

Chapter 210: Price of Success

Alara grit her teeth as she lay in the mud. Her body ached, numerous sores lay in uncomfortable places, and sleep had been cruel to her the last two weeks. They had taken the island, piece by bloody piece. From what she knew, her forces still had control of the beachhead, with the enemy ships sunk and ocean control uncontested. The consequence of that was that the Sentry had taken to bombarding her and her forces somewhat blindly.

The fortress still stood, its walls unbroken and guards getting more and more desperate. They now no longer showed their heads above the walls, having learnt the hard way just how precise Riley, Artemis and the other snipers were. Even now, Riley and her snipers lay at least a kilometre away, waiting for a moment's opportunity to cause real damage to the swiftly dwindling defensive forces. Alara wanted it to be over. She needed it to be over.

She turned, movement drawing her attention away from the fortress. "Commodore," Brett greeted. He looked exhausted but, then again, who didn't at this point. "Hey," she said quietly, taking a sandwich he offered in one hand before taking a box with a handle from him in the other. "Are we sure this will work?" Alara asked, taking a bite of the stale sandwich. Brett nodded. "It's got enough explosives in it to blow open almost anything – fortress included."

She smiled grimly. "One last charge then?" she questioned. He nodded. "One last charge and we can enjoy an all expenses spa-day, courtesy of the New World Republic and a crap-ton of medals that would turn the eye of any gal or guy either side of the Frontier," he stated, deluded by his own fantasies more than anything. "Steak," Alara muttered, practically drooling as she stuffed the remainder of her sandwich into her throat. *Jayce*, she thought more significantly. Surely he had returned from whatever voyage he'd been on. She shut her eyes, picturing his irritating grin just once more. "Witchford, you there?" she asked through her communicator. "Yes Commodore. I am preparing the supplies, they will be ready within the hour," he stated, somehow reading her mind once again. "Is he watching me or something?" Alara questioned to Brett. He chuckled, pointing upwards. "I think he's always watching us."

A gentle nudge startled Alara awake an hour later. "Ready, Alara?" Wulf questioned. "Huh?" she questioned, her spa-day dream, steak and Jayce included, vanishing before her eyes. "The wolves are ready. Are you?" he questioned, concern in his eyes. She nodded, stretching before shooting upwards

to a crouch. "All forces, prepare for final assault," Alara stated, crawling back into the main trenches before getting to her feet and walking to the improvised command centre.

Captains, Commanders, Lieutenants – they all saluted her as she walked in. "We're ready and waiting," the Weapon stated, looking to Alara for his orders. Alara smiled. "Are you implying I don't get to participate in this one?" she questioned. "Never, Commodore. It wouldn't be like you to be anywhere other than the front line, but this time, if it's not too bold, perhaps you could let someone else blow open the doors." There were a few laughs and Alara folded her arms. "Perhaps. First one there gets to hit the button. How about that?" "Oohrah!" came several voices.

Alara crouched at the edge of the trenches. It had all been silent for suspiciously long now, on both sides. She turned to Wulf, to Brett, to Witchford, the Weapon, and the others. They looked to her and nodded and she smiled back at them. "Until the next dawn," she stated, turning and vaulting over the edge alone. "Charge!" she yelled behind her as the guns opened fire at her. Alara weaved through the hail of bullets, her forces opening fire with everything they had at the enemy.

She leapt over mines and runic traps, darted through enemy spells, and deflected bullets and cannonballs with her glaive. She slid into enemy trenches, cutting down the few survivors still within, whilst ignoring the stench of blood and death from injured soldiers who had either taken their own lives, perished from their wounds, or been killed out of mercy. The conflict had taken its toll on both sides. Alara had seen enough to last her lifetime and she had said goodbye to enough friends. "I surrender," cried an enemy. She grabbed his rifle and disarmed him, before forcing him to his knees and leaving him to her Marines.

She carried on past injured soldiers, only slowing once she was certain she was out of the range of the enemy guns. A wall of corpses lay outside of the gates to the fortress, the bodies of the enemy that had been abandoned by their own and sealed outside. Alara shook her head. "Brett," she stated, turning to her friend. He charged past her and placed the explosives amongst the corpses. "Let their deaths be the end of this fortress," he said in an almost prayer-like manner. "Clear!" he yelled, hitting the button and blowing open the gates.

Alara charged forwards, ignoring the defenders on the inside and instead charging straight towards the lighthouse-like building in the centre of the fortress walls. It was tall, with a circle stairway running up and along the outside of the

pale tower. At the very top was a bulb-like control centre, where Alara immediately spotted figures inside pointing at her before yelling behind them in a panic. "Stop them!" Alara yelled, surging forwards and leaping upwards towards the guards desperately defending the stairs. The Sentry itself was massive, and Alara could feel the entire ground beginning to rumble as it began to charge up energy for another barrage, likely on itself.

