

Chapter 209: Sacrifice

Alara sat on her bed early in the morning, the darkness still surrounding the Courier and her greater fleet. The air was cold and frosty, ice covering the windows of her quarters. Tilly lay on her lap, the cat sleeping but restless as Alara cradled her. It was here: war, the day that her invasion of the Sentries begun. She hadn't slept. She couldn't sleep, no matter how hard she had tried. Brett, Braze and the others hadn't returned from their reconnaissance. They could be dead for all she knew, their whole mission exposed and all their preparations ruined. She simply didn't know.

Her eyes lay on the Wolfpack's tree, the various tags of her fallen friends shining in the low light. It had haunted her for days, far more than it had before, but equally in someways it felt almost inconsequential. Alara had thirteen ships under her command, the smallest of which had a crew of one-hundred and fifty souls on board. She held lives in her hands in the thousands. A significant chunk of which she knew with almost certainty would be lost within only a few hours. They were crewmates, comrades, friends.

A knock came from the door and she immediately stood up, Tilly leaping off her to safety as she strode to the door and heaved it open. Brett stood in front of her, mud across his face and a trail of blood leading down from his nose to his chin. He held out a tag in his hands, his face vacant and eyes dull. "A fleet waits for us, and the Sentry is surrounded by a fortress manned by mages, Null Legion, and remnants of Brunxchume military. We outnumber them, but they hold the defensive advantage."

Alara looked down at the tag, shakily taking it from Brett just as his knees gave out and he dropped to the floor. She knelt in front of him, placing a hand on his shoulder before sliding it to his face. He looked up at her, his skin cold, wet and pale – his eyes shining with held-in tears. "How?" she asked quietly, cradling Braze's tags in her hand. "We and the others were setting up traps, something to help our offensive. I... we went in too deep, we sabotaged their communications, I have the detonator, but on our way out we were spotted. He led an offensive, a trick to distract the enemy so that we could get out. I... volunteered, but he stole the chance from me. It should have been me," Brett confessed. Alara shook her head, taking the tag and approaching the tree. She hung it with the others, lifting the tiny tree up and placing it gently inside her bottomless bag. "I need you Brett. I need you to help me finish what Ashton and the others started. We can't mourn

him now, we don't have time. Rest – if you can. And Anson, thank you for surviving."

Alara stared at the island ahead of them. She couldn't see the array from their current position, it was too far inland, but the fleet assembled at the island's main access point gave a distinct clue that there was more to the island than it initially appeared. Brett's mission had given them more information than she could have possibly asked for. The entire landmass was sloped, with the Sentry stationed inside of a fortress on the far, elevated end. The associated cliff face was rugged, steep and trapped with runes and explosives – a death trap with guns pointing downwards. The rest of the island was covered with forests and defensive stations, with a singular road leading from the island's edge to the fortress.

She had debated an assault from the air. Taking the Sentry that way would have helped to eliminate the main danger, but likely at the cost of the assault team that had gone inside, alongside the destruction of the target they had been sent to capture. She needed the Sentry to rescue her parents. So that meant they needed to make landfall, and fast, before the Sentry destroyed them from afar. She let out a short puff of air, adjusting her peaked cap as she looked to Captain Volker. He nodded to her, a silent understanding that once she and her Marines departed it would fall to him to keep the Courier afloat. She then turned to her forces.

"Fight until the end!" she yelled, raising her glaive into the air. Her troops roared, rushing to their stations. "Forwards!" she commanded to her fleet, the largest warship – Absolution – leading the way. Alarm bells rang across the fleet, every sailor and Marine ready for battle. "Commodore, enemy ships are moving to intercept, five have remained behind to form a defensive line, the other six are on direct approach!" informed a Lieutenant.

Alara turned and looked at Brett. He looked ready for battle but she saw a weariness to his eyes. "Give them hell," she told him. He pulled a cylinder out of his pocket, a red button on top which he immediately pressed. Several loud booms rang out in the distance as the explosives detonated. "Communications are down between the fleet and Sentry. Not forever," he warned. Alara nodded appreciatively. "For Braze," she said softly. "Sniper division, target all enemy Mages. Mage division, defend our ships from enemy spells. All ships, fire at will!"

