

## Chapter 208: Through The Wall

"Are you sure we don't time to pick up a Dragon or two?" Lieutenant Commander Riley questioned, as she leant against the railing of the Courier tuning her sniper rifle. Alara looked up at the canopy far above them – they were deep within the Frontier sailing near the middle of the large fleet heading to the Old World. "No," Alara stated firmly, sharing in Riley's disappointment but also well aware of the importance she and her crew had within the greater fleet.

Forty-five ships were sailing for the Old World, forty-five crews all prepared for war, with more due to follow. Last time they had left with their tails between their legs - this time that was not an option. Too much was at stake: her parents, Jayce and his missing crew, and even the Republic. If Alara failed here there would not be a do-over: she would be dead and so would her parents. That was not going to happen. And she was not going to fail, no matter the cost.

"But come on, a Dragon would be so useful. Just picture me flying above like Falconer does, only with my rifle and a creature that spits fire or lightning," Riley whined. "Okay, let me just turn around the entire fleet. Delay our journey by however long it takes us to find this Dragon nest and then give you however long you need to capture and bond with a Dragon," Alara returned sarcastically. Riley pouted before sticking her tongue out at Alara. "Rude," she mumbled. Alara rolled her eyes, glancing back to the main deck as her Marines and Navy made their final battle preparations.

"Nervous?" Riley questioned, looking down at her rifle and finishing her tweaks. Alara glanced back towards her. "You could say that..." Alara said quietly, her heart hammering away in her chest, so much so that she could see the vibrations through her Commodore uniform. "Yeah, not surprised. I still don't understand why we don't have at least a Rear-Admiral with us," Riley said quietly. Alara shook her head. "We're the vanguard. Our job is to wipe out the Sentries so that the following invasion can commence. We're not expected to hold them, nor is this expected to be the most fierce of the battles to come. Those that follow have to take control of the territories we are passing straight through. The Admirals will be needed for that," Alara answered. Riley shook her head, looking outwards through the trees. "I still have a bad feeling about this."

"Ahem," came a voice from next to them, the pair turning to face Captain Volker. "Commodore, Commodore Cyrenna Kai says we're nearing the exit. Your orders?" he asked, the usually stoic man sweating somewhat profusely. He was nervous, and Alara was not surprised. The scouts had informed them that an

armada awaited them. "Speech time," Riley stated, slinging her rifle over her shoulder and patting Alara on the back before walking off. Volker nodded to Riley before setting his gaze back onto Alara. She sighed. "I need a channel to our fleet."

Alara stepped up next to the Courier's wheel, her crew looking up to her, her friends and trusted aides around her. She looked across the faces she had been with since the start, the faces who had joined her when she first took command, the faces who had joined her only recently. She held all of their lives in her hands. She held their hopes. Their dreams. Their futures. Their fates. They trusted her implicitly. She looked beyond her ship to the others in her fleet followed behind. Each crew was there because she had chosen them. Because she had asked them to join her in this personal battle, a fight for her parents. They all knew what it meant to her, and just how dangerous this mission was. Yet they were here anyway.

"Thank you," Alara stated firmly and openly. "Thank you for coming with me. We face perhaps our second greatest mission, second only to erasing the taint of the Church from our Republic. This mission is a turning point in our dealings with the Sovereign. It is a chance for us to take back not only our New World, but also to free the Old from the Sovereign's and her Betrayers' grips. It is a chance for us to deal a meaningful blow so that our brothers and sisters that follow stand a greater chance at succeeding in their own missions. It is a chance to return two of our own back to the fold: Admirals Silas and Victoire Vanathur, a chance to bring my parents home. We will succeed. We must. And I ask only three things of you: your trust, your loyalty, and your unwavering courage."

"Do I have your Trust?"

"Oohrah!"

"Your loyalty?"

"Oohrah!"

"Your unwavering courage?"

"Oohrah!"

