

Arc 1 - Chapter 82 - Infiltration I

As Morin concluded his briefing, Field Squad, designated for the assault on "mark yellow," started to diverge from Sovereign Alpha and Arrow Squad. They headed eastward, moving stealthily towards their assigned location.

In the meantime, the remaining marines engaged in final checks and preparations. Thea, along with her squadmates, meticulously ensured that their gear was secured tightly, minimising any chance of noise.

Despite knowing that Viladia's stealth bubble would mask any sounds they made, Thea understood the importance of not overburdening the ability. Every extra noise they made could potentially strain the effectiveness of the stealth coverage.

Engrossed in securing her own equipment, Thea was momentarily distracted by a familiar voice addressing her. "You look a lot better, Patchwork. Glad to see you've been taken care of properly after that clusterfuck of a mission." The nickname and the voice instantly brought a smile to her face.

Looking up, she saw Morin standing before her.

His presence was a comforting reminder of the bond forged during their previous mission. Unable to conceal her joy, her smile widened as she met his gaze. "As am I. It's really good to see you again, Morin," she responded warmly.

Morin subtly leaned in, adopting a conspiratorial tone as he initiated the conversation he had specifically come over for.

He spoke in a hushed voice, ensuring their discussion remained private. "Listen, Thea. If you experience any of your unique premonitions, like you did with the Seeker minefield, make sure to let us know, okay? Both Arrow and Field have been briefed about having a burgeoning psyker in our ranks—although nobody but Johnsen, Viladia and I know who exactly. If something urgent comes up and you need to quickly communicate, just prefix or suffix your warning with 'Psy'. It's a simple code to signal an imminent psychic insight."

Thea, caught off guard by Morin's suggestion, hadn't anticipated being singled out for her psychic abilities. She recognized the practicality of having a rapid communication method for her premonitions but was concerned about the limitations of her powers, as they were primarily oriented towards personal foresight.

She was about to express this concern when Morin pre-empted her, his hands held up in a disarming way, "I am, of course, aware that your psychic abilities are more self-directed than that. *But* consider it a safety measure, in case you perceive any broader threats. It's always better to have a way to alert us, rather than regretting the lack of one later. Our top priority is to keep everyone safe, after all." He concluded the brief but significant conversation with an encouraging grin and a reassuring thumbs-up before he abruptly turned heel and walked away.

This exchange left Thea with a newfound sense of responsibility and inclusion.

She pondered Morin's words, realising that her Psychic Powers could serve a purpose *beyond* her personal ambitions. Until now, she had primarily viewed them as a tool, merely a means to climb the leaderboards.

However, Morin's perspective opened a new avenue of thought for her.

*'He's absolutely right. These abilities **could** be a valuable asset for the squad's safety and the success of our missions, if I learned how to use them in more broad strokes, not merely centred on myself,'* she reflected, contemplating the broader applications of her powers as she completed her final equipment checks.

Despite this newfound realisation, Thea remained cautious, *'I need to be **very** careful, though. I can't risk triggering that stupid psychic gate thing again... Maybe I should consult Viladia about it? She seems quite knowledgeable about Psykers and their capabilities.'*

Looking around for Viladia, Thea spotted her engaged in a quiet discussion with Morin and Medic Johnsen a short distance away. Not wanting to interrupt, she decided to postpone her inquiry. *'It looks like Viladia's occupied right now. I'll find another time to talk to her about it,'* Thea thought, refocusing on her immediate tasks.

She hoisted her backpack and meticulously checked her gear one last time, ensuring everything was secure and silent. Satisfied that she was fully prepared, she gave Corvus a subtle nod to indicate her readiness. Thea's thoughts continued to linger on the potential of her Psychic Powers, not just for personal gain but as a strategic tool for the well-being of her team, as she looked over the rest of the squad.

Karania and Isabella, having completed their preparations earlier, were already at the ready. They stood beside Corvus, engaging in light conversation to pass the time. Their relaxed demeanour and readiness contrasted with the hustle of some other squad members.

Lucas, in particular, was deeply engrossed in organising his gear.

Thea understood the reason behind his meticulousness. As the squad's defensive heavy, he not only carried the largest equipment but also the most varied assortment of items.

His role as the de facto pack-mule, bolstered by his unique physical constitution and a weight-reducing Ability, meant his backpack was brimming with supplies essential for the entire squad. Ensuring that every piece of equipment was secure and silent for their stealth mission was no small task, and Lucas was diligently making sure everything was in order.

