

## **Chapter 221: Boots on the Ground**

“Keep your heads down!” Alara yelled, the deck of her adopted ship detonating as it was sprayed with bullets and cannon fire. It didn’t matter, the ship was sacrificial, all that mattered was it got her and her Marines onto the massive island that Cyrenna was trapped upon. With a lurch, the ship hit sand. “Go! Go! Go!” she yelled, charging forwards through the danger and leaping over the bow of her ship. She hit the ground and rolled, darting forwards up the beachhead.

Wulf’s pack of therians dashed forwards, the heavy weapons that the Null Legionnaires and the local Brunxchume armed forces had set up to box Cyrenna’s forces in desperately beginning to turn to target them. Weapon surged forwards alongside them, aiming his mechanical parts at the heaviest of emplacements and launching explosive ordnance from the miniature cannons built into him. Riley and her snipers brought up the rear, using the cover of their allies to take precision shots at key enemies. Brett and his scouts darted to the side, heading into the trees and bushes to flank the enemy.

But Alara remained focused on her task. She could only hope that the Admirals and the other forces would do their part and defend her rear from the enemy ships. She aimed her glaive, letting loose a bolt of energy that tore straight through one of the largest Null Legionnaires. She weaved to the side, ducking low as bullets tore past her head. A glowing cyan bolt flew past her ear, so close that she could physically feel the wind from it. A bunker exploded ahead of her, the gunfire aimed specifically at her coming to an end. Alara dove inside a trench, swinging with her glaive and cutting down the few surviving enemy.

They had only travelled a hundred to two hundred metres but already Alara felt exhausted. She felt the weight of her task and the weight of the lives under her command. They needed to take control of the Sentry, a few kilometres ahead of them inland, and somewhere between it and her was Cyrenna with only a handful of hardened survivors. Alara glanced behind her: the ships swarming the island were wrapped in one another, desperately fighting to control the main entrance to the island. “Send in the second wave,” Alara commanded to her allied fleet, nodding to her Marines to raise the flag of the Republic.

“Are we not going to move forwards?” Wulf questioned quietly, a few hours later. Alara shook her head, looking cautiously at the thousand-or-so souls that were placed around the first line. Everyone was tense, everyone was waiting for word to reach the Sentry and bombardment to begin. “This isn’t going to be a

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short campaign," Alara told him gently, as much as the words hurt her to hear aloud. "This will be weeks if we're lucky."

He met her gaze, shaking his head softly. "Can Cyrenna hold out for that long?" he asked her, the pair of them for the most part alone. "I don't know but this island is, in rough estimates, almost thirty kilometres long and the Sentry is on the far side with a huge fleet defending it. You know as well as I that between us and it are fortresses and military installations. If we don't crush them then we will be surrounded and cut down before we can take the Sentry." He let out a sigh, the dark sky illuminating with flashes of cyan light. Somewhere ahead, Cyrenna was under assault.

A heavy panting drew Alara's attention to the doorway of her command centre. After a long charge and a longer siege they had seized a supply outpost for themselves, the large camp build around an ancient stone fort. Brett gasped for air as he stumbled in, several Marines rushing to his side as he all-but-collapsed. Grime covered his sweat-covered face, a long streak of blood flowing from his scalp down and across his left eye and then finishing at his lips. "Commodore," he gasped as she approached him. He held up a scroll of paper, handing it to her. "Get him food, water, and a medic," she commanded, nodding to him as he looked up at her with a grimaced grin.

Alara turned, approaching the maps strewn across a large central stone table in the middle of the room. She dropped the scroll on top of it and unfurled it, looking at the crude drawings of the region they were in. A small red x marked a village roughly two kilometres away. Alara grinned, she turned and looked towards Brett as he was supported out of the room. "Well done, Brett, I owe you!" she called after him. A weary thumbs up came back. "We have Commodore Kai's location, we move out at first light!" Alara declared to the cheers of those around her. "I'm coming, Cyrenna," Alara then muttered.

It was the first good night's sleep that Alara had had in quite some time. The start of her campaign had been fluid, but then they started to fall into traps. Suddenly they were being ambushed at their most vulnerable moments, information was inaccurate, and casualties were rising. The enemy were using their communication systems against them, and that meant that communication between Cyrenna and Alara had been forced to come to an end. Alara hated leaving her friend alone. If she could she would have set off on her own to find her, but that was the actions of a more inexperienced Alara. As Commodore, despite the increase in rank, she felt far more restricted. There were more things

that she could organise, but less things she herself could do. It felt choking, far more than she would have liked.

