn because it didn't go as you were expecting," she challenged, stepping onto her desk and walking across it before dropping down in front of him. She looked up at him, the fear gone, and his anger subsiding. "Think of me as a villain if you want, it wouldn't be the first time, but Jayce – I only want what's best for everyone, and this is it. But you promised me that you would think favourably of me, can you do that, please?" He let out another sigh, looking down at her. She had always been stubborn and somewhat manipulative, and as much as he wanted to dislike it, she was right. "Fine."

"Fine?" she questioned. "Fine as in fine, or fine as in... fine?" He smiled and shook his head. "Just fine," he said softly. She nodded and headed back around to her seat. "I've got some maps set aside for you. I knew you'd come here eventually, and Myra is waiting on the other side – she has more accurate information you'll need for travelling in the Old World. You'll also need either a Mage or an engine to get across, unless you feel like waiting for the right time of year and day. Those trees suck up a lot of water, so it'll be like travelling upstream or up some strong rapids and there's only a few safe-ish paths through. There are some guides offering routes through, they can be extortionate, but will get you safely across," she stated. Jayce raised an eyebrow. "What? Did you think I wasn't going to help you?" He shook his head, somewhat relieved to be wrong. She sighed. "You always think the worst of me... It's dangerous beyond the Frontier, so just be careful, okay?" she asked, genuine concern in her eyes. "Will do. Thank you."

Jayce wasn't exactly sure whether to be happy or not with Holli, but he was grateful that she wasn't his enemy. With his main business taken care of, and Caelie inevitably going to refuse any other option, he turned his attention to the numerous shops across Fringe Outpost. The shops were selling all sorts of goods to people who had just crossed, mostly guides and warnings about the New World, but there were also various items being sold for those crossing over – the most notable being something called a sonic disruptor. Caelie pointed to it and then looked at Jayce for seemingly an explanation. "I don't know," he answered, much to her frustration before she then stepped to the edge of the platform they were walking on and pointed to the water.

Jayce entered into the Focus, the ocean teemed with life, but he quickly noticed numerous ocean crawlers swimming deep beneath them. There were many of them, far more than Jayce had ever seen before. Caelie then pointed towards the shop. "For them?" he questioned. She shook her head and then pondered for a moment before nodding. "Both," she stated uncertainly. Jayce looked out towards the Guild trimaran ship, a thought coming into his mind. "We need to speak to Bjorn," he stated, pointing back to Last Drop. Caelie opened a portal for them both and they stepped through.

It took some time to find Bjorn, but when they did, they found him along with Ordo speaking to a winged therian – a tall birdman: an eagle covered in white feathers. "Perfect timing," Bjorn stated, turning towards Jayce. "This is Aster, I've just signed him on as our guide through the Frontier." Jayce raised a curious eyebrow before looking towards the eagle therian. "Captain, a pleasure. The Quartermaster and I have come to an agreement with my fee of five-hundred

pearl, does he speak for you?" Aster asked, somewhat pompously. Jayce nodded. "Perfect, I will wait near your ship."

The eagle wandered off, only filling Jayce with more questions. "You okay?" Bjorn questioned. "Uh, yeah, can we trust him?" Jayce asked. Bjorn shrugged. "He said he's crossed before, seemed like a good idea – even if he is a bit of a—" "Fine," Jayce interrupted. "Caelie and I have just visited Holli," he stated. "How did that go?" Ordo asked with a chuckle. Jayce pulled a face as his answer. "Anyway, whilst over there, Caelie and I noticed that they're selling something called a sonic disruptor—"

"Are you sure?" Ordo questioned. Jayce nodded, looking at him with curiosity. "Those were banned some time ago, and for good reason," Ordo clarified. "They're anti-jiaoren, anti-life-underwater. Nasty things that can disrupt an ocean crawler's senses, or even kill them if it's too strong - them and any other life underwater," he explained, unearthing a memory of one of the many books Jayce had read during his education about regulations of the seas. "They're being sold, and there is a lot of ocean crawlers under the outpost, I'm guessing because of it."

"Those fishes have good reason to protest such devices," Ordo stated. Jayce nodded in agreement. "The design of those Guild ships makes me think that we're going to have to worry about attacks from underwater. In which case Red is about to become our most vital crewmember," Jayce stated. Ordo and Bjorn both nodded. "We're going to need a new playbook, especially without Wicke in our arsenal."

Jayce gave his crew a little longer before he sent out a message to return. He sat waiting on a crate, only standing up as he spotted Wicke and Damian approaching. Wicke faltered as she saw him, her eyes widening with fast realisation. She shook her head. "I need to talk to you two," Jayce said as softly as he could, Damian turning and quickly noticing Wicke's mortified expression. "No," she said quietly, shaking her head and staring up at Jayce. "Wicke..." Jayce said softly. She shook her head more vigorously, stepping back and looking pleadingly at Jayce, and up at the Rising Aces watching from above. "I'm sorry."