Meanwhile, Desmond was engaged with one of his drones, capturing Thea's interest. She watched as he expertly opened up the drone and began tweaking its internal electronics.

The sight of Desmond confidently and precisely working on the sophisticated machinery in a field setting was unexpected for Thea. She had not anticipated that field modifications of new-tech like his drones were feasible, let alone that Desmond possessed such a comparatively high level of technical skill.

Observing his adept handling of the drone's intricate components, she reconsidered her previous estimation of his abilities.

'I didn't realise he was so proficient with his tech. Maybe I've been underestimating him,' Thea reflected, wondering how he had gotten to this level of expertise.

Ultimately, however, she was just trying to pass some time with these mental exercises. She was impatiently waiting for the mission to start...

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Just as it seemed that the rest of the squad was finishing up their work, Thea was suddenly inundated by a slew of System Notifications that startled her.

[System]: *Messages have been grouped by related content for streamlined reading. To revert to the raw format, Participant may adjust settings using the standard procedures.*

[System]: *You have received 13 Contribution Points, 25 System Merit and 53 System Credits. (Combat)*

[System]: *You have received 324 Contribution Points, 443 System Merit and 822 System Credits. (Objectives)*

[System]: *You have successfully completed Faction Mission "Assault on Nova Tertius".*

[System]: *You have received 150 Contribution Points, 185 System Merit and 415 System Credits. (Mission)*

[System]: *Meditation Focus has reached Level 4.*

[System]: *Inspect Target has reached Level 4.*

[System]: *Sky Step has reached Level 4.*

[System]: *Improved Sprint has reached Level 4.*

[System]: *Agile Stealth has reached Level 4.*

[System]: *Detect Weak Spots has reached Level 1.*

[System]: *Detect Weak Spots has reached Level 2.*

[System]: *Detect Weak Spots has reached Level 3.*

[System]: *You have reached Level 7.*

As Thea sifted through the list of notifications on her System interface, she pieced together the reason for their delayed arrival. *'It's been about two hours since we left the combat zone. That would explain why these are popping up now...'* she thought, making sense of the System's timing.

However, as she delved into the details of her notifications, a wave of irritation washed over her. *'My combat score took a hit because of those stupid duplicate enemies. That Faction Trait really messes up my whole score!'* She grumbled internally.

Thea briefly toyed with the idea of using her newly acquired Attribute Points to enhance her abilities before the mission as well. However, she quickly dismissed the thought. *'No, it's too risky. I can't afford to trigger that psychic gate thing again, not when we're this close to the enemy lines. And what if the enemy has a Psyker who can detect such surges? That would put everyone in danger unnecessarily and ruin everything.'*

Her thoughts then drifted to a puzzling observation. *'Why haven't I encountered any Psykers yet anyway? It stands to reason that some Tier 1s, particularly those closer to Tier 1 Prime, would have psychic abilities by now... But I guess they would try to keep hidden, especially from a sniper. But at least on the UHF side I would have expected to have met one by now, but no dice, huh? Are they really that rare...?'*

Thea felt a sense of satisfaction regarding the Ability experience she had gained over the last few days and this last mission in particular. Most of her Abilities had now reached Level 4, and a select few were tantalisingly close to achieving Level 5, with [Penetrative Shot] being the prime candidate. The prospect of unlocking the Level 5 alterations was an exciting one.

"Just a few more shots..." she whispered under her breath, a mischievous grin playing on her lips at the thought of further developing and specialising her Abilities.

Her reverie was broken as Lucas and Desmond finally signalled to Corvus that they too were prepared. With the entire squad now ready, they awaited the final cue from Field Squad.

All that was left now was for Field Squad to give the signal for their infiltration and the subsequent, *real* mission of their assessment to begin...

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After what felt like an interminable wait, the much-anticipated signal from Arrow Squad finally arrived, indicating that Field Squad had initiated the operation.

The moment marked the commencement of their operation. Sovereign Alpha quickly rallied, joining forces with Arrow Squad. They huddled close to Viladia, mindful to maintain a compact formation without crowding each other, in preparation for the activation of her Ability.

Thea watched intently as Viladia began the process, a sense of awe accompanying the familiar ritual. Viladia extended her arms on either side, her posture commanding and focused.

