

Arc 1 - Chapter 87 - Urban Delve

The aftermath of the ambush left the members of Alpha Squad scouring through the remains of the second SUV. Amidst the wreckage, they unearthed several crates filled with ammunition and a modest collection of grenades.

Each item was promptly assessed for its utility and swiftly appropriated.

However, their search for a communications unit or any substantial intelligence came up empty. This outcome, though disappointing, was not entirely unexpected.

The SUVs, dispatched to investigate the missing patrol, were unlikely to carry sensitive equipment or information, especially in a scenario where enemy infiltration was a likely possibility. It would be a glaring tactical error to provide such an advantage to the enemy.

With the realisation that time was not on their side, especially given the conspicuous nature of their ambush, Corvus rallied the squad. "Let's move on. We need to get deeper into the city, so we can start using our comms again, and see what other squads are operating nearby. This mission isn't going to be a solo endeavour all the way through. The mission objectives are undoubtedly going to be heavily protected, so we'll need some extra hands."

He then turned his attention to Thea, assigning her the role of point person. "Thea, you take the lead. Your urban expertise, along with Isabella's, will be invaluable now."

Thea acknowledged the order with a nod and assumed her position at the forefront of the group. Lucas, ever the protector, positioned himself directly behind her, ready to deploy his shield if needed. Desmond followed, with Karania and Isabella bringing up the rear. Isabella had gladly taken the rear position, in order to make sure that nobody was accidentally going to step out of line.

In urban environments, or so she had said, it was imperative to remain vigilant at all times and have a good balance of offence and defence across the entire line, as you never knew where the enemy might approach from.

The squad, now reformed in their new lineup, prepared to navigate the dense and unpredictable maze of the city's outskirts.

Leading the squad through the urban outskirts, Thea felt a mix of nervousness and familiarity.

While she had no experience in urban combat, the environment reminded her of her time navigating the similarly deserted undercity of Lumiosia. The fact that civilians had been evacuated from this area only amplified the sense of déjà vu, making the surroundings feel eerily akin to the desolate stretches she knew so well and had spent the vast majority of her life navigating through.

Adopting her scout persona, Thea's focus narrowed to identifying the most effective yet inconspicuous route through the city's fringe. Aware that the Stellar Republic might have set

up defences against infiltrators in the seemingly deserted urban expanse, she proceeded with a heightened sense of caution.

As Lucas finished securing the newly acquired ammunition and grenades, Thea started their trek through the cityscape, steering the squad swiftly away from the site of their recent ambush.

Her pathfinding strategy involved weaving through alleyways and under overhangs, aiming to stay out of sight from any potential surveillance drones that might be patrolling the skies above. This cautious approach reflected her desire to minimise exposure while navigating the complex urban terrain, ensuring the squad remained undetected as they delved deeper into the city.

Taking command with a newfound assertiveness, Thea directed Desmond with clear instructions, her voice carrying an uncharacteristic decisiveness. Embracing her role as the leader for this phase of the mission, she was determined to guide her squad as effectively as possible.

"Desmond, I need one of your drones in the air to scout a direct route for us towards the western side of the outskirts," Thea commanded, her tone leaving no room for doubt. "Make sure to loop it around a few blocks first. We can't risk it being traced back to our location in case someone's watching."

Her strategy was to lead the squad westward, closer to the ongoing conflict at the wall.

This choice, while potentially more perilous due to the increased likelihood of encountering random Stellar Republic soldiers moving to and from the military installations further in the city towards the wall, was tactically sound in her mind.

The chaos of battle preparations and the throng of continuous movement would serve as a distraction, reducing the chance of their small unit being targeted by dedicated search parties. Thea reasoned that most search efforts would focus on areas far from the front lines, making their approach towards the west both unconventional and strategic.

Thea's decision to take the riskier path was not made lightly.

It was a strategic choice, one that she had thoroughly discussed with Isabella during their multiple days of patrol and the corresponding downtime that came with it before the assault on the wall. Their conversations had been productive, focusing on the urban segment of the mission, where they exchanged ideas and identified potential dangers to avoid.

Both Thea and Isabella were in agreement: A risky yet calculated approach often yielded better results than a conventional, by-the-book strategy. They understood that their adversaries might be equally, if not more, intelligent and resourceful than themselves. As such, playing it safe and predictable wasn't going to cut it in a complex infiltration mission like this.