Riley remained by Alara's side, her snipers operating without her. "Sever their leadership," Alara instructed coldly. Riley nodded, bounding a fist to her chest before darting to the edge of the ship and leaping overboard. Wulf stepped up.

"I should go with her," he said quietly to Alara, Absolution taking their first shots at the approaching enemy fleet. Alara shook her head. "Riley is a big girl, she can handle herself and too much attention will put her in greater danger. I need you here for the ground invasion," she stated firmly. Wulf nodded, stepping back. "Witchford, Brett, prepare the Marines." Brett and Witchford nodded, rushing off below deck.

Cannon fire erupted from the Crusader, the Blood Moon, Azure and the Iron-blooded, as they entered firing range. Alara's heart thundered in her chest along with the guns, her eyes locked firmly on the island ahead of them. "Commodore!" came Artemis' voice. "There's a Mage, he's being guarded – we can't stop him!" she said, panic growing in her voice. Alara clenched her fists – Artemis didn't panic.

A golden ring surrounded the Absolution before the clouds above parted and colossal beam of golden light slammed down onto the ship. It tore a hole straight through, the ship erupting into flame as its crew and Captain were instantly disintegrated by divine wrath of the heavens. "By the Gods!" uttered Volker. "Riley! Priority target!" Alara yelled, her largest ship completely destroyed. "Roger!" came the response. Explosions peppered the oceans around them as they entered accurate range of the enemy ships, Alara's forces desperately separating as they were forced to sail around the remains of the Absolution.

"Commodore!" Wulf stated firmly, Alara looked at him, her knuckles white as she clenched her glaive. "They have too much space," he stated. "If we don't make it to the shore then this is all for nothing." Alara agreed completely, but if her troops were exhausted before they even made landfall then they were screwed. "Riley needs an opening," he stated. "Let me go." Alara blinked, her mind flashing to the expression Brett had held that morning. An image followed of her own grim expression held in a mirror as Wulf's tag hung from her grasp. She couldn't lose him. "Commodore... to the end," he stated.

Alara nodded. "Boys, we're going hunting!" Wulf declared into his communicator, striding away from Alara. She reached out to him wanting to desperately beg for him to come back alive, but she couldn't. Several hundred Marines and Navy were dead already. She couldn't afford the luxury of personal feelings. She snapped her hand back to her side and turned to face the enemy just as another golden ring enveloped the Crusader. The ship desperately swerved to the side, the golden beam tearing an opening in the hull that immediately forced the ship to roll as water began to flood in through the catastrophic damage.

"Crusader, abandon ship!" Alara yelled into her communicator, another ship lost. She grit her teeth, taking a step forwards only for Volker to place a hand on her shoulder. "Commodore," he said simply – the reminder of her title enough to snap her back to her duty. "Captain Egan, take your survivors and seize an enemy vessel. Any survivors of the Absolution are under your command." "Aye, Commodore – I'm sorry."

"Lieutenant Dawnstar to the Helm now!" Alara called into her communicator. A young woman in armoured robes ran across the main deck and up the stairs, standing at attention before Alara. "What is that spell? Can it be stopped?" Alara questioned. "It's called Wrath of God, Commodore. It's... a tenth tier spell." "By the Gods," Alara muttered. "Can they cast any more?" she asked. Lieutenant Dawnstar bit her lip. "I'm sorry, I do not know. There is a chance it's not a singular Mage. Our defensive spells may hold out for a moment, but... only a moment," she explained. Alara nodded, dismissing her with a single gesture. "Artemis, are there others?" Alara called up.