Then, with a dramatic gesture, she clenched her fists, as if grasping at unseen threads in the air. Thea observed the strain in Viladia's posture, visible even beneath her armour, creating the real impression that she was exerting force on the very fabric of reality itself.

She struggled for a while, as she pulled her fists closer and closer together, until finally, Viladia's fists met and the world around them abruptly transformed.

Their surroundings were enveloped in a hazy, water-like shimmer, a clear indicator of the potency of Viladia's Ability. The bubble-like veil that encompassed them muted the sounds of the Azure Forest, erased the natural scents, and dimmed the daylight into a mute dark-grey.

It was as if they had stepped into a separate realm, a place disconnected from the external world.

Thea immediately noticed that the stealth bubble Viladia conjured this time was distinct from the one used during the Strike One mission.

Its size had been substantially increased to encompass the larger group and their equipment, a necessary adjustment given the expanded number of individuals and the additional gear they carried.

However, it wasn't just the size that was different; the density of the bubble seemed significantly greater as well.

During the Strike One mission, the bubble had been slightly transparent, allowing Thea to perceive the outside world, though through a hazy veil. In contrast, the current bubble's opacity was so pronounced that it rendered the outside environment virtually invisible. The massive trees of the Azure Forest, which were ordinarily unmistakable due to their size, were now completely obscured by the dense haze of the bubble, merely appearing as dark specks behind a raging waterfall.

The other members of Sovereign Alpha were visibly taken aback by the bubble's interior, their expressions a mix of awe and surprise. They were clearly impressed by the potent manifestation of Viladia's Ability.

Thea's attention was drawn to Karania, whose face was a picture of unfiltered wonder, her mouth agape in an 'O' of amazement.

Thea couldn't suppress a smile at Karania's reaction. *'I must have had the same look of astonishment the first time I experienced Viladia's Ability,'* she thought, reminiscing about her own initial encounter with the bubble.

The experience of being within the confines of a Platinum-rarity Ability was something Thea and her squadmates could only marvel at in their current stage as marines. Being enveloped by Viladia's extraordinary stealth bubble felt almost magical, an eye-opening revelation of the heights they could potentially reach in their careers. The first hand exposure to such a high-level ability was not just impressive; it was inspiring.

Viladia, aware of the need to coordinate their movements, signalled the group with a silent "let's move" gesture. She began to advance slowly, setting a measured pace to allow the rest of the squads to adjust to the nuances of moving within the bubble.

The group's movement required careful synchronisation; they had to maintain a close proximity to Viladia to remain concealed by her Ability. Quick or erratic movements were not an option, as they risked straying from the protective veil.

As Thea carefully navigated within the confines of Viladia's bubble, she remained vigilant about the positioning of her squadmates, especially Lucas and Isabella. Their heavy- and ultra-heavy-type armours and large weapons necessitated extra caution to ensure no part of their gear inadvertently breached the veil's boundary. This aspect of their movement was critical; even a minor slip could compromise their stealth.

Thea's previous experience with Viladia's bubble gave her an edge in adapting to its nuances. She felt more at ease with the movement required within the bubble's confines, a

familiarity that helped guide her actions and allow her to spare some extra attention for her squad mates.

However, Arrow Squad, even more accustomed to operating alongside Viladia, displayed an even higher level of proficiency. Their ease of movement within the bubble was evident.

As Viladia's primary special-mission squad, they had likely completed countless operations under her stealthy protection. Their effortless synchronisation with Sovereign Alpha's movements, deftly adjusting to accommodate any missteps, was a testament to their extensive experience.

Observing Arrow Squad's seamless integration of Sovereign Alpha and expert manoeuvring within the veil, Thea found herself wondering about their extensive history of covert operations. *'Just how many Alpha Squads have they guided and protected like this during assessments in the past?'* she pondered absent-mindedly.

As they ventured beyond the Azure Forest's natural cover, the squad transitioned onto the barren no-man's-land that lay between the dense foliage and the imposing wall. The ground beneath their boots shifted to the ashen, sand-like texture of the ashen wasteland. This change in environment brought with it a palpable shift in the atmosphere within Viladia's veil.

The realisation that they were now fully exposed, with no natural cover to shield them, heightened the tension among the squad members. Their reliance on Viladia's stealth bubble for protection became more pronounced and crucial, it being the sole difference between life and death.