This mindset was something Thea had observed and learned from Morin and Viladia as well.

Their actions often leaned towards the unconventional or seemed imprudent at first glance, but their track record spoke for itself.

They were among the most skilled and experienced marines Thea had encountered, and their success was a testament to the effectiveness of their unorthodox methods.

Emulating this approach as much as she could and felt comfortable with, Thea hoped to guide her squad successfully through the outskirts of Nova Tertius...

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By the time Desmond's drone efficiently mapped out a path towards the western outskirts, Thea's leadership came into its own. The environment, eerily reminiscent of the undercity of Lumiosia where she grew up, bolstered her confidence tenfold. She navigated the deserted streets and structures of the city with a familiarity that was almost second nature to her.

Her pace, initially moderate, gradually increased as she became more in tune with her surroundings. Thea's swift and agile movements as she led the squad were a blend of instinct and memory. She effortlessly weaved through the labyrinthine urban terrain, taking shortcuts through dilapidated buildings and sprinting up abandoned staircases.

Her proficiency in this urban jungle was almost uncanny to see.

However, her rapid pace soon proved to be a bit much for the rest of the squad. Corvus, observing the growing gap between Thea and the others, had to call for a slowdown. While Thea's speed and agility were impressive, they were pushing the limits of the squad's ability to keep up.

Acknowledging Corvus's request, Thea ended up moderating her speed, still leading confidently but now more in sync with the squad's capabilities. Although she had to restrain her natural inclination to move quickly through the eerily familiar terrain, she remained energised and focused. The drone's intel, relayed by Desmond, continued to guide their path, ensuring they avoided unnecessary risks and maintained a steady progression towards their destination in the western outskirts.

Approximately ten minutes into navigating their new route, Thea felt an unease abruptly kick in. She raised her fist, signalling an immediate halt. The squad, well-trained and responsive as ever, ceased all activity, turning their attention towards her.

In front of them was the entrance to a nondescript apartment building, similar to the many they had already passed through. It was a modest structure, three or four stories tall, but something about it set off alarm bells in Thea's mind.

It wasn't a psychic premonition either; rather, it was an instinctive, almost visceral sense of unease. It reminded her of an experienced blacksmith who could intuitively gauge the force needed for each hammer stroke on hot metal—a skill honed through years of experience.

Thea found herself perplexed.

Her psychic abilities, usually sensitive to immediate threats, remained silent, offering no explicit warning. Yet, she couldn't shake off the feeling that something was amiss.

'So... nothing immediately harmful, maybe? Could be an alarm of sorts... But what exactly is giving me this uneasy feeling? Why do I feel so strange about this building in particular?' She mused, trying to make sense of her own instincts.

The question was simple: Should she listen to them and lead the rest of the squad around the building entirely or investigate what might have set her off, instead?

She mulled over the decision, her eyes scanning the building's facade for any visible clues.

Her training and experience told her to err on the side of caution, but part of her questioned whether this was an overreaction to a harmless anomaly. After a brief moment of contemplation, however, she ultimately decided to trust her instincts.

'It's not worth risking the mission just because I feel strange and want to know why. The last time I followed my urge to figure out why I felt weird, that stupid gate thing happened. Don't want a repeat of that happening anytime soon,' she thought to herself, cementing her decision.

She signalled the squad with a subtle gesture, indicating that they would take a detour, avoiding the building that had inexplicably set off her internal alarms.

It wasn't hard to find another way through, but the strange feeling of unease that had briefly overcome her in front of the doorway kept gnawing at her.

Just what exactly might have set the feeling off...?

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The sensation of unease returned unexpectedly a few minutes later, just as Thea was guiding the squad towards another apartment complex, a couple blocks further away.

Instinctively, she signalled for another stop. This time, her attention was drawn to a door slightly ajar, not any different from the others they had encountered and passed through so far.

Thea's frown deepened as she pondered the peculiarity of this door. *'What sets this door apart from the rest?'* she questioned internally.

With caution, she inched closer, her heightened Perception at the ready. She hoped to catch even the slightest hint or anomaly that could explain her discomfort.

