

Chapter 223: Crusade

Alara wished it was raining. She always felt so much better about her situation when it was raining. It made it feel... right, right to be trapped on an island in a slow crawl towards the Sentry she had been sent out to conquer months prior. She had known when she had first arrived that the crusade was going to be anything other than a speedy mission, and the last five months had proven exactly that. She had lost people... countless people... so many friends and faces left behind in the mud, or shipped back to what dwindling remains were still supporting her advance. For most of the war it had been cold and wet, but now as she lay in a dirt trench, completely unaffected by the explosions ringing around her, the sun lay warm on her face. A face grizzled, scarred and broken with grief and fury and fatigue. An ironic smile crossed her face as the clouds parted above her. The final push was here, but she could only wonder just what the lasting cost would be this time.

"Morning," came a shadow, as a figure stepped to loom over her. Cyrenna held the same grim expression as she did, only with a dirty hand holding a dry sandwich. "Is it already?" Alara questioned. Cyrenna nodded, tearing off a piece of her rations and extending it down to Alara. "Did you sleep out here again?" Cyrenna questioned with somewhat genuine belief. "It's a stupid risk," she reminded.

Alara knew that already. She had been told off by anyone and everyone who had thought she would listen. "The backlines are unlikely to be hit by bombardment," she repeated. It was true. The Sentry mainly targeted the frontlines, as did the ships along the southern coast, but Alara had spent many a night hoping for once the enemy would change things up a little. "Still not worth the risk..." Cyrenna muttered, crouching down next to her and then letting out a pained groan as she lay back in the mud with her. "What's the worst that could happen?" Alara questioned. "Death is the easy way out by this point," she added.

"Coward."

"Fraud."

"Asshole."

"Loser."

"Fuck off..."

"No, you."

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Alara shut her eyes, enjoying the sunlight on her face and the cool breeze. By all accounts, her parents were dead. She was not naïve enough to believe otherwise – Khalid had no reason to not kill them. Months prior she could have deceived herself into believing they were still alive, but not now, not after all this time. Nothing had been said of Jayce to her. She had received no letters. Nothing. He was probably dead too, or else he'd have come and visited with enough reinforcements to guarantee she could have rescued her parents.

Cyrenna continued to munch away on her dry meal – the sound irritating but also comforting. A small laugh escaped Alara – a dry and emotionless laugh as tasteless as Cyrenna's food. "Something funny?" Cyrenna questioned. Alara nodded. "We're the highest ranked members here and we're laying in a ditch. Fleet Admiral Exarga would be pissed." Cyrenna didn't laugh at first, but eventually a small chuckle emerged. "Probably in this entire detachment," Cyrenna corrected. Alara giggled – they had practically lost all contact with the two Rear-Admirals that had been reinforcing them. They knew one of them was dead, but had heard nothing from the other. But supplies were still coming, albeit slowly – so there had to be some allied forces still out there. The laughs stopped abruptly.

Alara forced herself to sit upright, slowly looking past Cyrenna towards Riley as she stood with Wulf, Brett and Weapon. They looked at her, their bodies and souls worn and tired. A fire still burned quietly in their eyes, a faint light amongst the deep darkness. Alara let out a sigh, patting Cyrenna's knee before standing up. Cyrenna's obsidian eyes met hers. "Last push," Cyrenna said firmly. Alara nodded. "Last push."

Alara let out a yawn and then a groan as she stepped out of the foremost trench and up into the open air. Immediately a hail of bullets and magic flew her way, but she remained unbothered, completing her stretches as she made minor adjustments to ensure that they missed her. Cyan flames licked her body, her Focus honed and controlled like it had never been before. As if to show disrespect to her directly, the clouds above began to part, a cyan energy filling the skies as the Sentry – a little under a kilometre ahead of her – fired directly upon her. "Go!" she stated, her allies spread as far away along the trenches as possible all clambering out and beginning their charge, the enemies' attention locked solely on Alara.

Alara broke into a sprint, the cyan bombardment turning the mud and sand to glass behind her. Cyrenna darted out a trench to move along with her, the pair

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of them running in sync. Cyrenna pointed her father's gauntlet towards an enemy emplacement, the heavy guns thundering large chunks of metal towards them. Wulf's squad of therians split off from the main charge, rushing towards it to wipe it off the face of the planet.