"Then let's show the Old World that we will not turn our backs anymore!" Alara yelled. Her crew and the neighbouring crews cheered, cannon fire thundering ahead from the front of the convoy. "Battle stations!" Alara declared, turning to Witchford, Wulf, Brett, Volker and Riley – lying down on top of Alara's quarters

alongside her other snipers. Riley winked at Alara, before firing the first shot. A beam of cyan fire flew through gaps in the countless ships ahead before emerging out of the Frontier into a tsunami of artillery, a hurricane of flyers, and a wall of ships bombarding the entrance. Somewhere, high up within the fortress island of Final Bastion, a commander slumped to the floor – killed by an impossible shot.

One by one, the fleet flooded out of the entranceway of the Frontier, dropping out of the darkness with a crash into the flowing rapids, the light bearing heavily down upon them. Volker took lead, blasting out orders to his sailors as the Courier and its trailing fleet spread out into formation behind Commodore Cyrenna Kai's forward fleet. They immediately took a three-rowed arrowhead formation, the largest and most durable ships at the front to take the heaviest of the artillery. "Vanathur," came Cyrenna's voice. "You're up!"

Alara nodded. "Wulf!" she commanded, pointing portside to Final Bastion. "Wipe out those guns!" she ordered. He roared, darting forwards with his fellow therians over the side of the Courier, the squad surging across the top of the waters, numerous other therian squads joining their charge towards the island from their own ships. "Riley, protect them!" Alara commanded, surveying the battlefield. "Aye!" Riley yelled, her snipers turning and changing their targets, the flyers darting downwards from the skies in an attempt to gun down the charging therians as well as the cannoneers aiming at the advance.

A crescent wall of ships surrounded the entrance and exit to the Frontier, an armada only just larger than Alara's own, but unlike Alara's, it was also reinforced by the defensive battle island of Final Bastion. Cyrenna's strategy was to blitz through the wall, then to head perpendicular to Final Bastion and blast through the ships near the edge of the crescent. It gave them an advantage, they had no need to deal with Final Bastion, and it also gave them the broadside of their ships to launch cannon after cannon back at their enemies. However, it meant creating larger targets for Final Bastion and the enemy to target. It also meant the rear side of the assault could not use their cannons, as their allies were between them and the enemy. It was bold, but Cyrenna was completely right on the strategy. They did not have to win. They only had to break through.

An explosion drew Alara's attention to the front of the Fleet. Armistice, one of the largest ships in the fleet, had detonated from within. Alara bit her lip. "All survivors of Armistice, abandon ship and make for any other vessels. Those that fall behind will be left behind!" came Cyrenna's cold and brutal voice. Alara looked ahead: the wall was remaining firm – the ships were larger than hers and

most of them were more heavily armoured, but she could see Cyrenna fighting on the main deck, wielding her father's gauntlets and tearing through each Null Legionnaire that approached her.

A shadow slowly shifted across the shining waters to their left and Alara immediately looked up. A huge airship was amongst the clouds, flying as high as it could to avoid detection as it prepared a bombing run on the fleet. "Riley, up!" Alara commanded, crouching and readying to jump. There was no way she could make it there in time, but she could reach it if she had to. Riley rolled over, aiming her rifle upwards and shutting her eyes as the sun blinded her. She held her breath reaching out with her Focused senses and ignoring everything else on the battlefield. She was completely defenceless. Riley pulled the trigger, her armour-piercing round sailing upwards, reinforced with a cyan flame.

Alara couldn't see from her position, but one of the large propellers on the side of the airship came loose. It tilted, still functioning but dragging the ship sideways into the beginning of a roll. "Gotcha," Artemis stated, firing a following shot straight into the hangar of the airship. A flash of orange followed, before the entire airship seemed to swell, resulting in a colossal detonation. Alara could feel the heat on her skin even from the deck of the Courier.

The airship began to fall, quickly gaining speed as the flaming carcass dropped from the sky towards the ocean. It hit the water hard near the enemy fleet, sending a colossal wave that slammed ships into ships, washing sailors overboard, before finally flowing towards the Courier. "Mages!" Alara yelled, her newly added Navy Sorcerers chanting quickly before freezing and shattering the wave, successfully defending the fleet.