Even the seasoned veterans of Arrow Squad, who had forged a deep trust with Viladia through countless missions, displayed signs of heightened alertness. The unease of stepping into an open battlefield, heavily guarded by formidable defences, never seemed to diminish, no matter how experienced one was. The reliance on a System Ability for protection in such a vulnerable setting was inherently unsettling.

Thea found herself musing on the psychology of stealth and visibility, to try and lighten her own tension. *'Perhaps if the Ability rendered us translucent, instead of this strange bubble, it might ease the tension. In the arcade games back home, developers often used translucency to denote stealth, providing a visual cue of being hidden yet present. It always seemed to reduce anxiety about being exposed... I wonder if that's something Viladia can choose, somehow? I should ask her about it someday.'*

As they advanced, the initial tension within Viladia's bubble gradually stabilised as Sovereign Alpha adapted to the constraints and rhythm of moving under its cover.

Roughly three minutes into their trek, a subtle but significant interaction occurred.

Viladia signalled to Medic Johnsen, who promptly stepped forward. Closing his eyes, he placed a hand gently on her back.

Thea observed this exchange and pieced together the implications, having been on the receiving end of this interaction more than once already. *'She's already out of Focus...? I*

guess the massively increased size and density of the bubble makes this a lot more draining,' she surmised, concern for Viladia creeping into her thoughts.

Thea guessed that maintaining such a large veil over the expanse of the ashen wasteland and the subsequent climb up the wall would be a formidable challenge, especially if Viladia was already experiencing strain merely a couple dozen metres into their journey.

As the unit of marines pressed on toward the wall, enveloped in Viladia's veil, the atmosphere within the bubble gradually shifted.

The initial tension that had plateaued began to evolve into a heightened state of alertness.

Moving through the ashen wasteland, the marines were unable to see, hear, or smell anything beyond the bubble's confines. This sensory isolation began to take its toll, leading to occasional missteps among some members of Sovereign Alpha.

Thea, ever vigilant for exactly these missteps, quickly intervened to prevent these minor errors from escalating into major mishaps. Her focus was razor-sharp, her eyes constantly scanning her squadmates, ensuring they remained safe and undetected.

This hyper-awareness served a dual purpose for Thea.

Not only did it keep her squad secure, but it also helped her combat her own feelings of sensory deprivation. She recalled her previous experience under the veil, where extended exposure had left her struggling significantly with the lack of external stimuli.

This time, however, by keeping her attention firmly on her teammates, she found a way to mitigate the disorienting effects of the bubble.

As they continued their cautious approach, Viladia signalled once more to Johnsen, a clear indication that she required another Focus Link.

Thea, observing this exchange, felt a growing concern. *'Vi relied on just a single Focus Link during the entire Strike One mission, and now she's already needed two, just for this first part. And it's taking a toll on Medic Johnsen too,'* she noted with apprehension.

She watched Johnsen step back after linking with Viladia, allowing her to resume leading the unit. He then administered Focus Boosters to himself, a necessary measure to replenish his depleted resources.

Thea, having been part of a smaller-scale operation like this before, could see the strain the presence of Sovereign Alpha was placing on Arrow Squad during this particular operation.

Despite the additional burden, the members of Arrow Squad showed no signs of hesitation or complaint. They carried out their duties with unwavering dedication, fully committed to the success of the mission.

This realisation sparked a sense of urgency in Thea. *'We need to grow stronger, and quickly. Relying this much on others doesn't sit well with me at all. I can't stand feeling like dead-weight... And I bet the rest are thinking the same thing,'* she thought, the discomfort of

being overly dependent fueling her determination. She was burning to get to show off her skills again and shoot some Stellar Republic soldiers, to prove that she deserved to be here as part of the elite squads.

Time seemed to stretch endlessly as they made their way towards the wall, each step measured and cautious. Eventually, Viladia signalled a halt, raising a closed fist.

Thea, who hadn't even realised she was holding her breath in tense anticipation, exhaled deeply at the sight. The massive rock-crete wall loomed before them, its imposing structure momentarily breaking through the confines of the veil.

Almost instantly, Morin, Moira, and Crusher sprang into action.

They confidently took a few steps up the wall, now moving perpendicular to the ground in a display of adept use of the GravS. Thea watched in awe as they effortlessly defied gravity, ascending the wall with practised ease a couple of metres, as far up as they could go, without leaving the confines of the bubble.

Morin then gestured to Corvus, indicating it was time for the first group from Sovereign Alpha to ascend. This group consisted of Isabella, Lucas, and Thea.

