

Chapter 226: Confrontation

The Brunxchume Capital lay on Alara's horizon with a heavy and continuous rumbling of cannon fire echoing across the waters. There were no grand fleets that had risen to Khalid's defence, but the city of Chull was not making it easy for Commodore Kai's forces. But Alara didn't need it to. Cyrenna's fleet was swarming the Fortress ship, unloading volley after volley on the docked vessel desperately making repairs and resupplying for a counter.

"Irall, send three of your ships to reinforce Commodore Kai," Alara commanded through her communicator, looking across the waters to the majestic gold and blue ship sailing alongside her patchwork hull. "Aye Commodore," he returned, gesturing towards three of the six ships he had under his command. They remained on their heading whilst Alara and her new friends' ships turned further south. "I would like to remind you, Commodore," Irall stated as respectfully as he could, dressed in a somewhat renegade and flowy outfit to indicate his less than official status, "that the Gate has not been breached in more than a hundred years." Alara was never one to shoot down a challenge but even she couldn't help but feel a little underprepared for such a task. "Well, it's not seen us attempt it yet," she returned. His expression across the waters was not full of confidence.

"Make your way back to Cyrenna and do what you can," Alara called up to Navy Commander Vayle of the Omen, as she finished unloading her Marine forces onto the desert sand. "We will breach the Gate within the next four hours, if not then we're dead," she stated grimly. Vayle nodded, immediately barking out orders to her crew and walking away from the edge. It wasn't for certain, but Alara doubted that it would take forever for the Fortress ship to be repaired enough to truly fight back. Khalid would do everything he could to buy time, but Alara had no doubt that, after the threats made against the local populus proved to be useless against a cold and dominant Commodore such as Cyrenna, it wouldn't be long before he would soon turn to executing his prisoners. The more desperate he became the harder it would be for her to fulfil her main task: rescuing her parents. Killing him came secondary.

The Omen and the Brunxchume renegades sailed away, leaving Alara alone before her Marines and Irall's hand-picked soldiers. They numbered a little over three hundred. Three hundred bodies tasked with opening up the city to the rest of their forces. "I was hoping for more from your ships," Alara said with unfortunate honesty. "You would be surprised how difficult it is to find people willing to betray their own country that you can trust," Irall returned. Alara

almost smiled: it was a truthful and honest retort about the position she was putting him in. If they succeeded he would be a hero, if they failed...

"Fair point. Thank you for joining us in this fight," she stated, extending a hand to him. He looked down at it and shook his head. "Thank me afterwards. Is now the time for one of your rousing speeches?" he questioned. Alara withdrew her hand and shook her head, turning and looking at her forces as they finished their preparations. They were all tired, and all had been through more than enough to last countless lifetimes. There was no speeches that would help, they had jobs to do, and would do them to the last breath. "Ready?" Alara questioned loudly. "Oohrah!" Alara turned to Irall and nodded, beginning the long march across the sands.

"No wonder this thing hasn't fallen in however many years!" Wulf stated, laying in the cover of a sand dune as bullets peppered the sands around them. "We're still hundreds of metres away, just how tall is that wall?" he questioned. "Almost one hundred metres," returned Irall, wiping his brow before placing his peaked cap back upon his head. "Fuck me!" Wulf complained. Alara elbowed him. "Quit your whining. We're the ones with distance on our side," she stated, giving the signal with a single gesture. Streaks of cyan and blue light stretched across the skies above as Riley and her snipers began to surgically cut apart the defences.

"By the great tides..." Irall muttered, watching through his binoculars. "Most of the standard defenders will have been pulled away, either through Fleet Admiral Malik's interference or by the fact that an enemy fleet is assaulting the Capital," Alara stated, standing up into plain and open view. A bullet grazed her cheek, not even drawing blood as her Focus defended her. "My snipers have enough ammunition to continuously fire at least for a few more hours. They won't need it," Alara stated, the gunfire on her position halting entirely. "Forwards!" Alara commanded, pointing her glaive ahead at the colossal and narrow stone wall. "I want those mines dealt with, and I want those heavy weapons emplacements destroyed!" Alara commanded, looking up as the first rockets began to fall.

Alara carved her way through the air, deflecting and redirecting the heavier artillery away from her forces beneath her. The mages she had brought along were tilling the sands, tipping over and revealing the mines buried beneath – both mechanical and magical. Between Riley and Artemis, the gunners had begun to falter. Even within weapon emplacements covered in thick metal they

found no refuge from Alara's snipers, the pair terrorising the defenders whilst the others surgically isolated the others.