Alara tensed, her body instinctively moving to defend itself as it sensed danger. Her eyes immediately darted towards Final Bastion, a figure leaping away from the island and darting across the numerous decks of the end to end ships. Alara glanced back towards the front of the fleet, Cyrenna was still battling, her forward ships still getting closer to the edge of the wall. Alara gripped her glaive, leaping over the edge of the Courier and darting forwards on a direct intercept to the enemy warrior.

She met him two-thirds of the way, leaping onto the enemy ship and unleashing a wave of Panic as she vaulted at him with a heavy downwards swing of her glaive. He stopped and turned, darting into her swing to catch it early and before it found its full momentum. He towered above her, a giant of a man dressed in a Null Legion uniform that looked almost indistinguishable to the others – the only

difference being faint traces of golden markings across his shoulders and chest. He hooked her glaive with a nook in one of his two large double-bladed axes, immediately swinging his other axe towards her waist in an attempt to disembowel her.

Alara twisted the handle of her glaive, the runes glowing before unleashing a bubble of defensive energy. It hit him, blocking the blade and sending him backwards away from her. A barrage of gunfire immediately peppered her shield from all directions as the Null Legionnaires around her regained their composure from her Panic. The bullets shattered on the shield, the clear blue colour slowly turning yellow before eventually red. The Null Legion Commander paced in front of her, waiting.

But Alara didn't wait. She crouched and leapt upwards, cocking her glaive and ejecting the almost drained magic stone inside – the shield melting away. She twisted, roaring as she pushed off the air in a fast and ferocious downwards lunge. She slammed into the deck, the wood rippling and shattering in an outwards blast from the impact. Shards of wood shot outwards, impacting unlucky Legionnaires whilst sending others tumbling below or off the deck. The Commander lunged at her, swinging both axes at her, but Alara leant backwards, bending her glaive as she kept it wedged into a beam.

She released the weapon, the glaive swinging back, straight into the Commander's masked face, cracking the lens. He groaned, staggering backwards across the beam – more shocked than anything as Alara dove forwards, twisting her glaive free and swinging it towards him. But it missed and he looked at her with distinct confusion, his masked face tilting to the side, her glaive the wrong way round. She fired a bolt of energy from her glaive, blowing his head clean off his body in a bloody splatter. The giant toppled, falling off the beam and crashing below deck.

"We're through!" came Volker's voice in Alara's communicator. She turned and darted, resuming the Null Legion Commander's trajectory towards Cyrenna. "Retreat to the fleet!" Alara commanded Wulf and his troops, the therians immediately surging away from their positions across the surface of Final Bastion back towards their ships and the greater fleet. Alara herself darted across the ships in her path, swinging and firing her glaive with brutal precision against all foes that met her charge.

"All ships do not stop!" came Cyrenna's voice from up ahead, the ship she was standing on in flames and a ringed pile of corpses around her, her black uniform

shiny with blood and her metal gauntlets oozing crimson. Alara leapt, rolling across the deck to land next to her. They both stood panting, watching each other's back as ship after ship flooded through the gap they had forged in the armada's wall. "Go!" Alara commanded, the final ship breaking through. Cyrenna charged forwards, leaping onto the back of the ship with Alara, and Beowulf, close behind as he joined them from the other sinking enemy ship.

"Now comes the fun part!" he stated, his expression grim but a faint bloody smile at the corner of his mouth. Alara shook her head, the enemy ships on the far side of Final Bastion beginning to turn in pursuit. "Fun is not how I would describe it," she stated starting forwards to the bow, the other two Commodores walking with her. "Losses?" Beowulf questioned to Captain Aran, stopping by the helm. "Four ships in total, the Armistice, Merciless, Ranger and Fearless," answered the Captain with a grim expression. Beowulf sighed and shook his head, stepping forwards to join the others.