Alara woke up early as always, her dreams grey and empty and swiftly forgotten. She hadn't bothered to change out of her clothes; she hadn't slept in a bed either, instead curling up in the deepest part of the fort – one of the few places she and her people felt safe to sleep in. The Sentry hadn't targeted the ancient fort, it must have held some sort of historical relevance to the Brunxchume forces because everything else around it had been reduced to numerous craters. Alara damped a rag and wiped her face; she had long accepted that she smelt and was dirty, but there weren't any amongst them that were clean so she didn't really care.

Alara returned to her command centre, the other members of her main command waiting for her – Brett stood amongst them, to Alara's frustration, despite almost certainly still needing to recover. "We have Commodore Kai's location," Alara stated, nodding to him but ensuring to add a firm glare along with it. "The wounded will stay here under Commander Aed. You're to hold this position and maintain the supply line. Everyone else is to push forwards to this town, we're going to seize the garrison there and make it ours."

Several looks of confusion crossed the room as Alara pointed to a target away from the x on the map. "Myself and a small detachment will pursue and rescue Commodore Kai," Alara then stated firmly. An uncomfortable silence filled the air. "We will then link up with the forces here to join the assault here." No one questioned her orders out loud, they all knew better than that. "I am going personally because in the worst salvageable situation I know that I can get in and out, and should be able to get the Commodore out with me. This is not an assault, it is a grab and go, so as one of the fastest here it is the best option," Alara clarified.

She could sense the unease but they were going to have to live with it. "Weapon, you will take my place in command. Take the town and get us one step closer to that Sentry," she ordered, looking directly at him. He was one of the only people in the room who didn't seem to have an issue with the plan. "Aye Commodore," he returned with a firm nod. Alara then looked towards Wulf. "You're with me, I'll need your squad." He nodded back and Alara looked across the rest of the room. "This is a risk worth taking. I will be back, but if I'm not, I know you will all do your part. My team sets off immediately, the rest of you are to depart within the day. Wulf, get your boys."

“Any particular reason you chose us, Commodore?” questioned Boot, as Alara and the squad of therians moved quickly through one of the forests scattered across the large island. “I need your noses, obviously,” she stated with a smile. The wolves around her laughed, apart from Wulf. “No,” she corrected more honestly. “If Cyrenna is dead I need a squad with me who is willing to obey more... reckless orders, and is willing to both commit and survive them.” “Let’s say the Commodore is...?” Channing asked somewhat gently. Alara remained silent for a few moments. “We head for the Sentry directly and buy time for the others by causing as much mayhem as we can,” Alara stated. It was a foolish plan, a stupid one. But without someone as strong as Cyrenna, Alara really couldn’t see a way to take the Sentry alone – especially if Barca Khalid could be manning it personally, like she theorised. “Then let’s hope the Commodore is still alive,” Boot said with a smile. “I’ve not brought enough bombs.”

They moved quickly, staying low or ducking into abandoned buildings whenever they heard the familiar roar of flyers above them. The island was devastated, the majority of the previous woodland and grassy lands turned into fractured and trodden mud. Rotting and abandoned bodies were everywhere, their uniforms identifying them as Null Legion, Brunxchume military and even Republic Marines and Navy. But there was no time to stop, no time to give them proper burials so Alara and her wolves carried onwards, eventually coming to a ruined village surrounded by a field of corpses.

A lone flag fluttered in the wind, torn and full of holes with the ends singed. It was the flag of the Republic: an anchor held in the air by a seagull with its wings spread. “Cyrenna,” Alara called into her communicator, as she rushed forwards and took cover behind a broken stone wall. “Still kicking,” came a groan through Alara’s communicator. “We see your flag, give us a signal.” Alara twitched as she felt a wave of Focus hit her. “She’s here,” Alara told her group. Wulf gestured ahead, drawing his heavy sword. “She’s not the only one. Brunxchume military are approaching.” Alara peered her head around the corner of the wall. It was a sizeable force, nearly fifty in number.

“Republic insurgents!” came a voice that Alara recognised, drawing a quick look of surprise and confusion from her. She couldn’t quite remember where she recognised it from. She felt another pulse, somewhere from below the village: a cave or a cellar. “Below the village,” Alara told her wolves. “Find her, I’ll buy you time,” she commanded. They nodded, hurrying quickly away from the approaching gold and blue soldiers. “Show yourself and surrender!” came the

voice once more. "I won't surrender, but I will talk!" Alara called out, immediately moving towards a nearby building before diving through its' broken window.

