

Chapter 248: For the Old World

"We'll do what we can Vanathur, but their warships are more advanced than ours!" yelled Rear-Admiral Alpin through her communicator. It was undeniable: the crews of the Null Legion fleet were veterans amongst veterans, geared to the teeth in enchanted equipment, with fleets personally designed and forged by the best the Guild had to offer. As fights went, it was like bringing a foam baton to blows against a metal mace.

Alara grit her teeth as her onboard Mages focused on defending her flagship against long-range barrages. Her ship - the King Killer - groaned under the assault of the rough ocean and the mortars from the shore. "Hang in there," she muttered to her new flagship. A beam of black fire blasted from overhead as Riley blew a hole through the hull of an enemy vessel, the ship imploding as she hit the gunpowder stores. Alara couldn't help but shake her head as Riley racked her new anti-material rifle and took aim at a new target; the weapon was preposterously large and, in her arms, hyper-lethal. "Do what you can to support our aiding fleets, but keep your eyes open for breaches in their lines. When one appears, and it will, we are going through. Anyone unable to keep up will be left behind!" Alara commanded to her fleet, through her communicator.

"Aye, Admiral," responded her three Commodores: Kask, Kai and Kai. Alara glanced out towards the Pirate fleet; the entire warzone to the southwest had descended into utter mayhem, the harassment of the sea monsters, paired with the Null Legion and the Betrayers, had resulted in a central mass of death to any daring to enter. She could see the Stacked Hand sitting towards the rear, but - from the Dragons in the skies, the beams of green energy from the clouds, the blue portals, and the booms of lightning as Thalia pursued her prey - it was clear that the Rising Aces were doing anything but holding back. "Admiral, I need you here!" stated the Weapon to her right, his eyes locked ahead on the mass of ships before them. "Right, sorry," she said quickly. Jayce, and Astris, were not her concern - they would come later, provided they all survived to see the end of this hopefully brief and brutal war.

Riley and her, significantly-expanded, squad of snipers had been spread across a variety of ships, all acting within their own communications array to isolate high-value enemy targets. Each of them had been assigned a spotter - a Marine whose sole objective was to locate targets for them and point them out. The sole exceptions were Artemis and Riley, the pair of which were on Alara's ship with

specific commands to use their mastery of Focus to inflict maximum destruction in whichever way they saw fit.

Wulf and his Marines were below deck, waiting to act as the first line in the ground assault – a role they had volunteered for, despite Alara's protests. She didn't know what she would do if she lost him, and the mechanical automata waiting for them on the shores were undoubtedly going to be a poor match for her therian men and women. Alara didn't want to lose any of her people, but she'd resigned herself to admitting that they were probably all dead. Anyone, including herself, that made it back would be something to celebrate.

The three fleets ahead of hers had angled themselves on a trajectory towards the Sovereign's mansion. It put them in between the two defensive lines, in what was essentially a suicide channel, but it was slowly thinning the defensive fleet around Diasta's Capital – Novalis – as it dragged them forwards in order to pursue and protect the swiftly thinning Null Legion fleet in front of the Sovereign. For every ship that made it through the rain of cannon fire, a reinforcement was added to the Pirate fleet, and Alara could only imagine what the Null Legion Generals barking orders from the shore were saying about that.

Her snipers continued to execute commanders left, right and centre, throwing the defensive fleet into fast panic. An enemy ship moved forwards out of Novalis' defensive fleet, ahead of the rest in a curious display of aggression. Alara faltered as others ununiformly did the same. She glanced to the right; Rear-Admiral Ewon had pulled his Flagship away from the southwest assault. It was foolish, he was using his own ship to shield others behind it, but it was also an irresistible bait – one that several crews, now relying on improvised leadership, were eager to take.

"Here's your hole, Vanathur! Make it count!" he yelled, turning fully towards the enemy fleet. His communicator remained active, his war cry ringing true across the entire battlefield as he sailed straight at the foremost enemy ship before turning at the last moment to move into the gap between the enemy ships. "Argh!" Rear-Admiral Ewon yelled, as his ship was torn apart from all sides, continuing to sail deeper and deeper into the defensive fleet before detonating in a vast and horizon-consuming blast of crimson flame.

"That fool!" Alara yelled, gripping the nearest railing and shielding her eyes. "By the abyss! What the hell was that?" questioned Cyrenna across the communicators. Alara grit her teeth, a wave of flame flowing outwards across the ravaged Null Legion fleet caught in the huge radius of the blast. "A bomb! Ewon had rigged his ship without telling me!" Alara answered, curious as to just

how long he had been planning the suicide bomb and whether any more lay across the other ships in his fleet. "Admiral, a hole!" Kask stated, a faint giggle sneaking through. Alara nodded to her Helm before shaking her head to herself. A loud siren began to wail across the King Killer. "I see it, Kask. All crews, we're going in!" Alara declared, her ship lunging forwards on a new heading.