"Vanathur, can you spare the Halo to make up for the Merciless and the Fearless?" Beowulf questioned, as he landed on the next ship and caught up with Alara and Cyrenna on their journey forwards to their ships. "Both of them?" she questioned. He nodded. "Damn, that's as heavy of a loss as the Armistice," she added. "We also lost the Ranger," Beowulf added. Cyrenna threw a heavy punch through the nearest crate, shattering the wood and exposing the contents inside. "Halo, you're reassigned to Commodore Beowulf Kai's fleet. Warspite, you're moving to reinforce Commodore Cyrenna Kai. Acknowledge," Alara commanded. "Aye Commodore," came the responses from both Captains, the ships moving out of position to join the two other fleets. "Thanks," Cyrenna and Beowulf both stated to Alara. She nodded, it was a heavy sacrifice on her behalf, but it was a necessary one.

They landed on their individual ships, and Alara immediately began to read through the reports on losses. For her fleet it had been minimal, but the casualty reports from Cyrenna and Beowulf's ship were harsh, but ultimately within expected parameters. She hated the loss of life, she hated the relief that it had only been what it was, but she quickly set aside her feelings and walked to the edge of the Courier, looking backwards towards the pursuing enemy fleet. It was only a few ships, but they were likely reporting her location so that an ambush could be laid for them.

"I think this is it," Alara stated into her communicator, looking out towards Cyrenna and Beowulf's fleets as they separated firmly from her own. "Agreed,"

Cyrenna stated. "We'll see you on the other side," Beowulf stated, his fleet angling east whilst Cyrenna's angled west. Alara tried to speak, but her voice got caught in her throat. Silence followed from the other two Commodores and eventually she turned her attention instead to her own fleet.

Alara sat in her room as darkness fell. The enemy had fallen away into the distance as Witchford and Volker had predicted. They simply did not have the resources to pursue them and, with the breaking of the armada, fears of an even larger assault would only grow, the paranoia driving them back to assist the defence of Final Bastion. She sipped a glass of white rum, a farewell gift from Philip Exarga. It was smooth, clear and already almost empty, but Alara knew there wouldn't be much time for casual drinking when they arrived at their target. She sighed, looking up at the ceiling and thinking on the battle she had survived and the lives she had given and taken.

A knock prompted her to sit upright. "Yes?" she questioned, the door opening and Brett and Braze stepping inside. "Alara," they both greeted. She looked at Brett with curiosity. He had changed over the months of preparation, training hard to better fill the role he had originally co-opted for himself: a scout. He looked physically stronger and had shrugged off his confident façade for a genuinely confident demeanour only built through rigorous training and practice. He had grown into a far better Marine than he had been before. He looked down at her, his icy blue eyes glancing briefly towards the drink in her hand and then towards her desk before finally back at her face.

Alara couldn't help but still feel a twinge of guilt whenever she saw him. The shiny red scar covering the right-side of his face hadn't gotten any better throughout their years of sailing together, and his milky-blue eye still slightly unnerved her. He brushed his gloved hand through his short blonde hair before glancing towards his companion and tilting his head towards Alara, as if gesturing for him to say something.

Alara looked towards Ashton Braze. He had been with her since the start, a survivor of the original Wolfpack, but - as much as it pained her to admit it – she still felt like she didn't truly know him. She trusted him implicitly and he had always been there when she had needed him, but he had always been quite reserved. He was almost equal in height to Brett, and like Brett wore scars of his own. A black eyepatch sat over his left eye, a diagonal scar running from his scalp to his lip. His hair was cropped and dark brown, matching his thin eye. He was a muscular man, with far more scars beneath his uniform than just the main one

on his face. He had always loved being in the front of battle, and as the years had gone on he had only become more and more willing to volunteer for the riskier assignments, often working closely alongside Brett.