She darted forwards, knocking guards over the edge of the railing, cleaving others in half. She didn't stop, she didn't listen. It didn't matter if they surrendered or not, she didn't have the luxury to think, she had to save the Sentry from falling or it was all for nothing. She ran up out onto the top platform, charging inside and immediately unloading her glaive on every person inside. She slaughtered each lab coat-covered individual, only stopping as the final technician fell still. "Alara..." came Wulf's voice from behind, horror buried within. "Commodore, we must deactivate the system. We cannot allow it to fire," Witchford stated, ignoring the bodies and immediately rushing to the consoles and beginning to analyse it. Alara stepped back and let him work, her eyes slowly falling to the unarmed workers she had murdered.

She dropped her glaive, sitting in a chair and holding her head, the sound of gunfire continuing to ring out as her Marines finished securing the base. Slowly the energy began to disperse, the glow of the blue glass around them disappearing as Witchford deactivated the Sentry. Finally he stepped back, nodding to himself before dragging over a seat and sitting down upon it. "It's over. We won," he concluded. Alara shook her head. It didn't feel like a victory, they had lost so much, and there was so much more still to come... "That was just the beginning," she confessed.

The celebrations were short-lived. The communications to Beowulf and Cyrenna's fleets informed Alara that she had been the first to conquer her chosen Sentry and that they were both broiled in a drawn-out offensive. There had also been no sign of General Barca Khallid's fortress. So, with little other options, Alara reactivated the distress beacon of the Sentry and dug in. Funerals were held, toasts made in honour of the success and in remembrance of those that fallen to ensure it: Braze, Captain Volker and the Courier amongst them. A little over two weeks later, over a month since the start of the offensive, Alara heard her name be called across the communicators.

"He's here," Witchford stated, pointing out of the viewscreen at the Fortress Ship on a direct heading to them. Alara's chest tightened. It had been repaired since

Jayce had last damaged it and, if anything, the Fortress Ship looked even nastier than before. But that didn't matter to Alara, her parents were there, right in front of her, and she now had everything she needed to ensure she could rescue them. "Prepare target lock," Alara commanded, looking towards Witchford and the other Marines in the control room of the Sentry.

"Commodore, something is off," Witchford stated, pointing out towards the ocean. Alara faltered, he was right. The beacon was on, still calling for help but the Fortress ship had stopped. "Target lock, now!" Alara commanded, panic rising inside of her as an alarm bell began to ring. Alara heard rapid feet coming up the stairs behind her. "Alara, Beowulf's Sentry has fired on us!" came Riley's voice through the communicator. "No!" Alara yelled, staring at the Fortress Ship as it turned and started to move away.

"Everyone out now!" Witchford commanded. "Alara go!" he ordered, the Marines racing out of the room as Wulf raced in. "Get her out of here!" Witchford yelled. Wulf grabbed Alara's waist, dragging her backwards and leaping off the Sentry down to the ground. "Wulf! Let me go! He's there, we have to finish the mission!" she cried. He let her go, the entire tower beginning to glow as it charged up.

"Go! Go! Go!" Witchford ordered, declaring the target parameters to Beowulf's still unconquered Sentry. Alara was clear, he had ensured that and the others were evacuating. "Sir, you need help!" stated Lieutenant Pharax, one of the two other Marines who had stayed, immediately rushing to a station to control the power output whilst the Lieutenant Heroe headed to the firing sequence and began to prime it. Witchford looked at them and they nodded to him. "Go sir!" stated Lieutenant Pharax. "It's been an honour," cried Lieutenant Heroe.

"Witchford!" cried Alara, still stood at the base of the Sentry, waiting for him to emerge. "Alara! We have to go!" screamed Wulf from behind, only to physically be dragged away by Boot and Channing. "Alara! Alara! Alara!" Wulf screamed, desperately fighting to break free as she stood screaming up at the Sentry for Witchford. The entire sky began to glow blue, a heavy boom thundering the ground as the Sentry fired, another glow darting across the sky from the east.

Witchford raced down the stairs of the Sentry, running with every ounce of strength he had remaining in his body as he stared at Alara as she stood moronically close to the target of the enemy barrage. He tasted blood, felt his hairs begin to crackle with energy. He dove from the stairs, still at least twenty metres up from the ground. Witchford crashed into the ground hard in front of

Alara, his glasses broken, his ever-cool expression broken into desperate panic as he stared up at her.