"Unknown. They've taken that Mage inside, but they appear to be readying another," Artemis answered from her position, continuing to take precise shots at the enemy. "All Mages, prepare to block enemy spell of mass destruction, Helms you'll have one chance to avoid the Wrath of God," Alara commanded. A cyan bolt of energy flew across the ocean from the west, entering the cabin of an enemy flagship. "Archmage eliminated," Riley stated, cheers erupting across the decks of multiple ships, only for a golden ring to envelop the Azure. Time seemed to freeze as Alara watched the golden beam of devastation drop from the skies, walls of water, air, and energy desperately formed between the beam and the Azure. The golden beam tore through the first three shields without hesitation, but it stopped on the fourth for a moment before faltering on the fifth, golden cracks appearing through the translucent wall. The Azure desperately veered to the side, the beam crashing into the ocean next to it as the ship survived the assault.

Alara stared ahead as an enemy ship erupted into flames, Wulf and the other therians assaulting it with everything they had. "Snipers, cover our wolves!" Alara called out, her snipers changing their targets to better protect Wulf. The foremost enemy ship swerved, turning into the heading of another ship. Captain Egan was getting his revenge for the sinking of his ship. "All ships, engage and destroy!" Alara commanded, the enemy fleet coming within close range.

The battlefield erupted into chaos, the eleven surviving ships of Alara's fleet separating into battle groups and each targeting an enemy vessel of their own to annihilate. The enemy in turn, their ships mostly uniform in their design, abandoned their strategy, instead dispersing and aiming for any of Alara's ships that were close. They were swiftly gunned down by the precise gunnery of Alara's forces.

The casualties were minimum, with Captain Egan jumping ship back to the safety of the Iron-blooded along with the other survivors. Alara folded her arms. The damage hadn't been minor, almost all of the fleet had taken significant hits, but given the overwhelming success it seemed strange that the enemy hadn't broken their defensive line to assist the other half of their fleet. Instead, the five ships were still in position in front of the Sentry's island.

Alara turned, looking back at the wreckage of the sunken enemy. Her eyes widened and she turned back. "They were all Brunxchume military," she realised. "They were used to soften us up!" she yelled. The skies roared with fire as an armada of enemy flyers descended from the skies, the Null Legion warships unleashing their heavy guns in artillery barrages towards Alara's forces. "Concentrate fire on the enemy flyers!" Alara commanded, bullets peppering the deck of her ship as the swarm descended upon her fleet. Her gunners moved from the cannons to the anti-air guns, the air above them erupting in fiery blasts of flak that shredded the wings and cockpit of any vehicle caught in the gunfire.

A line of explosions rolled across the waters towards them as bombers dropped their loads onto her fleet from high above. Screams of panic surrounded Alara in all directions, her wounded ships being devoured one by one by the sudden influx of enemy ships. "Charge the line, we must break through! Marines, swarm the enemy ships!" Alara commanded, looking to Volker, who nodded. She dropped her hat and leapt upwards, vaulting through the skies with Artemis close behind as she charged through the air towards the bombers high above. "I'm with you!" Artemis yelled, firing shot after shot at any flyer that charged towards them.

Alara ignored the flak and the hailstorm of bullets. She had a job to do, she needed to save her ship, her crew, her fleet. She continued to leap, the air thinning and her body burning in agony as she used her Focus to fight against gravity beyond anything she had done before. She reached the first bomber, screaming in fury and frustration and grief with her Focus-enhanced glaive. She cleaved the

wing of the bomber, sending the vessel screaming towards the ocean far below. She lunged towards another, crashing into its cockpit and landing inside.

She swung, painting the metal room with the blood of the pilots before she fumbled for a grenade on her belt and embedded her glaive in the floor. She activated the rune, kicked open the door to the hold and threw the grenade towards the occupants and the undetonated bombs. She then ran back, grabbed her glaive, and dove through the broken window back out into the sky. The bomber detonated behind her in a series of explosions that caught others in the flying formation, igniting them in a chain reaction.

Alara fell, spreading her arms and legs wide as she surveyed her surroundings. Her remaining nine ships were engaging the Null Legion, but there were likely reinforcements on the way. She dove, angling towards the foremost Null Legion ship. The wind whipped past her face, her eyes watering and the taste of blood in her mouth. A bolt of cyan light soared across the battlefield, hitting an enemy Commander on the deck of the foremost Null Legion ship. But then the entire battlefield was painted in cyan and Alara stared in horror as the Iron-blooded was bombarded by the Sentry they had come to conquer.