"We wanted to ask about when you wanted us to depart?" Braze questioned. Alara hesitated. "As soon as possible. I need accurate information, so I'm counting on you and the others to obtain it. We're going to slow our approach, we need to time our invasion with the others to prevent the enemy from collaborating their targeting systems against us. But rest for now. Today was a big success and there's no point getting ahead of ourselves," she stated. They nodded to her and stepped towards the door, shutting it behind them.

She sighed, looking down at the floor. Sending any advance was likely suicide, if she sent Brett and his scouts ahead, they were unlikely to make it back. She didn't want to send them, but she knew she had to. For the good of the greater fleet, and the Republic's interests in the Old World.

#### Seize the Seas Tales: Taking from Life to give to Death

"Hang on!" Falconer yelled as Wren broke into a dive, the air around them erupting into flashes of fire as they were shot at from below. The giant roc tucked her wings in, unflinchingly diving down towards the dark fortress covering the Leyline they had targeted. Fenn held onto Falconer's waist as tight as he could, the wind blinding him as they dropped towards the ground. "Why are they attacking us?" Fenn questioned, yelling into the wind.

Wren twisted, weaving between the blasts before spreading her wings at the last moment. "Does not matter, this is the territory of Alberta Armin. Nothing here will be friendly," Falconer warned, preparing himself to jump as Wren glided quickly from a low angle towards the castle's main gate. "Stay close, I will guard you," Falconer stated, aiming with his bow before unleashing an arrow. "Jump!" he yelled, dropping off the side of Wren and landing hard in front of the main gate, just as colossal roots and vines slithered between the metal bars and tore the gate open for them.

Fenn rolled to his feet as he landed behind Falconer, a long curved knife materialising in his left hand as his bracelet transformed. "So the Leyline is under this castle?" he questioned. Falconer nodded, launching an arrow at a vaguely humanoid creature charging at them from the shadows. The arrow entered the cannibal's boulder-like misshapen skull before erupting outwards in large thorny vines and bright blood-covered flowers. Falconer held his bow in his wooden

arm, gesturing with his free hand towards the plant. Screeches came from the shadows of the overcast day as more of the cannibals rushed towards them, only for the thorns to lash out from the corpse and impale the creatures too slow to avoid them. Falconer dispatched the rest with three quick and well-placed arrows.

Falconer led Fenn forwards, walking calmly through the courtyard towards a curved, barren and crooked tree abandoned in the stone. He aimed and fired arrow after arrow, destroying each overlooking cannon emplacement in a large detonation of greenery. The monsters that survived then swarmed down from the battlements, each of them twisted forms of humans - varying from short, stubby hunchbacks, to taller, skeletal, gaunt and barbaric creatures, with blank black eyes, distended stomachs and wide toothy maws. Falconer finished the chanting he had been mumbling under his breath and touched the lifeless tree.

The wood twisted, growing and changing before two large legs made of roots tore themselves out of the ground. The branches clumped together into three large arms, the trunk splitting at the top to form the vague form of a head. "Exterminate them," Falconer commanded. The tree struck with horrific speed, causing Fenn to flinch defensively as the giant tore apart their enemies. Between swinging with its colossal arms, the impact leaving little more than broken splatters behind, stomping with its legs, squishing those too slow to flee or dodge, and the creature grabbing others with tendril-like roots and dragging them screaming into the plants growing form, it was a massacre.

Fenn stared in shock at the scene, only for a body to hit the floor next to him and cause him to leap back with a yelp. He looked up just as another screaming corpse splattered into the stone. "Don't worry. Wren will protect us," Falconer stated almost subconsciously, his eyes following the trail of green energy through the air. He set off forwards, the giant tree continuing to fight even without his command. Fenn desperately ran after him.

"Hold them off!" Falconer commanded, approaching the crack in the floor with caution. "Huh?" Fenn questioned, his mouth falling open. A twisted beam of green energy was flooding out of the crack in the stone floor, the cavern beneath the castle already filled with bones and rotting flesh. "They've tainted it," Falconer stated. "I must purify it. Guard me, pull me out if you feel you need to. Guard me, Ace."

