

Chapter 197: Justice

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Seize the Seas Tales: The Second Dungeon

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

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

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

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

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