Her eyes narrowed, scrutinising every detail of the door and its surroundings. The slight gap, the angle at which it hung, the way the shadows fell around it—everything was under her intense gaze. Thea's senses were on high alert, sifting through visual cues and ambient sounds, trying to piece together the puzzle that had triggered her instincts.

As she approached, she remained acutely aware of her squad's position, ensuring they were prepared for any sudden developments.

Every sense was attuned to her surroundings, yet nothing immediately seemed amiss. The door itself looked ordinary, similar to countless others they had passed. But Thea couldn't shake off the feeling that something was different here.

Deciding that it was time to figure it out, in order to make sure that this wouldn't slow them down in the future, Thea resolved herself to check this door properly.

Retreating quietly, she gently set down her backpack with a soft thud.

She rummaged through it and retrieved the corner-peek band she had packed during the assessment prep sessions for exactly these kinds of situations. The device, equipped with a tiny camera, was perfect for safely scouting hidden dangers around corners.

With skilled hands, Thea manoeuvred the flexible band, sliding its slender camera through the narrow opening of the door. The live feed from the camera played out on her small handheld screen, revealing the unseen details of the room beyond.

Her eyes narrowed as she quickly spotted a small, black box positioned near the door's opening. It was entirely out of sight from the outside—something she hadn't encountered in any other building they had passed.

This *had* to be the source of her unease.

As she processed this discovery, Thea's mind clicked with realisation.

The door's angle was subtly off, just enough to be unnatural but not immediately noticeable. This slight deviation, which she had missed at first glance, now stood out glaringly against the backdrop of her previous encounters with the other doors.

The other doors had simply been left ajar, when the resident had left, followed by the natural winds and environment moving them to their final positions until Thea had found them. This door, however, had a sense of deliberate placement to it, that invited you to come inside.

It was likely that this discrepancy had been the cause of her unease. An instinctive feeling of "this isn't quite how it should be" that had ticked her off to the existence of the black box—whatever it might be.

Thea silently signalled her findings to the squad, indicating that this was another no-go area and they'd have to find another way around, which shouldn't prove too difficult.

Continuing to navigate through the maze-like network of alleys and abandoned apartments, Thea led the squad with heightened alertness, now even more keenly aware of the potential dangers lurking in the quiet cityscape. After a short while, she halted the team in a relatively secluded alley, a few buildings away from their last encounter with the suspicious black box.

Gathering the team around, she shared her observations and concerns.

"We need to stay on high alert," she began, her voice steady but urgent.

"I discovered what looked like a surveillance device or alarm. It wasn't a direct threat, but it's clear there are security measures in place here. We're likely dealing with a network of alarms or detectors, so make sure you step carefully. I can't look at absolutely everything, though I will try."

She scanned the faces of her teammates, ensuring they understood the gravity of the situation. "We'll maintain our current pace and caution for another hour or two, then find a suitable spot to rest and recover."

The squad members nodded in agreement, each understanding the importance of staying vigilant in such an unpredictable environment. Corvus, acknowledging Thea's leadership and expertise in urban navigation, voiced his support. "Good call. Moving through this deserted urban landscape is more taxing than it initially seemed. Thea, lead us to a secure location when it's time to rest. We're counting on your judgement."

With renewed focus, the squad continued their journey, each member acutely aware of the silent threats that might be hidden behind every door and corner...

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Two hours passed, each moment filled with careful navigation and tense close-calls as Thea led Alpha Squad through the labyrinth of the city's outskirts. Her choices in their route had been impeccable so far, circumventing numerous potential threats and alarms that could have compromised their mission. As far as they knew, their passing had gone entirely unnoticed so far.

Finally, as the day's tension began to weigh on them, Thea identified an ideal location for a much-needed rest.

It was a modestly sized building, tucked away between larger apartment complexes that conveniently obscured it from easy view. This building, more akin to a spacious family home than a typical apartment, seemed to offer the perfect blend of seclusion and comfort.

Thea paused to survey the area one final time, ensuring its suitability.

'Sight-lines are blocked on all sides. We have a lot of escape routes should anything attack us while we're there, with the myriad alleyways on each side providing some easy routes... The house itself is also already set up with multiple doors and tinted windows, on both the first and second floors, in case we get surprised. This should be perfect,' she mused, deeming it a safe haven, at least temporarily, in the midst of their demanding mission.