“Communications has been reestablished, I repeat communications has been reestablished – the Sentry is operational!” Brett yelled uselessly across the battlefield. Alara changed her trajectory, landing back on the Courier with a heavy thud, Artemis landing closely behind. “Commodore, I can disable them once more,” she stated, slinging her sniper rifle across her back. Alara nodded to the Ex-Emperor’s Fist. “Do it!” she commanded. Another barrage of cyan obliterated the Azure.

“All ships, evasive manoeuvres!” Alara commanded. “Get to that beachhead! Put yourselves as close to the Null Legion ships as possible!” The remaining ships in Alara’s fleet immediately surged forwards. “Alara,” Volker stated, drawing her immediate attention. “We can get you there. Just give the command,” he told her. She looked at the Captain. There were still five enemy ships, all helmed by experienced soldiers, with the backing of the Sentry. She knew what he was suggesting, what he was telling her had to be done. Alara nodded to him and he stepped forwards to the Helm, taking over the wheel. “All Marines, prepare for island assault!” she commanded, as the Courier charged the blockade.

The other ships all pulled forwards, joining the charge towards both the island’s defensive guns, the five Null Legion ships – still unloading their cannons even whilst Wulf and other forces were boarding them – and the Sentry. Another

barrage of cyan energy lit up the sky, striking the ship to Alara's right, but the Courier continued forwards. It crashed into the centremost Null Legion ship, glancing off its hull and allowing the Courier's gunners to unleash a devastating barrage of cannon fire point blank into the enemy. The ship then carried on forwards, charging directly towards the beachhead, even as heavy cannons tore apart the front of the ship, the Mages on board desperately throwing up defensive shields and the snipers picking off the enemy gunners one by one. "Go! Go! Go!" Captain Volker yelled, the Courier slamming into the sand and beaching itself.

"Charge!" Alara roared, vaulting over the edge of Captain Volker's ship and charging the guns with her Wolfpack running after her. She reversed the grip on her glaive, firing off bolts of condensed magical energy at the gunner emplacements. Bullets tore up the ground around her, her Focus shrugging off the worst of the damage, her armour taking the rest. She met the first bunker, taking a grenade off her belt, throwing her glaive over the bunker, pulling the pin and throwing it inside before running past, recollecting her weapon and carrying onwards as it detonated.

A bolt of cyan energy flew past her, a heavily armed warrior dropping before she could reach him. A howl sang behind her, followed by an entire pack's worth as Wulf and his therian joined her charge. Still she continued, ignoring her feelings as a cyan blast flew over her. She felt the ground shake, knowing exactly where that blast had hit and who and what she had just lost. But she continued forwards, taking the next defensive line as her forces secured the beachhead and her other ships began to truly engage the four remaining Null Legion ships in what she knew would be a longer drawn out conflict.

Finally, as she reached the end of the beach, and the top of the initial slope, Alara slid to the floor, dropping behind a concrete wall and taking cover from the hail of bullets still flying at her. Her Marines joined her, the few remaining Mages immediately raising a wall of mud to create trenches. She lay there panting heavily, her Marines catching their own breaths and looking to her for her leadership. She looked past them, all the way down the beach. What remained of the Courier lay burning on the beach, the crew that had remained aboard to offer defensive fire for the other Marines to land all gone in an instant. "Volker," Alara said in barely a whisper. "Thank you."

Alara looked up at the evening sky. She could only wonder just how Cyrenna and Beowulf's offensive was going. She shook it off. It didn't matter. There was

a long march still to go. "All remaining ships, mop up, deploy your forces and then maintain speed. Hold out for us. We'll get the job done. I swear," Alara stated. An explosion shook the island ahead of them, Alara immediately peeking up from her trench at the enemy ahead. A ball of fire had lit up the darkness. "The way is clear. Communications have been cut," Artemis said through her communicator.