Alara stared at Witchford in horror as he crashed to the ground in front of her. He scrambled towards her, tearing up the ground beneath him as the barrage landed, obliterating the Sentry behind him. He dove, his arms outstretched towards her as she reached out to him. He knocked her arms aside, slamming his shoulder and arms into her and pushing with every piece of strength he had left. Alara flew to the side, her vision immediately falling into darkness as the entire world erupted in front of her.

Alara groaned as she came to, her vision blurry and the sky grey above her. Pain was all she could feel, but Witchford was all she could think about. Alara put her arms down, pressing to sit up only to topple over to the side. She frowned, her face twisted into shocked confusion as she struggled to even sit up. Her vision cleared, the Sentry was atomised, nothing remained by a bloody patch in front of her - a pair of cracked glasses sat within it. Alara stopped breathing, her entire body felt like it had collapsed into itself as she reached out in broken desperation looking for Witchford. She cried his name, nothing coming out as she looked for anything more than blood and his broken glasses. But she saw nothing. She reached out, her eyes looking forwards before her gaze fell closer to her. She looked to her right arm, but it wasn't there.

She screamed in agony as she clutched her torn and bloody stump. She screamed in agony at the loss of one of her closest friends. She screamed in agony at the loss of maybe her final chance of rescuing her parents.

But then the screaming stopped, replaced instead by a cold whimper as she felt her life draining out her. She fell down, laying in the grass as silent tears rolled down her face. Her vision darkened and large hands grabbed her body, lifting her up. Garbled voices surrounded her and she felt herself swaying as she hung across the furry back of something warm. Something familiar. Something that was sobbing just as she was.

Alara's vision slowly began to clear as she repeatedly opened and closed her eyes in groggy exhaustion. A heavy weight lay on her chest, her breathing challenging and laborious. "Ugh," Alara groaned, barely able to lift her head up to look down at the furry mass on her chest. "Tilly?" she questioned, the immediately turning her head to look towards Alara before beginning to purr as she shakily stood up. Alara's eyes widened as she saw the stitching on Tilly's shoulder, where her arm had been amputated. "Oh, Tilly, I'm sorry," Alara said softly, reaching up with

both arms to pet her cat. But Alara then faltered. "Oh..." she said softly, staring at her bandaged stump a little over half-way up her arm. Her eyes then fell onto the Wolfpack tree, presumably taken from within her bottomless bag. Witchford's cracked glasses lay at the bottom. "Oh..." Alara said more brokenly, the noise catching in her throat as she lay back in defeat, looking up at the roof of the hospital tent she was within.

Tears fell silently. She wanted to scream, to sob, but it didn't feel real. None of it did. She had lost so many and Witchford was just another body on the pile she had built. Tilly hobbled up to Alara's head, falling down with a thump and nestling herself into Alara's neck. Alara immediately grimaced, reaching up with her bandaged left hand to her face. Even through torn fingertips she could feel fresh wounds and stitches – all across her neck and chin.

The tent opened and Riley stuck her head inside, her brown eyes immediately widening as she spotted Alara awake. "Alara!" she cried, practically throwing herself on top of Alara. Alara groaned in pain, Tilly immediately rolling to the floor with a thump before hobbling away with a hiss. "Lieutenant Commander Riley! Off my patient!" growled Lieutenant Laine. She was a somewhat grouchy middle-aged woman who knew how to handle herself in a fight. She was no Yuthura, but there was no other Yuthura. "How are you feeling Commodore?" she asked, once Riley had removed herself from Alara.

The tent opened and Wulf and Brett both stepped quietly inside. They both stared at her with distinct relief. "Honest opinion?" Alara questioned to her Ship' Doctor. Laine nodded. "Like death. How long have I been out?" she asked, nervous to hear the answer. "Six days," Riley answered before the Doctor could. Laine glared at Riley. "Si-six days?" Alara questioned, forcing herself upright, only for her body to force her back down. "Careful, you've taken a lot of damage. I'll get you some pain meds, do not move."

Lieutenant Laine departed and Alara immediately sat back up, cautiously bringing her feet over the edge of her bed. "Alara, don't. You need rest," Wulf stated. "No, I need to prepare our next offensive. What's the status of the other two Sentries?" she immediately questioned, looking to Riley for support in standing up. She shook her head, tapping her metal legs before folding your arms. "You told me off, now it's my turn. Rest, Alara," Riley stated. Alara rolled her eyes. "Status?"