Alara's eyes ignored the emplacements, her attention instead on the fortress surrounding the Sentry. Mages and Null Legion lined the walls, throwing everything they had at them. Alara angled her glaive as she ran, sending out a singular bolt of energy that impacted a spot near the top of the walls. A second later came a hail of bullets from Riley's marksmen, picking off any target they could.

They broke through one defence and then another and then another. But Alara knew it could not last. "Mages!" she called out. "Trenches!" The few remaining mages in her army stopped chanting their defensive spells, the Marines that had been protected by them instead switching to shielding them with anything they could – not limited to their bodies if the needs arose. The ground shook as spells and the Sentry's bombardments hit the ground around Alara, but she ignored it, diving forwards and ducking behind a heavy wall of stone and mud.

She kept her eyes open, watching as her stragglers got caught in the spells, bullets and explosions. She could mourn them later, her mind taking in those that had made it and those that hadn't. A lot hadn't. A lot of not many hadn't. Alara grit her teeth as she turned towards Cyrenna. "Bombs!" Cyrenna commanded, the Marines carrying the explosives designed to blow open the fortress walls all taking off their backpacks and setting the charges.

Cyrenna moved to take a backpack but Alara stopped her. "Stay here, give us cover," Alara told her. Cyrenna shook her head but Alara met her eyes, her expression conveying enough to Cyrenna to warn her not to protest. "You'll have your chance if we fail," Alara told her. "Volunteers!" Alara commanded, the numerous Marines around her that weren't too terrified to carry onwards all stepping forwards, Brett amongst them. Alara briefly glanced towards him and he winked at her. "Till the end," he reminded her. She nodded, approaching the edge of the dirt wall and holding up her arm.

She dropped it and darted forwards, emerging into a fresh hell of enemy spells and bullets. A golden ring painted the ground to the side of her, a fellow group desperately trying to flee out of it before a colossal and solar beam of light slammed down from the heavens and disintegrated them almost instantly. Their

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screams passed straight through Alara. Alara stared at the wall ahead of them. They just needed one pack to make it. Only one and the Sentry was theirs.

A yelp came from behind, a second later a blast sent her tumbling forwards through grass. Alara's ears rung, her vision blurry and pain filling her lower back. A voice called down to her. A hand shaking her body and shadows surrounding her. "Get up!" yelled Brett, Alara's eyes refocusing onto his scarred face and the other Marines guarding her as they crouched in the shadow of the fortress behind a small mound of sand and dirt. Alara forced herself up, looking across the six Marines with her. None of them carried a backpack with the explosives. "Where...?"

"Gone," stated Brett firmly, scanning their surroundings as more groups fell around them. Another group pushed past them, some twenty metres away from them, clambering the final wall of dirt before toppling backwards as they were gunned down. One of the Marines crawled across the ground, leaving behind her a red trail. She dragged herself upright behind the sand and grass, taking off her backpack and hugging it to her chest. Slowly she leant back, her head angling towards Alara's direction. "Here!" she cried, before her body tilted to the side, her arms still hugging the mission.

Alara and Brett met each other's eyes. With this distance to the Sentry's fortress it was their best chance. "Covering fire!" Alara commanded to her small squad, stepping forwards. But a golden ring began to surround the bunker with the bombs and the fallen Marine. Alara faltered. Brett darted forwards, bullets peppering the ground at his feet as he ran. One caught his shoulder but he ignored it, the world sluggish and slow.

Alara screamed at him, her words inhuman and animalistic. But he couldn't hear it. The golden ring began to spin, as it did just before it was about to unleash its devastation. Without thought, without hesitation, without question, he dove forwards, grabbing the pack, twisting and flinging it towards Alara. She stared in horror as it landed by her feet, her eyes locked onto his bright smile and shining blue eyes, just before he disappeared in a beam of golden light.

More golden rings painted the floor between where Brett had been and the ground between them before one surrounded Alara. She twisted her glaive, slamming it into the ground before pumping the staff. A bubble emerged outwards, surrounding her and her Marines as they desperately tucked into her. The entire bubble erupted in golden light, the heat even through the shield agonisingly painful. But Alara screamed in a different kind of pain: a howl of

agony for the man that had been a thorn in her side right at her beginning and a loyal friend until the end.

The divine wrath scoured the ground around her, eventually subsiding and leaving a ring of orange glass around Alara and her survivors. Alara grabbed the bag, clambering up over the mound and throwing the bag with every ounce of strength she had left. It hit the wall, dropping to the floor before exploding in a sharp and immediate blast that cracked the entire wall and left a sizeable hole for her and her Marines.