The charge was slow, but Alara didn't need to hurry. She could feel the terror growing before her. She could smell it as enemies began to flee their posts. "Now!" Alara commanded, Irall's men taking up positions with their heavy weapons and unleashing explosive rockets of their own towards the stone wall. No desperate shots sprayed towards them, no magical shields were raised. Only the dead still manned the wall.

Alara surged forwards into the cracks that had been created. Null Legion surged towards her, reinforcements summoned to replace the fleeing Brunxchume military. She unleashed a wave of panic, staggering them backwards long enough for her to fire a bolt of energy into the concrete floor. The ground gave way, opening up to the floor below, Alara slung off and dropped her backpack down into it. The Null Legion stared at her across the gap in the floor, their eyes wide behind their gas-mask lenses. Alara lifted up her metal hand in a two-finger salute, stepping backwards to the edge of the crack she had entered through before backflipping out as the explosives detonated.

The wall crumbled inwards, bringing down with it the heavy emplacements above it to crush those below. Alara landed in a crouch, rolling backwards to her feet before she began to dust off the sand. "How many years has that wall stood?" Alara questioned to Irall as he approached with disbelief on his face. "One-hundred-and-forty-three years," he stated, waving away the settling dust and sand. "May the next one stand longer," Alara told him, patting his shoulder. "We have a city to take! Forwards!" Alara yelled out, turning away from Irall and looking through the dust at the Fortress ship docked more than a kilometre away. She gestured with her hand for the snipers to move up and rejoin the assault force.

"You have your objectives!" she stated, striding forwards. "Weapon, take control of the harbour – let our reinforcements in." A hand reached out from the rubble and grabbed her ankle. She looked down at the partially-crushed Null Legionnaire. "Wulf, Riley, we're breaching the main defences around that ship," she commanded, swinging with her glaive and beheading the crushed body. She had no time for weakness. Her parents' lives were on line, and so was her vengeance for the deaths of Witchford, Brett and so many others. "Irall, rescue your Admiral," she stated, relieving him from her command. He nodded appreciatively and dashed off with his forces towards the city's palace.

Alarm bells were ringing across the city of Chull. Civilians had, for the most part, fled inside their houses for safety, but some stubborn stragglers had remained outside. Alara didn't know why. Some stood in their way, desperately wielding ancient weapons or kitchen utensils. But others called out to her from windows and doorways. "Liberators!" they cried. Alara didn't quite feel like a liberator as a house detonated, a large shell raining down from the sky as Khalid fulfilled his threat to bombard the city. "Weapon, progress?" she questioned. No response immediately followed.

"We're experiencing more resistance than expected," eventually came a winded emotionless response. "Do you need reinforcements?" Alara questioned, vaulting over a temporary barricade and cutting apart its defenders with her therian squad close on her heels. "Negative, keep fighting Commodore. Don't stop." Alara nodded, not that he could see it, staring up at the colossal ship as it grew closer and closer.

A lone bridge lay ahead of them, connecting to the specialist harbour designed for the Fortress ship. Countless Null Legion stood in preparation, along with several mounted machine guns, cannons and distinctive mages. An army stood between them and Khalid. "Break through them!" Alara commanded, activating the barrier shield in her glaive and charging forwards. "Alara!" came Riley's voice. "There's too many!" she cried, her voice falling on deaf ears as Alara charged alone with only Wulf behind her.

So many weapons unloaded upon her that Alara could only see a continuous flash of weapon fire ahead of her. They shattered against her shield, fragments peppering the ground around her, but Alara pressed forwards, Wulf physically pushing her forwards as he placed a hand on her back and they pushed through the swarm of bullets. The shield began to crack, the army still twenty metres ahead of them. "We're not going to make it!" Alara realised, faltering as the reality that she had doomed one of her closest friends to inevitable death dawned upon her. "No, we are!" Wulf declared, a shadow growing across the bridge ahead of them as a burning ship barrelled straight into the bridge.