"Beowulf has finished his offensive thanks to some external aid. The Sentry was destroyed by Witchford... Cyrenna is still fighting. Her Sentry received

reinforcements but she is still holding them off and also progressing along the mainland. It's unknown how much longer she can hold out though," Wulf said honestly. Both Brett and Riley looked at him. "What? She'd just order someone to tell her," he pointed out. They sighed and shook their heads. Slowly, every gaze in the room eventually fell on the glasses. "I can't believe he's gone," Alara muttered. "Nearly you too. Stupid decision from the pair of you," Brett stated. Riley and Wulf glared at him. "No, he's right... it was lost. I needed to let it go, and Witchford may have just made this whole offensive harder for us. He did what he did to protect us, not for the good of the mission," Alara admitted.

The tent opened and the heavy footsteps of the Weapon followed after Lieutenant Laine. "Commodore," he greeted. She gave a weak smile and Lieutenant Laine gestured for Alara to lie back down. Alara instead tried to stand, only for Riley to push her back down. "Don't be stupid," Laine stated, sticking a needle into Alara's leg. "Ow!" she protested. Laine ignored her and begun to unravel Alara's bandages. "I shouldn't wasted a healing potion on your arm, would have kept you down properly," Laine lamented.

"Next time," Alara grumbled. Laine glared at her and then shook her head. "You have at least another day of bedrest. It's scarred over nicely so I will fit you for a prosthetic, but you'll need proper rehabilitation," she warned. Alara nodded appreciatively. "That can be sorted on route to Commodore Kai. Weapon, you're being promoted to my Commander. Get everyone moving and get everything in order."

"Commodore, I can't replace Commander Witchford. Should it not be either—" "No," Alara said firmly. "You're not great with the troops, but neither was Witchford. He and you both possess the ability of getting things done, even if they upset people. I need that. Get it done. I want us on the move within the next three days, understood?" she commanded. He stood to attention and nodded, leaving the tent. "Why not one of us?" Brett questioned.

"Do you want to take over from Witchford?" Alara asked, looking across Wulf, Riley and Brett. "No," they all answered quietly. She nodded to herself, laying back on the bed as the medication kicked in. "No one can, but Weapon will do his damned best to surpass the unsurpassable. And unlike you three, he'll follow my orders even when I'm like this. The time for mourning is over. I'm angry. It's time for a counter. It's time to put Barca Khallid in the ground."

Seize the Seas Tales: Reunited

The Gambit roared beneath Marisha's feet, the ocean rolling beneath them as she, Ohno and Morgana darted from cloud to cloud through the skies. "Are we certain?" Morgana questioned once again, as she leant near the cockpit. Marisha nodded. The information was too good to be true, but she had no reason to doubt it's validity. The Stacked Hand had been seen. It was intact, crewed, and heading north, and most importantly – not far.

"Crew of the Stacked Hand, come in – it's Marisha. Stacked Hand – come in. Stacked Hand – please respond," Marisha attempted, her mind running through the possibilities of who was on board. Bjorn? Jayce? Yuthura? Where had they been, what had happened to them? She needed to know – what had she missed in the last five and a bit months. The clouds cleared. "Marisha?" came Wam's voice. "Marisha, is that you?" She practically screamed with relief. "Brother, Wam, it's me!" Ohno cried into his communicator, the Stacked Hand sailing far beneath them.

They landed the Gambit in the waters next to the ship, attaching to the, almost unchanged, Stacked Hand before clambering aboard. Ohno tackled his brother in a tight hug, the pair staring at each other before bouncing with joy at their reunification. Marisha turned to Tempest, breathing a sigh of relief at the faceless expression of the djinn before being wrapped in a hug of her own by Gaea. Morgana nodded passively to Red, extending a fist to him which he lightly tapped with his own. The greetings and celebrating swiftly dwindled, the joys of the crew of the Stacked Hand immediately replaced by the shock and horror of the Gambit's passengers.

"It's... just you four?" Morgana questioned, dropping to her knees in horrified shock. Gaea immediately sat next to her and held her as Morgana began to cry. "Technically six," Wam and Asmodeus said in unison. Marisha glared at the pair in Wam's body. "A conversation and an explanation for later," she told them warningly. "Has there been any contact with anyone else?" Tempest asked. "I was going to ask you the same thing," Marisha said quietly, sitting down on a frost-covered deckchair and holding her head in her hands. "Then that is a no. A pity. Still, we are reunited for the moment, and this moment is a strong foundation."

Marisha and Morgana both looked at the djinn with a mix of anger, frustration, curiosity and bemusement. "How so?" Marisha questioned, sitting back and folding her arms and crossing her legs. "We have access to air travel and ocean

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travel. I have also spent extensive time these last few months making modifications to our communication devices. They should now function at far greater ranges, with hope even across the world," Tempest explained. Marisha nodded approvingly. "Good, thank you. That should help us narrow down the others. I will return to the Guild. Morgana and I will communicate and we'll search out traces of the others. We'll reassemble the crew, piece by piece."