With a nod of approval, she signalled the squad to make their way inside, ready to provide a brief respite from the relentless tension of their infiltration mission. She slowly led them inside, very carefully.

Thea's meticulous inspection of the interior was thorough to a fault.

She employed her corner-peek band with precision, scanning every possible hiding place for traps or alarms. Her vigilance was unwavering, her determination to ensure the squad's safety evident in every careful step and glance.

However, as minutes stretched into what seemed like an eternity, Corvus intervened, his voice laced with both concern and fatigue. "Thea, that's enough. We've made this place as secure as we can. You need to rest now," he urged gently.

His words, spoken with a blend of caution and care, managed to break through the shield of intense focus that Thea had maintained since they had entered the outskirts.

At his words, a wave of exhaustion that she had been holding at bay crashed over her. The adrenaline that had fueled her vigilance dissipated, leaving her suddenly and overwhelmingly tired. She staggered, her body betraying her weariness, but Corvus was there, his reflexes sharp as ever. He caught her before she could fall, steadying her with a firm yet gentle grip.

"Come on, let's find you a comfortable spot to sit," he said, his voice softer now, a reflection of his own relief that they could finally take a moment to breathe. It was clear that Thea's relaxation had allowed him to let down his guard as well, if only slightly, in this brief respite from the relentless tension of their mission so far.

As Thea slumped into a surprisingly comfortable couch in what seemed to be a living room, her mind rapidly began to cloud over with fatigue. The reality of her exhaustion fully dawned on her in that moment of respite; she was so worn out that she could barely keep herself upright, even if she tried.

Reflecting further on the day's exhaustive events, she realised the full extent of her physical and mental exertion.

Starting with the morning's Alpha Squad assembly and social interactions, the day had unfolded into a relentless sequence of demanding activities. The vertical ascent, her harrowing fall and near escape from death, followed by the intense focus required during the infiltration and ambush, had all taken a significant toll. The subsequent hours of cautious navigation through the urban environment had only added to her depletion.

'*What a day...*' she thought wearily.

The realisation that such relentless days might become a norm in enemy territory weighed heavily on her. She acknowledged the need to be more judicious with her energy in the future. Rest opportunities like the current one might be rare, and she couldn't afford to deplete her reserves so rapidly again.

As she hazily made a mental note to keep this in mind for the following days, her eyes quickly fluttered shut as the exhaustion fully overtook her, putting her into a dreamless slumber...

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Thea stirred, gradually coming to her senses as Karania's gentle nudging nudged her awake.

Her mind, initially foggy with sleep, began to clear, though she was still enveloped in the residual warmth and comfort of deep rest. "Yeah... just a moment, Kara. I'm getting up..." she mumbled, her voice thick with sleepiness, a pleasant surprise at how well-rested her body felt.

The couch, an unexpected luxury provided through Corvus' help, offered a level of comfort that surpassed any makeshift bedding she had encountered during the assessment so far.

Karania's response, light and tinged with humour, jolted Thea back to reality. "Take over? Thea, it's already morning. Time to get moving." Her words, though spoken in jest, carried the weight of urgency.

Thea blinked away the remnants of sleep, still slightly disoriented, as she processed Karania's words. The comfort of the couch had seemingly allowed her a deeper rest than she had anticipated.

"Morning already?" she murmured, her voice tinged with disbelief. As she sat up, the evidence of the new day was undeniable. The gentle morning light filtered through the drawn curtains, casting a soft glow across the room and dispelling the last of her grogginess.

Confusion clouded her expression at the mention of missing her watch. "Wait, I didn't...?" Her brow furrowed, reflecting her puzzlement.

The watch schedule was a crucial part of their routine, particularly given the heightened risk of nighttime threats. Her role in the middle of the night, leveraging her exceptional Perception, was integral to their security. The thought of missing her watch, of potentially jeopardising the squad's safety, unsettled her deeply.

Karania's light-hearted tone didn't match the gravity of Thea's concerns.

The realisation that she had slept through her designated watch, skipping a crucial responsibility, jolted her fully awake. She quickly scanned her surroundings, seeking to gauge the situation and the squad's readiness to move out.