Cheers rang out but they fell on Alara's deaf ears. She darted forwards with her glaive in hand, the first into the breach and the first into the Sentry's fortress. Null Legionnaires rushed towards her with their swords and bayonets, their faces hidden behind their masks, but their red lenses reflecting the pure expression of agony in her face. She tore them apart, her glaive abandoned after she thrust it with too much strength through too little a person, snatching and stealing weapon after weapon from her foes.

She took a bayoneted rifle, aiming it quickly and firing – its bullet shattering the face of a Mage before she threw it like a javelin at a charging Legionnaire, taking his bouncing and dropped sword and turning it on a trio desperately moving to block her advance towards the sole tower in the middle of the fortress. Alara threw a Focused fist into the chest of one of them, sending him backwards into the wall of the tower. He impacted hard, his chest caved in and a large red splatter left behind him as he toppled to the ground. Alara lunged at the other, jumping up and diving down to impale her borrowed blade between the breastplate of his armour and his collarbone. She pushed off the corpse like a beast, grabbing the helmet off the final soldier and twisting. She felt a crack and released, darting up the stairs unarmed as her Marines flooded the courtyard of the fortress.

"Commodore!" came a voice from below. Alara caught her glaive with little more than a side-glance, surging into the control centre of the Sentry. Several of the technicians, all desperately trying to input commands into the main terminal, immediately raised their hands in surrender. Alara fired a bolt of energy from her glaive, searing a hole through one and painting several others with his hot blood. She lunged towards the others, slashing and hacking away as those that had surrendered cowered away, screamed and begged for their lives. "Move and you die!" Alara growled, scanning the terminal to see what commands had been

inputted. She immediately stabbed her glaive into a still moving body and began to furiously input commands.

Alara's gaze looked up past the terminals towards the ocean stretching ahead of her. A small fleet lay before her: all bearing Null Legion colours. More Marines rushed into the control centre. "Target those ships," she commanded, stepping back and letting those with the capabilities to intricately plot the coordinates necessary to target them do so. The entire tower began to vibrate before it unleashed its artillery, smiting the ships one after another as their own weapon was turned against them.

But Alara didn't care for the destruction of the small fleet, she instead stared at the large Fortress sat beyond them, now desperately approaching the Sentry's island with a clear intention to destroy it. "Cripple it!" Alara commanded, pointing at Barca Khallid's fortress ship. The weapon once again thrummed with energy before it launched upwards its heavy ball of cyan. The glow arced through the sky before coming crashing down, directly into the side of the Fortress Ship. A cruel grin spread across Alara's face. "Victory," she told herself.

The ship rotated, bringing its undamaged side to face the island. "Evacuate the Sentry!" she ordered, a rumbling filling the air as the Fortress Ship's numerous cannons unloaded on the island, releasing a heavy and long-ranged bombardment of its own. Alara dashed out of the Sentry with her people as the bombardment landed, devastating the fortress and the Sentry. The bombardment ended almost as soon as it had begun, a slow silence building in its wake.

Alara's knees hit the ground. One after another so did those of her fellow Marines, tears filling their eyes, their lips quivering and smiles crossing their faces. "We did it!" cried a young man, cheers and sobs danced all around the fallen fortress. Alara's eyes dripped, her body too heavy to move, her soul so crushed that she couldn't even make a sound – even as she mourned the loss of all of those that she had lost. As she mourned the long forgotten Witchford, and the recently departed Anson Brett.

There was no words that Alara could even begin to form to describe her feelings as Wulf and Riley stood in front of her. But from the expressions of their own devastation, she could tell that they knew what had happened. They fell in the dirt beside her, their own howls of pain and grief filling the choir of Alara's fleet. But amongst the pain and loss stood a singular figure. "It's not over," stated Cyrenna, standing tall. Alara looked up at her through her blurry vision. So did the numerous others all around her. "It's not over!" Cyrenna roared. "To your

feet Marines! We have wounded the Betrayer's ship but the mission is not over! We push forwards!"

Alara stared at her in agony, but she slowly lifted a knee, resting her hands upon it before shakily standing up. Alara wiped her eyes, the red around her irises almost demonic. Blood, dirt and grime covered her face and body. Cyrenna turned to face her. "We need a clear leader," Cyrenna said quietly. "I need you to lead." Alara looked at the older woman and shook her head. "Where to next, Commodore?" Cyrenna asked loudly. "Back home? Or after the man who so many gave their lives to wound?"