"Snipers, protect the Rear-Admiral!" Riley commanded across her communicator. "Belay that," Alara countered, a steady haze emerging from Novalis. "Incoming flyers!" Alara yelled, her anti-air cannons immediately roaring to life as they spewed exploding shells into the skies. It was almost impossible to see, the flames of ruined ships had filled the seas with smoke, and the explosions in the air were painting the sky in black and orange. But the King Killer continued its blind charge forwards, Commodore Kask's vanguard ahead of Alara with both Kai's either side of her. Kask's stern sat almost underneath Alara's bow with how tightly they were sailing together, and Alara could physically see both Cyrenna and Beowulf as their fleet sailed in a kite-shape. A single lucky heavy bomber could have probably taken out all four of their ships if it made it through, but between the continuous stream of anti-air and Riley's snipers, nothing could make it past the forward ships.

Alara counted the metres as the shores approached, all lined with their own guns and defences. The ships didn't have to survive, they could all crash for all Alara cared, as long as their assault crews made it to land then there was a chance that they could, and would, eliminate the Null Legion's high command. Desperation rose on both sides of the battlefield. Null Legion ships were surging forwards on desperate ramming charges, looking to put themselves between the fleet and shore, but Rear-Admiral Ewon's bomb had completely separated the defending fleet, putting them far out of position to do anything other than collide with the tail of Alara's fleet.

The shore came within a few hundred metres. "All guns, light them the hell up!" Alara commanded, her forward guns spewing a wall of death at the defenders. Her anti-air aimed downwards, her snipers gave up on slaughtering the flyers, and the second sand met the hull of her first ships, Alara's Wolves leapt out from the bowels of the ship. Wulf bounded across the deck, leaping from the bow onto Kask's ship with Channing and Boot close behind him. "For the Republic!" he howled, every therian Marine racing out of their ships towards what remained of the defenders.

Alara watched him leave, taking a brief note of her surroundings as she gave her therians a chance to do their job. Her fleet spread out where they could before using the ships in front of them as extensions of the shore to launch their assault. "All crews, abandon ship!" Alara ordered, dashing forwards with Riley, Artemis and the Weapon close behind her. "Navy, you have your objectives!"

It was a mass abandonment of the fleet; the ground assault was now all that mattered and anyone still left on the crashed fleet was going to be torn apart by the now rapidly approaching defensive fleet. A few bold crews near the rear of the fleet had refused to abandon ship and instead were trying to peel away from the mass to engage the approaching ships and buy time for the ground assault, but Alara knew that their fates were sealed. Alara dashed through the air over the ruins of her fleet, her two personal guards, Riley and Artemis, darting closely behind her. They landed on a rooftop, glancing down at the corpses and destroyed machinery as the Navy crews swiftly set themselves up in their stead.

A large plume of flame drew Alara's eyes to a courtyard up ahead. She could hear gunfire all around her, both from defenders guarding their city and the occasional flyer dive bombing from above. Riley aimed up and fired, sending a flyer spiralling down towards the city ahead of them. "Save your ammo," Alara ordered. "We can deal with them later. For now, we need to identify where our targets are."

Alara dashed forwards toward a rooftop overlooking the large courtyard spewing fire. She leapt backwards, somersaulting down before cleaving a huge golden automaton from head to waist. It split in half and fell apart in front of her, she then turned and fired off a pair of orange bolts of energy from the rear of her glaive into the cores of two more giant machines. They exploded from the inside out, the metal flowering outwards. Alara tilted her glaive to the side before ejecting the flickering magic stone inside. She manually slotted another inside before turning to her Marines as they emerged from cover, Wulf at their lead. "Thanks for the assist, Admiral," Wulf greeted, catching his breath. Alara nodded to him before looking back up towards Artemis, still crouched on the rooftop above them and scanning the city. "Give me some good news!" Alara called up. Slowly Artemis raised a hand and pointed southeast. "Their royal houses are awfully chatty," she stated, "and are packing an awful lot of heat."

"Then we have a heading! All forces, converge on the royal houses! Cyrenna, their forges are yours! Beowulf, take out their airfield! Kask, secure the rear!" Alara commanded, looking to the small army gathering around her. "We take

this city, and we cut off the Sovereign's hands! She stole our world from us when we fought through blood and tears to liberate ourselves from the talons of the Church! Today we avenge those that died for an Empire that had already fallen and for those that gave us everything to put the ground beneath our boots! Forwards!" Alara yelled.