Fenn couldn't help but stand slightly taller at the acknowledgment of being a crewmate, but it still didn't take away from the task. "For gods' sake. Fine!" he

yelled, turning and holding his blade closer to his chest. "Guard him!" Falconer commanded, the heavy stomps of their tree companion bringing both unease and reassurance to Fenn as the colossal creatures dragged itself into the cavern. A scream startled Fenn, a red glow painting the walls from behind him. He turned without thought, staring in horror as Falconer's arm pulsated and twisted, the wood growing and digging deeper into the man's flesh. "Falconer!" he yelled, starting forwards. "Behind you!" Falconer yelled, his eyes shut as he fought against the agony.

Fenn dropped to his knee, a sharp pain in his shoulder and a heavy weight on his back. A growl filled his ears, a wet drool dampening his fur along with a healthy mixture of his blood as the cannibal bit into him. "Die in the abyss!" Fenn yelled, immediately stabbing the creature. He struck once, twice, three, four, five times, before pushing its corpse off his shoulder and mounting it, stabbing it further even as it lay dead. He screamed at it in frustration, only for another to slam into him, knocking his blade aside.

Fenn screamed at the cannibal as it screeched at him, dragging itself towards him in a bound with its claw-like fingers scraping the ground as it ran on all fours. He leapt, driving his knee into its chin before digging his own claws into its skin and throwing it without thought. The creature passed through the Leyline, dropping to the floor beyond Falconer and immediately beginning to retch. It threw up a bloody cocktail before grabbing its stomach, the mostly exposed flesh pulsating and moving before the creature detonated outwards from within in a spiky explosion of twisted bone and wood.

Fenn's eyes landed on Falconer, his body floating in the Leyline, green and red energy swirling around him. His arm had grown to monstrous proportions, the wooden mass almost as large as Falconer's entire body. His body lay fused within the wood, the weapon itself far larger and easily as tall as Falconer. Glowing green veins spread throughout Falconer's arm, before stretching further into his body and neck. Fenn could see the wood had burrowed into his chest, the growth only continuing to corrupt more and more of Falconer's body. "Falconer!" Fenn yelled, rushing forwards but faltering as he held his hands a few inches away from the Leyline. Falconer did not respond, continuing to float in the energies as the last traces of red faded away, replaced only by what Fenn assumed was the normal green of the Leyline.

"Gods dammit!" Fenn yelled, grabbing Falconer and trying to drag him out of the energies. It burnt, feeling like he had thrown his hands into fire, and Falconer

remained trapped in the Leyline. "Come on! Fight it!" Fenn yelled, pulling with all of his might. Suddenly it seemed to let Falconer go, the twisted man dropping out straight onto Fenn. They both hit the ground hard, Fenn groaning as Falconer rolled off him. "Are you okay?" Falconer immediately questioned, his face full of pain. "Am I- are you?" Fenn immediately returned, looking at the blood oozing from the new growths across Falconer's chest and the colossal arm pulling his entire body to the side.

Falconer groaned as he stood up, rolling the arm that reached all the way to the floor. He lifted it up, pointing at the tree that had guarded them before in turn at the Leyline. The giant strolled into the beam, immediately blossoming with countless flowers before rapidly growing in size, eventually crashing with the rock of the cave ceiling before pushing further upwards and outwards. "We need to go," Falconer commanded, his bow folding into his arm, grabbing Fenn and pulling him into the creature's shadow as the entire mountain above them split open to reveal daylight far above them. Boulders, cannibals, and the castle above started to crumble and fall down towards them as the tree continued to grow upwards. The rocks landed around them and a cry came from above. Falconer whistled and Wren landed next them in a flash of feathers. "Come on," Falconer stated, mounting Wren's back before extending his human hand to Fenn.

Fenn faltered, continuing to stare in shock and mild horror at what had happened to Falconer. But he shook it off, taking the hand and climbing on. "Come Wren, back to the Scourge. Let us try to revive what has died," Falconer stated, the large bird spreading her wings and launching them upwards through the falling mountain.