Alara looked at Cyrenna weakly. She was tired. So tired. They both were. "Onwards," Alara said quietly, slowly turning and looking at her people. "Onwards!" she roared. "Take what you can! Leave nothing behind but corpses of our enemies!" She reached up for her communicator. "The Sentry is down and the Fortress Ship is wounded. All forces are to retreat to the ships and the ships are to move up to the south of the island for pickup. Anyone who has not made it within six hours is getting left behind!" Alara turned back towards Cyrenna. Cyrenna simply nodded to her before turning and walking away.

It took some time, but eventually Alara found a moment's reprieve, a chance to slip away from the countless questions and requests sent her way. To even begin the task of locating all of bodies of the fallen would take days if not weeks, and that was not time Alara had. There was also the matter of the various injured, and of the enemy prisoners. These were not questions Alara had answers for. She wasn't sure she would ever had answers for them.

Instead Alara found herself limping through the hole she had made in the fortress and down the slope to where she had crouched in cover only an hour or so before. Her eyes lay low, unable to look at the fallen all around her. She stumbled, catching herself at the edge of a burnt pool of glass. There were no clothes, no bones, but frozen inside was faint piece of metal. With nervous and slow steps she approached the last spot she had seen Brett, his grin still etched into her mind.

She reached down, placing her metal hand to the cool glass before pulling it back and shattering the large disk. She punched again, and again, and again before finally she reached the metal. Alara let out a sigh as she held it up to the sunlight, the last remnants of her friend in her grasp. "You idiot," she said quietly, slowly bringing the tag to her chest and hugging it tightly as a fresh batch of tears were released.

Seize the Seas Tales: Brothers

Fenn refused to let go of Wam and Ohno, and they for the most part, did the same with him. He had of course let go of them physically repeatedly throughout the mop up of the Dragons assault and the continued advance through the Frontier, but at every waking moment he had ensured to the best of his ability to remain within eyesight of at least one of them for fear of losing them once again. The tales they had each shared with one another had brought laughter, grief, and pain. And it had all served to only remind them all of just how lucky they had been to find each other again and to survive their separation.

“You... died?” Fenn repeated once more, looking toward Wam with abject horror. Wam simply shrugged in response. “It happens,” he returned. Fenn shook his head vigorously. “Yes but... no! Absolutely not does it happen like that!” he protested. His larger brother wrapped an arm around him, pulling him tightly into an uncomfortably hot headlock. “Get over it, just be glad I had Asmodeus when I did or we wouldn’t even be having this conversation.” Fenn wriggled free, as he always did, glaring at his brother with a firm fury. “You cannot die again, you hear me! Not without us, and not without one helluva explosion! You hear!”

Wam chuckled and nodded. “Yeah, yeah, sure. No dying on anyone’s behalf, okay?” he returned. Fenn nodded – at the very least he was glad they could still agree on that. The pair then slowly turned and looked at their vacant-eyed brother. “Okay,” Ohno grumbled, drawing smiles out of them both. One-by-one they lay back and looked upwards at the Frontier canopy. “I thought I’d lost you both,” Fenn admitted.

The head of a large polar bear soon came into view. “Bed. All of you. Now.” “Oh come on, we’ve only just managed to-” protested Fenn, trailing off as he read Bjorn’s unimpressed expression. “I’m surprised a real bed isn’t more of an appeal to you, of all people, Fenn.” Bjorn glanced to his brothers. “Make sure he has a wash before you sleep,” he commanded, turning and walking away. Fenn gulped nervously, sensing his brothers’ gazes upon. “Now,” he began, slowly sitting up, “I don’t think that’s necessary. I’m clean.”

He stood up, he’d never enjoyed bathing – it had also been an uncomfortable and humiliating process. “You’re back sharing a room with us, brother,” Ohno stated, cracking his knuckles as he stood up. Fenn glanced towards Wam, the badger rolling his neck before a sinister smile spread across his face. “You get a five-second headstart,” he declared. Fenn strained his fingers, swiping upwards

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towards them. In the gap between erupted a short flash of hot orange flame, he then turned and broke into a fast sprint – desperately thinking of the hiding places he had used to use when avoiding bath time. He didn't even make it to down the stairs before his two larger brothers crashed down on top of him.