"Clear a path!" Cyrenna yelled, the stubborn gunners aboard the doomed ship unleashing their cannons upon the army of defenders, even as the ship cracked and broke apart under the impact. Cyrenna leapt free, landing to her feet next to Alara and turning on the fortress. "I liked that ship," Cyrenna stated with a snarl. "I like you even more," Alara stated, wiping her tear-filled eyes and steeling herself as her followers surged past her and across the amalgamation of broken

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ship and bridge towards Khalid's Fortress ship. Cyrenna placed a hand on Alara's shoulder. "Finish the mission, we have Admirals to save," she stated, stepping forwards and charging after their forces. Alara felt the palm on her back retreat, Wulf stepping forwards beside her. "Come on. He's waiting for us."

The Fortress ship roared to life, beginning to drag itself free from the piers and cables holding it in place. "Vanathur, you take the control room, we'll rescue the prisoners," Cyrenna yelled out as she leapt into the Fortress. Alara dashed forwards across the longest pier with Wulf and Riley, the sudden acceleration throwing waves across the planks ahead of them. "Leap for it!" Alara commanded, dashing towards the colossal opening left by the Sentry. She landed to a quiet silence, followed only by the soft metallic landing of Riley and the scabble of claws from Wulf. "Stay close," Alara warned, her heart pounding in her head as she edged through the wreckage towards the central lifts.

There was a worrying absence of guards as they climbed the stairs circling the elevators upwards. They could hear fighting far below, but there was no way that the command centre had been left unguarded. The circling stairs began to come closer together as they neared the peak of the fortress. "Alara," came Riley's quiet voice. She pointed upwards and Alara reached out with her senses, trying to feel for anyone above them. Like a sudden snarl, she felt a presence back – a singular presence surrounded only by a handful of others. "He's waiting for us," Alara informed Wulf. "There was never any doubt of that. Let's make this quick."

They stepped out onto the top floor, a small ring of a walkway surrounding the the command centre of the Fortress Ship. It was designed like a bunker, with heavy metal doors sealing the inside and folded down metal panels acting as large windows that could be sealed at a moment's notice. They stepped in front of the main doors, the metal grinding open before them. "Vanathur," came a cold growl of a voice from inside the red room. Elevator doors lay at the back, connecting to the rest of the ship, but the tethers had been cut. Large projections floated over control panels, showing the status of the ship and the outside world. A huge map lay across a large central table, with countless pins and figurines acting as markers. Facing the doors, facing Alara, was a large throne, with the Betrayer General Khalid sat upon it.

Alara looked to the pilots manning the ship. "Leave," she commanded. Khalid tutted, shaking his head. "No, they will not. And you will not do anything to them," he stated. He wore a military uniform, a red-brown colour that was decorated with countless golden medals. A warhammer shaped like a judge's

gavel sat with its head on the floor next to him. His hand rested on the handle of the weapon, a small trigger-like device in his other hand. "The Sovereign expects me to handle you, and you to handle me. Neither situation is what I wanted. I respect a warrior who knows herself, and knows how to draw out a victory regardless of the cost."

He stood up, hefting the warhammer over his shoulder. "That trigger?" Alara prompted. "Explosives placed on the various prisoners of importance within my cells. You can guess the placement of at least two of the bombs," he said with a cruel grin. "Coward!" Alara yelled. He shrugged, approaching the map table and placing his foot onto the edge of it. "Perhaps, but sometimes cowardice is the only way to draw out a victory – and in the end, victory is the only thing that matters."

"Why? Why is the Sovereign's commands final? Why go this far for her? Fall so much?" Alara questioned, looking at the numerous medals from battles long gone. She had no doubt in their validity. "Why betray your people?" she asked. "The Sovereign is like a force of nature, created by our sins. You cannot stop her." "But—" He held up a hand, shaking his head and kicking the table towards Alara. She, Wulf and Riley stepped aside, the heavy table crashing into the railing behind them and toppling over the edge towards the ocean. "In another time I would have appreciated a conversation, a discussion between soldiers, but that version of me is dead. I am he who remains. We are what remain," he stated.

His form twisted, his reddish-brown eyes dividing so that two eyes filled the sockets, his uniform split as he swelled in size, his medals sinking into the grey flesh that lay underneath. His skin then bubbled, countless black feathers bursting out from the flesh before a colossal pair of wings emerged from his back. "A Demon," Wulf stated. Alara didn't respond, they'd figured that out long before. "Alara – the bombs have been disarmed," came Cyrenna's voice through Alara's communicator. "Go wild," Alara commanded.