Under normal circumstances, Thea would have been part of the second group, but the decision to place her in the advancing group was strategic. Her potential for psychic precognition, despite the low probability of it manifesting in a timely and useful manner, was a tactical advantage they couldn't overlook.

Karania, Desmond, and Corvus would follow them, ensuring the team remained balanced and ready to adapt to any unforeseen challenges. Thea understood the rationale behind this arrangement and Morin's philosophy resonated with her in this moment: It was always preferable to attempt to tip the odds in one's favour, rather than resigning to potential failure.

This proactive approach, seeking even the slightest edge, was a mindset Thea appreciated and wanted to include in her own more and more, going forward. It was the mindset of somebody that had walked the path of an elite for a while now; somebody worthy of imitation.

Perched high on the wall, having moved up almost immediately alongside the members of Arrow Squad, Thea observed as Lucas and Isabella momentarily grappled with their initial reluctance to trust the GravS fully.

However, their resolve quickly solidified, and they confidently stepped onto the wall, ascending to join Thea and the already positioned members of Arrow Squad.

In a discreet gesture meant only for Lucas and Isabella, Thea gave a subtle thumbs-up, her pride in their rapid adaptation and courage clear, even if her face was obscured. She hoped her gesture would reassure and encourage them, a silent commendation for how swiftly they had overcome their earlier apprehensions.

Their progress was a clear indication that the earlier emergency training with the GravS was paying massive dividends already.

Following their lead, the remaining members of the unit began their ascent, with Viladia leading the second group. As she moved upwards, the protective bubble moved with her, enveloping the climbers in its hazy shield.

Soon, all the marines assigned to the mission were aligned vertically against the Stellar Republic's formidable wall, defying gravity with their GravS.

Thea mentally calculated the challenges ahead. '*We have about 200 metres of vertical ascent,*' she estimated, cautiously advancing upwards. Her focus was split between her ascent and keeping a watchful eye on her unit, ensuring everyone's safety as they climbed as much as she could.

Ahead, Isabella and Lucas formed a protective barrier with their heavily armoured bodies, with Lucas bracing his Stalwart shield overhead to guard against any unexpected threats from above. Nearby, Crusher mirrored his actions, creating an overlapping shield formation above Viladia.

This strategic placement ensured that Viladia, central to the success of their stealth approach, was doubly protected.

As they continued the vertical climb, Thea found the experience more challenging than she had anticipated. The unusual orientation, combined with the sensory isolation inside Viladia's bubble, made it difficult to gauge their progress.

The lack of visual and auditory feedback from the outside world created a disconcerting sense of stagnation, as if they were moving without actually getting anywhere. This unique combination of factors was proving to be a significant mental strain for Thea.

'I really wish I had some way to know how much further we have to go until we reach the top—' Her train of thought was abruptly shattered by a sudden clenching in her chest, coupled with a jarring noise.

CLUNK.

The loud sound of a heavy metal object impacting Lucas' Stalwart shield reverberated through the bubble, startling Thea. The noise was mere metres above her, a stark reminder of the dangers they faced even under the veil of stealth. The suddenness of the sound in the otherwise muted environment of the bubble was especially alarming.

The object that had struck Lucas' Stalwart shield bounced downwards, and as it descended towards Thea, her eyes widened in horror. The falling object was not just debris, but the body of a dead Stellar Republic soldier, fully armoured and now hurtling straight towards her.

The realisation hit her with a jolt of fear. Thea's mind raced.

There was no time to move out of the path of the descending body.

Acting on instinct, she crouched as close to the wall as possible, trying to make herself as small as she could. Despite her efforts, the heavy body of the soldier, having fallen from a

height of 200 metres and only slightly slowed by its collision with the Stalwart, slammed into her with brutal force.

The impact was jarring and disorienting.

Thea felt the crushing weight of the soldier's armour against her body, and a sharp pain shot through her torso, just as the collision disrupted the GravS' hold on her.

The planet's gravity instantly reclaimed her, pulling her downwards. Simultaneously, her psychic premonition flared even higher, a visceral warning of imminent danger that only added to the chaos of the moment.

Struggling against the disorienting mix of pain, severe psychic distress and the feeling of freely falling to an inevitable death, Thea was overwhelmed. Unable to think properly, she resorted to the only thing she instinctively knew that could grant her some extra time.

'Sensory Overdrive.'