"Then don't say it! Please don't say it!" she begged. Damian's eyes widened as he grasped what was going on. "Hang on," he stated. "You're not leaving her behind, are you?" he questioned in foolish disbelief. Jayce looked at Damian with sympathy. "You're not coming either," Jayce stated. Damian's eyes widened, and

he looked back and forth between Wicke and Jayce. "What? That's not fair!" he protested. "Shut up Damian!" Wicke screamed. "Why Jayce? Why?" she asked, tears streaming down her face.

Jayce approached her, seeing the way the tears stung her burnt skin and the physical pain she was in just by standing. He reached out and placed a hand on her unburnt shoulder. "It's too dangerous," he said softly. She shook her head and pulled her shoulder away from his hand. "So what? It's been dangerous before! What's changed?" she cried, shaking her head and staring up at him. "You nearly died, Wicke. Died. There's no do-overs, that would have been it. Done! Dead!" Jayce stated. "It's too dangerous for a child." Her face fell, her skin going white as she shook her head in disbelief. "What about Caelie? She's hardly older than me."

Jayce looked up towards Caelie as she quietly observed, her face full of pain and conflict. "Caelie has a Demon inside her, a God-like being, and she is almost an Adult. You're sixteen." Wicke scoffed and shook her head. "Wicke, I can't lose you!" Jayce yelled suddenly, stunning her as she looked up and saw the pain in his face. "I can't see you hurt like that again. I'm sorry, you and Damian are staying behind. You are still injured, and that makes you a target. You haven't explored the Dungeons as your sisters asked you to. And--"

"You promised!" she cried, her words cutting straight into him. He grit his teeth and looked down. "You promised," she squeaked, far more quietly – the rest of her world crumbling around her. "I'm sorry," he said, forcing his feelings aside as he tried desperately to ignore the hurt in her voice. "I can't take you with us. Not now, not with Vexx and the Sea Sovereign as our enemies. I can't put you in danger, and that means I can't trust you to do the job I need from you," he finalised, looking over to Damian as he stood angrily to the side. "The same stands for you. You're not ready, but I have a job for you. I'm trusting Wicke to you, and vice versa. This isn't the end, I want you to come back once we've recovered Vexx – once you two have found out what is at the bottom of the Dungeons. By then we'll have a better handle on things, and I can show you both the Old World."

"Jayce..." Wicke said in near-silent desperation, drawing his attention. He looked down at her as she sniffled, wiping her burnt face. She silently asked once more for him to change his mind with little more than a wide-eyed look. He shook his head, carefully pulling her into a hug. "We'll be back, I promise," he said, placing his head to the top of hers. She shut her eyes, nodding in quiet,

defeated acceptance. "Pack your things, and say your goodbyes," he ordered, releasing her.

It felt awful to see Wicke slowly drag herself to her room to pack her things, and Jayce could see that he was far from the only one who felt miserable forcing her out. They had almost all known it was coming, but few had believed Jayce would actually go through with it. Jayce had doubted he could go through with it. He stayed nearby, keeping his eye on her from afar before retreating away as he heard her wailing in heartbreak from inside her room, finding his own place to let his feelings out as he tore her out of his life.

It took her a long time to finish packing, her items generally scattered across her home, but Wicke did not fight it. She knew better than to try to sneak back aboard, and she knew that Jayce had meant his words. She slowly made her final laps, Little Witch in her arms or following her around, stopping in one room after another – each filled with a brief lifetime of memories. Filled with experiences that had moulded her from the scared little girl hunted by the world, into the Wizard she was today. Into the Rising Ace she had become.

"You'll look after yourself, won't you?" Marisha questioned, handing Wicke a basket full of food before holding her in a gentle embrace. Wicke looked up at Marisha and nodded. "You'll write, every week. Telling me how you are, and that you're doing okay, understood? No skipping meals, and I expect you to have a proper diet," she ordered. Wicke nodded, Marisha carefully placing a kiss on Wicke's burnt forehead. "We'll be back for you," she promised.

"You're not going to do anything too stupid without us, right?" Zeta questioned. Wicke forced a grin. "How could I? You're taking all the stupid with you." Zeta squeezed Wicke tightly. "Ow ow ow!" Wicke protested, but Zeta ignored her, struggling to bring herself to let go. Ordo gently placed a hand on Zeta's shoulder, peeling her away. "I'm expecting you to follow that regime I made you. Actually follow it, this time. If I hear from Damian–"

"Yeah yeah yeah, okay okay!" she protested. Ordo tilted his head, shaking it gently before he reached up and patted her head. "Take care, trouble. I'm going to miss you." She stepped forwards and grappled him. His eyes widened with surprise before he held her gently back. "Don't die of old age," she told him. He chuckled, holding her until she released him before stepping back with a wink. "I'll outlive you all, don't worry."