"Fools!" came a deep guttural voice that was both Khalid's and someone else. He pressed the trigger, but silence followed. Riley fired off a shot, the bullet passing cleanly into Khalid's head. His brains splattered outwards, his huge body staggering backwards. The opening in his head gushed blood but he remained standing in a stooped form. Slowly his hand clutched one of the medals on his chest. "Die for me," growled the creature before them, the metal dripping out of his feathery fingers. One of the pilots screamed, clutching their head in agony

before it exploded outwards in a fast spray of gore. Khalid's head healed closed. "Not good," Riley stated.

Alara surged forwards, aiming to put herself between Khalid and Riley as the Demon General flapped his wings and darted forwards. There were at least twenty or so medals across the Betrayer's chest, there weren't that many pilots, but Alara doubted that mattered. Khalid had once ordered Riley to announce her identity using the same method. If the medals represented commands then they were in distinct danger.

Alara swung her glaive downwards towards Khalid's neck, the warhammer rose up to block it and Wulf embedded his blade deep within Khalid's stomach. A following shot sent the Demon Lord crashing backwards. "Pathetic!" Khalid growled, grabbing Alara's entire torso with his huge hand and beginning to squeeze. Alara groaned in pain as she fought back against the crushing grip. Khalid flapped his wings, flying upwards to his feet. He then swung his warhammer, Wulf foolishly blocking the swipe with his sword. The weapon shattered and, with a yelp, Wulf flew backwards across the room in a similar manner to the map table, tumbling over the side. "Wulf!" Alara groaned.

Khalid lifted her up, preparing to slam her head-first into the floor, but a bullet severed the joint in his wrist and she broke free, leaping off him to land in front of Riley. "We may need a new plan," Riley warned, sensing Wulf beginning the slow climb back up. "Agreed," Alara stated, noticing two medals drip off Khalid's body without him touching them. "He doesn't need to touch it to use his powers," she declared, watching as two of the remaining three pilots expired. "Then what's the trigger?"

Alara darted forwards, but Khalid swung wildly at her, forcing her to slide underneath the blow as he flew past her directly at Riley. "You're becoming a nuisance." Riley changed her aim, firing off a single shot towards the control panel controlling the heavy metal doors. The doors slammed shut, crushing Khalid's outstretched arm. He roared in agony, pushing back and turning towards Alara, now alone with him. "Hang on!" came Riley's voice through Alara's communicator.

Alara stared up at the Demon in low red light. "And now you're alone!" he growled. Alara tried not to smile. She fired off a quick shot, killing the final terrified pilot. A medal did not drip from Khalid's torso. "And you're alone with me. And I'm not afraid," she stated, voicing her guess. Khalid grabbed a medal. "Grovel!" he commanded. Alara felt invisible claws scratching the back of her

neck, a heavy weight threatening to press her to the floor, but she stood tall. His eyes widened. "And so it becomes clear," she said, finally smiling as she twirled her glaive and took a defensive stance.

Khalid yelled as he charged towards her, but she ducked under his two-handed swipe, swinging with her glaive to cut free his left wing. He crashed to the floor, the severed wing thrashing around before falling still. Riley had sealed him inside whilst removing Alara's worry for her wellbeing, whether deliberate or not - Alara didn't care, it had heavily helped her. "I don't know your name Demon," Alara stated, striding forwards and meeting Khalid's heavy downwards swing by deflecting it to the side and then returning a heavy gash to the arm that followed. "but I am friends with Jayce Exarga, and on his crew is your king: Baal."

Khalid's body twisted as he rushed to attack her, but something held him back. "I can bring you to him. But you need to leave this body," Alara commanded. "Or else you will die with him," she threatened. Panic crossed Khalid's bird-like demonic face. "No! Don't listen to her!" he cried. Alara struck, severing the hand holding the warhammer and then embedding her glaive deep into his bloated torso. Alara stared the Demon right in the eye. "I offer you refuge in my body," she stated, sliding her flesh hand into the wound and deliberately cutting herself. "I-I," gasped Khalid's mouth. "I accept."

Alara yanked her glaive free, Khalid falling to the floor, his mouth and eyes wide. "No!" he cried, shuddering and thrashing as the feathers fell off his body. Alara turned her glaive around. "Your sentence," she said coldly. He raised his human hands towards her. "Mercy!" he cried, blood spurting out of the wound in his side and dribbling down his chin. "Is death!" she concluded, firing a bolt of energy into his chest. He fell still, his eyes unseeing.