Against all of Alara's instincts, she held back – letting her Marines take the lead as they fought through the wide streets of Novalis. Where they met walls of guns and soldiers, Wulf and his therians broke through houses and clambered onto rooftops to take street after street. Artemis guided him from above, dashing from roof to roof in complete silence. Periodically an explosion would erupt from ahead leaving a roadblock devoid of life for Wulf and his squads as they charged through. Riley remained by Alara as they observed the assault, her rifle aimed solely on the royal houses, the numerous automata and weapon emplacements.

It wouldn't be long before a vast number of enemy reinforcements were deployed into the city. The rest of the Republic Navy were doing what they could to delay the Null Legion, but Alara knew that it was inevitable. A series of blasts erupted from the large factories in the distance, the machinery meeting its demise at the hands of Cyrenna. Mere moments later, Alara spotted vast plumes of smoke fill the air from the rough direction the flyers were coming from and returning to. "Objective achieved," stated both Kais. A small smile crossed Alara's face. "Rally on Wulf's position, I'll meet you there," Alara stated, nodding to Riley before charging towards the royal houses.

Wulf lay against a toppled over mobile cannon, Boot sat with him hugging his side before looking at the blood on his hands. "Ow," Boot said grimly. Wulf glanced towards him, the pair of them grabbing Channing and pulling him down as he attempted to clamber over the top. "Don't be a hero," Wulf ordered, temporarily phasing out of his therian form to deal with his own wounds. His fellow wolves did the same. The rest of the Wolfpack were some distance behind them, trying to advance against the heavy guns and machinery guarding the royal houses. "Someone has to do something," Channing stated, looking at the other two. "Sir, we're pinned here – I might be able to buy a moment or two," he attempted. "That's a one-way trip," Wulf immediately returned, shaking his head as a fellow Marine was gunned down attempting to reach them. "One I'm willing to make, Wulf. Let me do this, sir." Wulf shook his head, one hand on Boot's shoulder, the other on Channing's forearm. "No, that's an order. We're staying here and waiting for support." The metal around them groaned as a shell impacted it, a bullet whizzed past their heads as a hole was made.

But then the guns stopped as a huge and heavy impact shook the ground. "Come on!" Alara yelled, standing in a crater of her own making. The three wolves peered out from cover as she moved like a blur up the stairs towards the guards desperately firing at her. "Now we go!" Wulf yelled, darting out after her with his heavy sabre. Boot and Channing bumped fists and ran out after him with their own battle cries.

Alara blew open the main doors with her upgraded glaive, purple dust falling out her weapon as she slammed in a new crystal and blew apart a Null Legionnaire. Limbs and gore coated the marble floors as she hacked, slashed and shot her way through the huge building. A cannon on wheels rolled out from behind a wall, only to detonate as a window shattered and a bullet coated in black Focus sailed through.

Soldiers and automata rushed to meet her, to desperately do anything they could to slow her down, but nothing survived longer than a few seconds. A wall collapsed up ahead as Alara stared down a long corridor. Cyrenna emerged from the dust, her gauntlets dripping blood. "Down!" she yelled at Alara, before pointing in other directions for her own Marines to clear out sections of the royal houses. Cyrenna then ran over to Alara's side as her Marines cleared a large space on floor and stepped back in a ring. Wulf and the Weapon stepped forwards into the middle of the circle with a silent gesture from Alara, the trio standing around Cyrenna. "At least three floors deep," Cyrenna stated, her palm to the floor and eyes shut. "I trust your senses, get us down there," Alara commanded, crouching down. Weapon and Wulf did the same. Cyrenna Focused on her fist, her gauntlet glowing black before she punched through the floor.

They dropped and hit another floor, Cyrenna immediately throwing another punch as the guards around them took aim and fired. They fell again and she punched through once more, the group landing hard within a large room covered in panels displaying flickering lights. All around them were huge tables covered in maps, terminals sparkling with magic stones showing images of the battlefield, and a vast group of Null Legion with their helmets off and eyes wide. "To arms! For the Sovereign!" cried an elderly man, his uniform laden with golden icons. He went down almost immediately as Alara blew a hole through his chest with her glaive. "Leave none alive!" Alara commanded, her Marines rappelling down from the floors above. "For the Republic!"

Seize the Seas Tales: King of the Seas

The ocean writhed and thrashed as the squad of ocean crawlers Ningyo had brought with him dashed around the krakens and leviathans under Ura Soruk's command. But Red didn't have any time to pay attention to them, instead he dashed around after the Despoiler, propelling himself through the water using the jets in his body. "We take her here and now!" Red declared, drifting in the water next to Ningyo as close to the ocean floor as possible. "Agreed," stated the blue ocean crawler with red eyes and red armour, a pair of curved swords in his hands.

