

## Arc 1 - Chapter 111 - Reunion

Arriving at the eastern front with the rest of the day's reinforcements, Thea and Sovereign Alpha disembarked from the Sidoreno transporter that had delivered them.

Gratefully, the journey had been free of any psychic nightmares, a small mercy she didn't overlook as she shouldered her gear and led her squad into the dim, cramped underground tunnels leading to the frontline.

It had only been a few days since their last mission here, yet it felt like a lifetime had passed since she last navigated these oppressive tunnels under the ashen wastelands fronting the Stellar Republic's Wall.

In truth, she didn't want to be here.

None of Alpha Squad wanted to be here, to be precise.

Throughout the redeployment, the mood had been sombre; not a single Marine in the transporter had anything positive to say about the eastern front, where the UHF's forces continued to clash violently against the unyielding fortifications of the Wall.

Some Marines, already on their third stint at the Wall, expressed fear of exhausting their allowed lives in the assessment. Others simply hoped for less perilous assignments away from the relentless artillery barrages that kept hammering the frontlines since the first day.

Similar sentiments resonated within Thea and her team as well.

The initial assault on the Wall had left deep imprints in their minds, especially the IgT-artillery bombardment that had followed the UHF's initial push and the destruction of some of the massive anti-armour cannons through Thea and the specialised groups of heavies that had gone around to try and keep the UHF AD from losing too many pieces of armour.

Karania's injuries from that day were a constant and very real reminder—her arm now replaced with a cybernetic prosthetic after being horrifically burned off. Isabella, Desmond, and Lucas had all perished directly due to the shelling as well.

Thea's thoughts darkened with the memory, *'I really hope they don't have any more of that apocalyptic stuff...'*

Realising that she had no idea where Corporal Panteol might be situated, Thea grabbed the first Marine she spotted who seemed to know their way around the tunnels.

"Marine, where can I find Corporal Panteol?" she asked, her voice firm but polite.

The Marine, caught off guard, hesitated before answering, "Uhh... I'd guess one of the command rooms...? Follow tunnel F17 until you start seeing the L-numbered tunnels, then ask around. There should be command rooms nearby. Sorry I can't be more specific." His eyes darted around, clearly relieved when Thea released him from further questioning.

With a nod, she thanked him and led Alpha Squad down tunnel F17, her strides quickening with each step. The sounds of boots against the compacted mud, the hum of distant battle and countless busy Marines filled the air.

A moment later, she heard rapid footsteps catching up to her from behind.

It was Karania, her voice light and teasing. "Since when did you become so assertive, Thea? I thought socialising wasn't your strong suit," she joked.

Thea felt a rush of warmth to her cheeks. The blush spread like wildfire, but she refused to let it show in her voice. "I can get things done when I need to, Kara. Thanks for the vote of confidence," she replied with a forced casualness, though her embarrassment was clear.

She heard muffled laughter from behind, clearly from Isabella and Karania, their playful teasing nearly making her falter in her brisk stride. But she kept moving, deciding against reacting further. *'Don't react, Thea. It'll only give 'em more satisfaction,'* she thought, a mix of annoyance and amusement swirling in her mind.

Her internal monologue churned with additional defensiveness as she pressed forward, *'Also, I can **totally** be assertive when I know what I need to do! It's not like I **can't** talk to people at all. They just never see the instances when I do it right!'*

Despite her internal pep talk, she knew deep down that assertiveness wasn't her strong suit and Karania's words weren't exactly wrong.

But she was learning. Or so she was hoping, at least...

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Following the marine's advice, Thea led her squad deeper into the labyrinth of tunnels, navigating the network of intersecting corridors until they arrived in the area marked with L-numbered tunnels.

Spotting another marine, she didn't hesitate to pull them in.

"Could you point us to Corporal Panteol?" she asked immediately.

"Ehh... He's likely in the usual spot? Probably command room C13 down L5. If he's not there, your guess is as good as mine," the marine replied with a shrug.

As they continued, Thea couldn't help but give Karania and Isabella a smug look, pleased with her navigational success. Their raised eyebrows and mischievous giggles didn't dampen her spirits—a win was a win in her book.

Their approach to the command rooms was met with heightened security.

The presence of heavily armed marines and imposing auto-turrets at each intersection underscored the importance of this area. Each time they were stopped, Thea presented Staff-Sergeant Venn's orders, and they were allowed to proceed without further issue.

Finally, they reached room C13.

As they approached, the blast doors swooshed open and they found Corporal Panteol busily commanding aide's and marines around. As he heard the door open, he turned around to them and his expression broke into a warm, welcoming smile. "Well, if it isn't Sovereign Alpha—or the majority thereof. It's been a while!" he exclaimed.