A droplet hit Alara's cheek, followed by another and another as rain flooded from the skies. She turned, glancing to her exhausted troops, several of them getting desperate sleep in preparation for the next assault. She herself felt exhausted, but in the darkness – glowing brightly thanks to their panning spotlights – she could see a staging outpost. One just begging to be taken in the name of the New World Republic. "Flare," Alara ordered, taking the gun and loading it before standing up and firing. A solitary blue flare lit up the darkness. Alara stepped up and out of the trench, running forwards towards the danger.

Seize the Seas Tales: Old World Connections

Morgana tapped her spoon against the side of her teacup, a purple, dream-like fluid swirled within the black and gold cup. Slowly she lifted it up to her lips, taking in the sweet scent of the tea, only to then grimace at the bitterness to it – even after copious amounts of sugar added to it. "You'll get used to it," stated Marisha, a weary expression on her face and a gold and green uniform covering her body, her eyepatch shiny and golden. Morgana shook her head, tipping the drink into a nearby plant pot and folding her arms. "I doubt it. Ohno, can you get me a cola?" Morgana requested instead, the large panda letting out a sigh and getting to his feet.

"There are easier ways to get him to give us space," Marisha said quietly. "But you should trust him more." Morgana shook her head, leaning back in the padded chair and looking out towards the other patrons of the café. "I trust him with my life, but I trust his lips like I would trust paper to hold water. He talks without thought, it only makes me understand more as to why his brothers taught him to speak only to them. Anyway, you don't have time for casual talk."

Marisha nodded, a faint smile spreading across her weary face. "No, you're right. I've been doing some digging, or perhaps it's all an exercise in trust to test me - I don't know anymore – but I've found something. The Sovereign has her own network within the Guild. An entire structure of business created purely to send information, items, resources, people, across the world without any oversight or

public knowledge. Even the Guild Masters seem to know very little about it, but they're dealing with their own internal issues at the moment."

"Such as? Thank you," Morgana stated, smiling to Ohno as she took her drink and gesturing for him to sit. "Corina Liu," Marisha said softly, causing Morgana to cough on her drink. "That...?" She leant forwards. "The Empress?" she questioned. "Now officially Gryphon, she's a Guild Master. He took an early..." "Retirement?" Morgana concluded. Marisha nodded, taking a sip of her tea with barely a grimace. "Cold, but not surprising if Jayce's stories are real." "Oh they are, I can guarantee you that."

Ohno leant forwards to set his own glass of apple juice on the table between Marisha and Morgana. "So what does that mean?" he asked as softly as he could. "It means opportunity," Morgana answered, Soteria snoring away on a bench nearby. "How?" Ohno questioned, loudly dragging his chair closer to them. Morgana's face twisted into a look of annoyance, but a small smile spread across Marisha's. "It will take even Corina time to settle in. A Guild Master has a lot of duties, and a lot of power, the others will be trying to butt in – to take over duties that Corina may not even be aware of yet. And with the consistent destruction of the Dungeons – something that is Gryphon's domain – all of the Guild Masters will be distracted," Marisha explained.

"Do we know if she is the cause of their destruction yet?" Morgana asked quietly. Marisha shook her head. "I haven't asked, I don't want any accidental attention put on that group. If it is them then better that they are left to it until we can actually do something to help them. The Guild as a whole is... furious at the situation." Morgana nodded. Losing a crucial supply of magic stones would be devastating on a global scale, the sale and distribution of magic stone powered technology was practically what the Guild had been built for. "So they're vulnerable," Morgana ascertained. Marisha nodded.

A shared smile spread between them. "So now would be the chance for a rival to appear?" Morgana suggested quietly. "A Syndicate of sorts?" Marisha glanced away from her, covering her mouth with her cup. "I need you to pay our first employees a visit. Myra has been redeployed from Final Bastion – something about a Republic fleet smashing a blockade there. She and Holli coincidentally have been requested to visit here of all places to give a report on current business. They'll be expecting you."

"And you?"

SEIZE THE SEAS

"I have my own business to tend to. The Sovereign is stocking up on and selling explosives. A lot of them. I need to find out who they're going to."