The doors to the command centre slid open, Wulf, Riley, Cyrenna and an entire squadron of armed Marines stood outside waiting. They stared at Alara and she slowly turned and looked back at them her reddish-brown eyes glowing. "It's over," Alara declared. "I have his Demon, and the Betrayer, General Barca Khalid, is dead." There was movement to the edge of the squad, two figures pushing through the group to step out into the open: an olive-skinned tall woman with wavy silver hair and hazel eyes, a similar height man with a very skinny build, messy grey hair, pale skin and brown eyes. Alara stood frozen as they stared at her, both in horror at the blood across her body and her glowing eyes and the stranger that stood before them. "Alara?" questioned her father Silas

Vanathur. "Hi... Dad," she said quietly, her glaive clattering to the floor by her feet as her mother tackled her.

Seize the Seas Tales: Punishment

The days after Morgana's exile were quiet, unusually so for the reunited crew. The feeling of betrayal had hit hard, and what's more was that it had shone an uncomfortable light on what lay ahead of them. The end was in sight, and most likely a final confrontation with the Sea Sovereign at the end of it all. They would have to be ready for it, one way or another, and not everyone was certain they would be.

"Taking on both Strigon and Armin... it's a lot, Jayce, and that's coming from me," Astris stated, slowly pacing back and forth within the living quarters. Jayce glanced over his shoulder to Bjorn leaning against the far wall. "Thoughts?" Jayce questioned, still barely comfortable being back in his position of Captain. "She's not wrong, but the real question is can we afford not to?" Bjorn returned. "How so?" questioned Astris, stopping pacing and folding her arms.

"Think about it. The Sovereign has shown her hand: she's stated outright her interest in Alara, and that she's growing fed up of her current Betrayers. That they're boring her, or something along those lines. She named you as another one, asked you to replace Strigon--"

"I'm aware," Astris stated.

"Zeta was another. We still don't know anything about the Sovereign or her Betrayers, how they've come to be under her command or why they follow her. She's already choosing new ones and I have no doubt in my mind that she will cut us apart with a scalpel and take the pieces she wants. We need to show the world that the Betrayers can be beaten. We need to show ourselves that they can be beaten. Or else... it's inevitable that we will lose each other, maybe even ourselves."

The door opened and Marisha stepped in with a stack of letters and newspapers. "He's right, this is our fight. We beat Strigon before, we can do so again." "It just feels like a trap, that's all I'm saying. And with Morgana out of the picture we've lost a consistent supply of potions and a potent aerial combatant," Astris stated. Marisha handed Bjorn a rather thick wad of letters. He frowned as he took them but then faltered as he spotted a red patch on the paper.

"I agree we have to do this, but we need--"

A guttural gasp drew Astris, Marisha and Jayce's attention to Bjorn, the papers falling to the floor apart from one in his hand, his other hand gripping the back of the sofa so hard that he actually tore it open. "Bjorn?" Jayce questioned, getting to his feet and approaching him as the giant bear-man dropped to his knees, shaking his head in disbelief. Marisha rushed to Bjorn's side. Astris began to pick up the letters, tearing them open. Jayce stood in front of his friend, Bjorn's gaze slowly looking upwards to him. Tears stemmed from his eyes, a growl of rage following them.

Bjorn held a photo in his hand, the letter accompanying it discarded on the floor. "Fucking hell..." Astris muttered, placing her palm to her forehead and shaking her head. Jayce took the photo, staggering backwards and shutting his eyes. It showed a severed head: the head of a polar bear therian - Magnus. "Who?" Jayce questioned. "Who do you think?" Bjorn returned, a snarl on his face. "Xerxes, that bastard! I'll kill him for this!"

"Jayce," Astris said quietly, handing him a letter.

'The Frostbear tribe is mine, part of my army, conscripted to refill the ranks you emptied, Bjorn. You stood on the wrong side and now blood has been shed that cannot be undone. I will blow away all remnant of our cursed past, and then I will come for you. I swear on it, as King of the Therians, that you will never find refuge amongst our people again.'

"Jayce..." Bjorn said with cold steel. Jayce nodded, glancing towards Astris as she showed the front page of the newspaper: it displayed the scorched ruins of an island. "This takes priority. If Xerxes is targeting our friends and blowing up the world, then we have to put an end to him."

"No matter the cost," Bjorn growled, looking sadly at the array of images showing the corpses of his family and friends.