She could sense the enemy Captain reaching out for her with Focus, and she did the same, the pair detecting each other. Rather curiously, he then quietly ordered his men elsewhere before approaching with a small group. Alara remained where she was, practically holding her breath as she heard his footsteps in the gravel amongst the explosions far in the distance. "Vanathur?" came a hushed whisper through the broken door of the house. "Irall?" Alara returned, approaching the door before opening it a crack.

He stepped inside: he no longer had quite the golden outfit he had previously, and his face was certainly more worn than when Alara had met him more than a year prior in the Brunxchume capital. "What are you doing here?" they both asked, almost simultaneously. Alara gestured for him to answer first. Fleet Admiral Malik dispatched me to try to escort a Commodore out of here. I had no idea that Commodore was you."

"It isn't," she stated firmly. "My people are evacuating her and her survivors as we speak." He nodded before folding his arms, but she spoke first. "Why is a member of the Royal Defence Force here?" she questioned. He shook his head. "He is not. A member of the Navy is. I received a demotion and a reassignment. My people do not take too kindly to Republic soldiers slipping in and out of the city of Chull without capture. So I am here to make it up."

"Yet you're taking orders from someone who is no longer a serving member of your military?" she questioned. He glanced to his two escorts before gesturing for them to leave the room. They did so without question. "If this were a nicer place I would opt for a longer discussion. Your people are making more permanent moves on this world, correct?" he questioned. She nodded. "Then in the best interests of Brunxchume I offer some aid, on the Fleet Admiral's behalf. He wishes for a conversation with your command, such that any invasion will not spill unnecessary blood."

"Not currently possible, and I struggle to see why your people would want to be incorporated within the Republic of the New World?" she stated hesitantly. "We have already been conquered, this way offers a chance to reclaim our sovereignty. You seek the destruction of the Sentry, it is your way to launch a full invasion?" he asked in turn. Alara nodded and then shook her head, glancing outwards towards the broken windows and Irall's patrolling men. "We want to

cripple Khalid's fortress, and for that we need the Sentry. He has my parents prisoner on board and it's the only way to successfully ground it."

Irall stared at her like she was insane. "All of this for two Admirals?" he questioned in disbelief. "We don't leave our people behind," she stated firmly. "So I see. I shall pass this forwards, and will do what I can to ensure my people are not between you and the Sentry. Should you succeed, on your way to Chull please rendezvous with the Fleet Admiral. You will need his assistance if you are to enter the city. I must depart, but I wish you luck – for all our sakes." "Thank you, may we not meet in battle. For your sake," she stated. He glanced back towards her and stepped outside before barking orders to his people to fall back.

Alara slipped out of the back of the building, spotting Wulf and the others retreating discretely in the distance. She broke into a sprint and chased after them, finding them waiting for her within a thick treeline. "Thank the Gods!" Alara stated, grabbing Cyrenna in a tight embrace as she turned to look at her. Cyrenna looked tiny, almost skeletal and on death's door. The twelve others with her didn't look any better. "You found me," she said weakly with a weary smile, her grip on Alara still firm. "Alara, we shouldn't stay here long," Wulf warned. She nodded to him. "Feed them, water them," she commanded to her squad, the group breaking out the rations and waterskins that Cyrenna's crew practically dove for. "Is this...?" Alara questioned uneasily to Cyrenna. She nodded back. "Yeah..." she croaked. "We're all that's left."

Alara tried not to let her disappointment show. In many ways she had been hoping that Cyrenna and her elite would bail her out. But Cyrenna clearly didn't notice the disappointment, inside her face was stretched into a look of horror as she cautiously placed one gauntlet on Alara's torn up neck and the other on her metal arm. "Damn..." she said softly. "Looks like you've had it rough too." Alara nodded, her eyes blurring as Cyrenna held her.

"The plan then?" Cyrenna eventually asked, as she struggled to keep down the rations and water given to her, her body no longer used to eating or drinking anything proper. The wolves looked to Alara as well. "Our forces are pushing further along the eastern side. Before we can take the Sentry we'll need to expand to the west, or else we'll have spread too narrow. The Rear-Admirals are still supporting our flank but they're in a losing battle. The enemy keep getting reinforcements, we don't."