Wicke approached Wren and Falconer, both stood slightly to the side. She reached up, placing her hand to Wren's giant head and ruffling her feathers. "I'll miss your songs in the morning," she told the bird, Wren cooing loudly and placing her head into Wicke. Wicke then turned towards Falconer stepping into his body before he gently held her. "You will do just fine," he reassured. "We will fly together again, I'm sure." She nodded and stepped away.

Astris didn't really know what to say. It had been astounding how quickly she had grown to adore Wicke, despite feeling so frustrated by her at the beginning. "Keep your head down and feet moving. Whatever awaits you in those Dungeons won't go down easy, but you've got this. We believe in you, and I'll be waiting for your mission reports afterwards. In your usual style," Astris comforted. Wicke forced a smile. "If you find the True Vampire, kill it this time." "Will do," Astris said, placing a soft hand on Wicke's head before placing her forehead to hers. "I'll miss you."

"My final gift to you for now," Tempest stated, handing her a scroll. Wicke unfurled it, her eyes widening. "Is this real?" she asked. Tempest sparked with excitement. "It is. I shall eagerly await our first experiment. Farewell, Wizard." "Bye Tempest." Wicke looked towards RK-227, stepping towards the colossal rokken. "Make sure you eat lots of nice minerals, big guy." RK grumbled, the internal grinding sounding somewhat mournful to Wicke's ears. She then turned to Thalia and Yuthura.

"Next time we meet, I expect to see the largest explosion this world has ever seen," Thalia stated, placing a firm hand on Wicke's uninjured shoulder. Wicke nodded. "Stay in one piece this time." Thalia chuckled, nodding in simple agreement. Wicke sighed as she looked towards Yuthura. "You have everything you need, your health is in your care – fail to look after yourself and that will be on your head. Understood?" Yuthura asked. Wicke nodded, the pair staring at each other. Yuthura let out a sigh, opening up her arms. "Go on then." Wicke dove into her arms. "You've always been my favourite. I expect greatness from you," Yuthura whispered.

Wicke felt her heart twist as she was released and looked towards the final three: Bjorn, Caelie, and Jayce. Each goodbye had hurt more than the last, each farewell reminding her of everything she had gained and everything that had now been stripped from her. Caelie stepped forwards and held her tightly, remaining holding onto her for far longer than anyone else. "Little sister," she eventually

said softly, tapping Wicke's slightly charred nose. "Stay safe," she added. Wicke nodded in agreement, unable to say anything to her.

She looked up at Bjorn, the old therian struggling to come up with what to say to her. "Don't do anything I wouldn't," he said eventually, kneeling down to meet her eyes. She stepped into him, placing her head into his neck. "Same to you, old bear." He held her gently, hearing her softly cry into his stomach. "I remember when we first set off together, I remember wondering how quickly I could be rid of you. Now I don't want to see you ever go," he told her quietly. "You will always be one of us, and if you get into trouble I will cross the world in an instant to come to your aid. We will be back for you, I promise." He stepped back and she quietly nodded, leaving the final and most painful goodbye of them all. "Don't say anything," she told him, looking up at her Captain as he approached. He smiled and nodded. "This isn't goodbye. It's farewell for now, right?" she questioned. He nodded once more. "Then tell me you'll see me soon."

"See you soon, Wicke."

It hurt to watch her home sail away. It hurt anyway, thanks to her burns, but it felt like a far more special kind of pain to Wicke. One she knew she wouldn't heal from for a while. "So what now?" Damian asked, as he stood next to her, unable to hide his disappointment at being ditched by his brother, again. "Doc said three months, three months of this ointment and I'll be healed. Then we set out and get moving."

"The Dungeons?" Damian questioned. Wicke nodded, turning to her new companion. "I've put it off long enough, it's time to get some answers. But we'll need a team, a crew of our own. People strong enough to help us reach the bottom." Damian nodded, looking out towards the Stacked Hand sinking into the horizon. "Where do we begin?" he asked. She smirked, folding her arms. "Where do we begin, Captain? I think you mean," she corrected. Damian rolled his eyes. "Absolutely not."

Seize the Seas Tales: A Repeating Story

It took everything Jayce had in him not to turn the ship around and go back for Wicke, but he steeled himself as the Stacked Hand passed Fringe Outpost, the sun still high in the sky. He left out a small chuckle, shaking his head as he looked down at the railing he was gripping, Little Witch sat upon it. "Something funny?" Astris asked, standing next to him, with Bjorn on his other side at the helm. "It's

three years today since Valentine left. He left me behind then, and now I've done the same to Wicke."

"Having second thoughts?" Bjorn asked, the giant row of trees called the Frontier stretching impossibly high in front of them. The waters of the ocean shifted nearby, a colossal figure emerging out of the depths and casting a shadow over the Stacked Hand. Little Witch hissed loudly. Jayce's eyes widened before he bore a big smile. "No, I think everyone's exactly where they need to be."