

Chapter 192: Fool's Game

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Seize the Seas Tales: Glory For Another Day

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