“Okay, not much has changed then – that’s fine. And what of Beo, are his forces on their way?” Cyrenna questioned. Alara shook her head – she didn’t know. “Unknown.” Cyrenna let out a sigh before forcing her food down and getting to her feet. “Then we presume not. We’ll have to make do with what we’ve got. We meet with the others and continue our assault. We should move out sooner rather than later, but – if you don’t mind – at a slower pace for the sake of my people,” she stated. Alara nodded.

“Oh, I spoke to a Captain of the Brunxchume military,” Alara suddenly remembered. The entire group all looked at her. “Huh?” Cyrenna questioned. “It was someone I had met before. He was speaking on behalf of one of their old Fleet Admirals. Should we succeed, he has asked that we speak to Fleet Admiral Malik. They are willing to help us against Khalid but there is only so much they can do for us here. He had been dispatched to get you out of here.” Cyrenna scoffed and shook her head. “Sounds like a trick. Not worth thinking about.” Alara looked towards Wulf. “It was Captain Irall.” He nodded and pondered for a moment. “Worth thinking on later. Not much we can do about it now.”

It took some time to reconnect with the others, but that was mostly by choice. Alara could see just how damaged Cyrenna was, and as much as throwing her straight into another military push could be to their benefit – her status and reputation would be a potent morale boost – Alara knew her friend needed rest. They rejoined the supply line from towards the rear, the journey mostly safe, before following the traces of her forces forwards.

“You will wait here until you feel comfortable sending your people back out there again,” Alara ordered Cyrenna, the pair of them at odds with one another as she caught Cyrenna packing her kit. “I am needed out there,” Cyrenna told her. “Lies. You aren’t any use to them right now. I’m heading forwards because I have to. A week at the least, then you can join me. Get back up to weight, actually recover, and then come find me – am I clear?” Alara questioned. Cyrenna glared at her. “Cyr... if it was the other way around, would you send me in your state?”

That ended the argument. “See you soon,” Cyrenna told her firmly, standing at the very edge of the camp as Alara and her wolves broke into a run. Alara ignored her. The first part of her mission was over. Now it was time to seize the Sentry – whatever the cost.

**Seize the Seas Tales: Chained Mutts**

Scáthach rubbed her temples as the whining continued all around her. Her Betrayers, a few excluded, were all barking at each other as they sat along a large table in her mansion. “The Republic is pushing closer and closer towards the Sentry! And they have also breached the Frontier! Now is the time for action! To put them down and deal with them once and for all!” Barca Khalid demanded. Scáthach let out a groan, leaning back in her chair and kicking her feet back and forth on top of the table. “Just shut it already. I heard you the first time.”

“Sovereign-“ began Strigon, silencing immediately as Scáthach glared at him with prepared malice. “Bitching, bitching, bitching. Ooh a Bard sang mean songs about me. Ooh a Marine is trying to rescue her parents. Shut up and see what happens. Quite frankly...” she stated, sitting up and looking at them. “You’re sucking the fun out of this. The rest of you are to do nothing to help them. All of you. This is not your fight, not your effort. This is your problem and it’s on you to deal with it, personally!” she declared pointing at the Vampire, the Cannibal and the coward. “Fine,” Khalid stated, getting to his feet. “I will execute the prisoners and put an end to this.”

He sat back down, his face pale and eyes wide as he stared at Scáthach crouched on the table in front of him with her nose an inch from his. “You will do no such thing!” she stated coldly and quietly. “You had the chance to and you displayed her parents like a prize to her. You dangled them in front of her and now she is hunting you for it. You failed to keep this within your control. You will keep this fight fair – even with it already chanced against her, because if you do fail, then she will be the perfect replacement for you. And that is my business you will have personally fucked with if you screw it up!”

“Do not forget your usefulness to me is limited, Khalid. And that is true for all of you. Deal with your own problems, don’t beg for help like this is an alliance. You serve me. Do not forget it.” She stood up and looked towards Strigon. “Jayce, wherever he is, will come back. If you are so afraid of him and his crew then now is the time to bite back at them – regardless of their proximity to the Republic.” He seemed to sink into his chair and she struggled not to laugh – of course he wouldn’t lift a finger, Astris Kai was about to reunite with her crew, and if he was afraid of Scáthach then he was terrified of that girl. “Pathetic,” she muttered, turning back on Khalid. “Make good on your title, General. Win this properly. I will make sure it is a fair fight.”