Ura Soruk's purple body floated ahead of them both. She looked at them before glancing upwards to her monsters. She withdrew a pair of short blades from behind her back before letting out a cry that immediately drew the attention of the colossal monsters. She pointed at the pair in front of her as the creatures descended upon them. "Ignore them!" Ningyo yelled, dashing towards her. Red pursued him, but swiftly found himself unable to ignore the mass of sea monsters swarming around them.

Whether they could fight her or not was irrelevant, the creatures under her command were too many, too powerful, and now too heavily invested in hunting down the two surviving ocean crawlers. Red retreated, pulling further and further underwater with his back to the ocean floor as the dark mass of pulsating tentacles pursued him. He pushed through ship debris, sinking ammunition, and corpses until he hit the floor, a small cloud of sand erupting upwards around him. The monsters continued to push towards him, thrashing over each other in a desperate bid to get him, but Red simply crouched before pushing off towards the mass as fast as he could swim.

The ocean folded and split far above him as Ura and Ningyo clashed with their weapons, but Red kept his attention solely on the sea monsters ahead of him. He took in a deep breath and then squeezed the propulsion organs on the back of his head, launching forwards like a jet as he weaved through the maelstrom of tentacles, claws and teeth. He squeezed and darted, soft and squishy flesh enveloping him in all directions. Red slid between giant suckers as the tentacles collapsed around him. He dashed through an open beak, the mouth snapping shut on the bubbles left in his wake. He twisted and broke free, the mass of bodies slamming into the ocean floor behind him and granting a momentary vision of clarity upon the Pirate Lord and the Betrayer fighting beneath the ocean's surface.

Ura grunted as Red slammed into her, breaking her free of the water's embrace and thrusting the pair of them out into open air. "What are you doing?" questioned Ura in a brief hiss, before the pair of them slammed into the hull of a Null Legion ship and tumbled inside the lower deck. "Breach! Breach! Bre-!" cried a Null Legionnaire, only for her second repetition to be cut off as Red impaled her throat with one of his headtails. Water rushed into the deck through the hole in the hull as the soldiers around them fled for the higher decks. Ningyo dashed in through the hole, looking around before looking towards Red in confusion. "You think an enclosed space like this will weaken me?" questioned Ura with a cackle. "I'm not sealed in here with you; you are trapped here with me!" she growled, but her eyes glanced towards the hole in the hull and the water rushing in and quickly filling the deck.

The three ocean crawlers maintained a defensive stance waiting as the water rose to their waists, then their shoulders, before finally fully enveloping them. Ningyo and Ura dashed at each other, their weapons tearing open the wood around them, but Red let out high-pitched trill. Both Ningyo and Ura faltered, their eyes widening as Red called for the monsters he had shook off. "No!" Ura realised, darting towards the hole in the hull, only for a huge golden beak to seal the gap and snap at those still inside. "What have you done?" Ningyo questioned, in similar shock to Ura, as the Null Legion ship shook and shuddered before beginning to groan as it was enveloped in all angles by the sea monsters Ura had brought to the war. "You'll kill us all!" Ningyo yelled, turning in a panic before grunting as a blade pierced his side. Red grabbed his shoulder and pulled him backwards away from the bow, placing himself between Ningyo and the Betrayer.

"Take ownership of your position! This battle is beyond the two of us, but if the Despoiler dies here then not only will those fighting with us benefit from our sacrifice, but all of the great waters of this world will. Flee if you must, Ningyo – I will not. This is my stand and where I fulfil the debt I owe!" Red declared. Ningyo looked towards the stairs leading up towards the main deck before glancing back towards Red as he desperately held back the Betrayer in the collapsing ship. She trilled, commanding the sea monsters away, but Red commanded the opposite. "May the depths accept our embrace," Ningyo muttered, turning back towards Red and charging forwards into Ura as he copied Red's trill.

Ningyo slammed into Ura, pushing her further back towards the bow just before the wood around them cracked and crunched down towards them. "Ningyo!"

Red called out, grabbing the Pirate Lord's ankle and pulling him back as the ship imploded. "Scum!" Ura yelled, desperately pressing out at the collapsed beams around her. "You'll pay for this!" she screamed, her arms buckling as tentacles continued to squeeze on the wood around her.

The ship split in two as a huge tentacle tore through the hulls, exposing Ningyo and Red to the ocean for a brief moment. "Go!" Red yelled, dashing out into the open with Ningyo as Ura screamed – the tentacles continuing to squeeze the debris enveloping her. A spray of blood escaped the press, the scream silencing along with it. Red and Ningyo looked towards each other as the rest of the sunken ship met a similar fate. "Go!" Red commanded, letting out a trill and turning the sea monsters against the Null Legion.