The sudden shift from deep rest to high alertness was disorienting, yet necessary. In their current environment, every moment counted, and Thea was keenly aware of the importance of maintaining vigilance and momentum, especially in an urban environment, where threats could appear at any time.

Karania, observing Thea's panicked scanning, gently placed a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay, Thea," she soothed, her voice a blend of reassurance and firmness. "We decided to let you sleep. You've been carrying the heaviest load ever since we got into the city, and we all agreed you needed the rest more than any of us."

Thea's eyes, still wide with a mix of alarm and confusion, met Karania's. The guilt that had surged within her began to ebb as she processed her friend's words. It was unlike her to

shirk responsibilities, but the understanding and concern in Karania's expression were undeniable.

Slowly, she nodded, the tension in her shoulders easing.

Thea's role as their navigator through the treacherous cityscape had indeed been taxing, both mentally and physically. Their gesture of allowing her additional rest wasn't just an act of kindness; it was a strategic decision to maintain their group's effectiveness—something that Thea herself would likely have decided on as well, were she in their position.

As she sat up, taking in the sight of her team members double-checking their gear and scanning the area for potential threats, a renewed sense of gratitude and responsibility filled her. With a deep breath, Thea pushed herself to her feet, grabbed a quick bite of her rations and geared up for the day.

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Around ten minutes later, Thea led the rest of the squad out of their hiding place.

The group moved with a silent, practised efficiency, their gear secured and weapons at the ready. The early morning light cast long shadows between the abandoned buildings, adding a strange, haunting beauty to their deserted surroundings.

The sight almost threatened to give Thea a severe case of homesickness, but she was fully focused on her task, which ultimately took priority in her mind: Making sure that Alpha Squad got through the outskirts alive.

She led them through narrow alleys, their footsteps echoing softly against the surrounding walls. They passed through abandoned apartment complexes, their empty windows like the hollow eyes of forgotten souls, staring down at them with a quiet judgement. Occasionally, they would sweep by a store that, just merely a week-or-so ago had likely been bustling with activity, but was now completely devoid of any signs of life.

Thea was acutely aware of the potential dangers lurking in such desolation as well, however.

Her eyes constantly scanned for any signs of movement around her, around the squad, in the windows of every building they passed and every alley they crossed. Her ears were similarly tuned to the slightest sound out of place, her Perception heightened to its absolute limits at all times.

The squad followed her lead, each member alert and ready to respond at a moment's notice.

It took them several more hours, following the path outlined by Desmond's drone and Thea's personal touch, before they approached the outskirts' edge towards the thoroughfare.

The landscape began to shift dramatically.

The cluttered, cramped residential buildings gradually gave way to an expansive industrial zone, dominated by massive structures whose purposes were varied and ominous.

The warehouses they first encountered were colossal, their metal exteriors weathered and beaten, bearing the scars of age. Row upon row of these giant storehouses stretched into the distance, their sheer size dwarfing the squad as they passed.

The silence around these buildings was profound, broken only by the occasional echo of their footsteps against the concrete as they continued to make their way closer towards the thoroughfare.

Beyond the warehouses lay barrack-like structures, lined up with an almost oppressive uniformity.

Each building was stark, utilitarian in design, with no ornamentation or colour, just the cold, hard lines of economic efficiency. The presence of unsettling watchtowers at strategic intervals, now abandoned and looming like silent sentinels, added a foreboding air to the area.

If Thea hadn't been intently focused on making sure they weren't running into an ambush, she would undoubtedly have thought about the implications of such towers existing in a common industrial zone.

But, ultimately, it was the factories that *truly* conveyed the scale of this more industrial sector.

Towering structures, each seemingly larger than the last, rose up like giants among the smaller buildings. Their enormous chimneys, some still faintly smudged with the remnants of smoke, pierced the skyline. The scale was not just in their size, but also in the realisation of their once-immense output, now silenced and still due to the war that the UHF had brought to Nova Tertius' doorstep.

The sheer vastness and desolation of the zone were downright overwhelming, creating a sense of insignificance and vulnerability in the squad as they moved through, but Thea tuned all of this out, as she was single-mindedly focused on one mission: Getting Alpha Squad to their mission objective safely...