"It has indeed. I hope things have been smoother since our last encounter?" Thea responded, pushing herself to engage in a bit of light conversation. This was her moment to prove she could handle social interactions just as well as the rest of them.

Panteol grimaced slightly, recalling their last disastrous mission. "Oof, let's just say it *had* to have gone better. That first day was straight out of a nightmare scenario. If every mission was like that, we'd all have been Zero'ed out by now," he said, managing a rueful laugh.

He shook off the unsettling memories with a visible shudder before his expression softened, looking directly at Thea. "Regardless of all that, I've heard that you guys have continued to excel; *really* impressive work. I'm excited to see how far you'll go in this assessment and beyond. Staff-Sergeant Venn is very impressed with you all, last I heard."

Thea and her squad exchanged quick, surprised glances—news of their commendation from the Staff-Sergeant, who ranked as the second-highest officer they were aware of in the assessment, was both unexpected and highly encouraging.

"Now, go collect your last squad member; we're moving out soon. Keep an eye on your comms; a major order is coming through in the next few hours," Panteol continued, his smile taking on a somewhat predatory edge. "You're going to be treated to some VIP seats to witness some of the UHF's might... I hope you're ready."

With that vaguely ominous statement, he waved them off, turning back to his command duties, barking orders and coordinating with aides and other marines.

Dismissed and slightly stunned by the rapid change of pace, Thea led the squad out of the command room.

Once outside, she turned to her team, uncertainty clear in her tone. "So... we need to find Corvus, right?" she asked, the enormity of their task dawning on her. With tens of thousands of marines stationed at the eastern front, locating any particular one seemed beyond daunting; downright impossible.

"Sounded like it," Isabella replied with a shrug that was mirrored by Lucas and Desmond as well. "Maybe we could ask—"

In that moment, Thea's comm device interrupted with a chime that caught everyone's attention. Opening the new transmission, she couldn't hide a smile.

[=== Orders: Sovereign Alpha 01 ===]

[Objective: Fully reinforce the squad in preparation for the Major Order.]

[Additional Intel: Private Sylarion is stationed in zone B-R-47.]

[=== Signed: Corporal Panteol ===]

“I know where he should be, let’s go,” Thea announced briskly before immediately starting to move towards the zone mentioned in the orders. This time around, she wouldn’t need to ask any random marines for directions either, as zones were designated on the tunnels themselves, making for an easy trek through the UHF’s underground base...

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Navigating to zone B-R-47 was a journey that took over an hour, traversing the expansive underground network that the UHF had constructed beneath the desolate, ashen wasteland.

Thea and her squad were astounded by the scale of the tunnel system, which far exceeded anything they had anticipated.

Periodically, they paused to consult their interfaces, ensuring they hadn’t veered off course or started circling back on themselves. Surprisingly, however, they found they had maintained nearly a direct path from the command room to their intended destination.

“This is insane... It’s only been a week. How could they possibly have built all this?” Desmond marvelled at some point during their journey, his sentiment echoed by the rest of the squad.

They had all witnessed the efficiency of the UHF’s special tunnelling squads during the initial assault on the Wall, but the extent of the organised, sophisticated tunnelling that had continued afterward was something none of them had truly imagined possible.

An entire underground base had been established right beneath the main defensive line of the Stellar Republic.

“It must be some sort of System wizardry... Even with vehicles, excavating this much space in such a short time would normally be impossible, especially given the geographic constraints,” Lucas added, equally impressed.

By the time they had finally reached the correct zone and made some headway into figuring out where Corvus might be located, which had involved grabbing more random passerby for directions by Thea; much to her chagrin, they had shared quite a few thoughts on the whole underground base matter.

The consensus they had come to was simple: Allbright System wizardry.

Even Karania, universally acknowledged as the brightest mind among them, struggled to rationalise the construction of the vast tunnel network without invoking some sort of extraordinary, almost magical method to shift the immense volumes of dirt, stone, and gravel.

“It’s truly impressive,” she eventually conceded. “I had never even envisioned the System’s capabilities extending to something as—well, ‘mundane’ as tunnel digging. When you think about the ultimate warrior, you don’t usually picture someone wielding a shovel. But now, seeing and traversing these tunnels, I can’t overlook the tremendous utility that rapid excavation provides. It might be worth exploring further for some of us in the squad. Having

the ability to quickly establish a defensible position could be a game-changer in environments where we're not confined to urban combat.”

Her insights resonated well with everyone, sparking a collective agreement across the squad.

They resolved to revisit this discussion post-assessment, considering the potential benefits of integrating more utility-focused Abilities—similar to those utilised by the digging squads—into their arsenal if there were slots left over, instead of opting for suboptimal combat skills that offered only marginal enhancements at best.

After several more rounds of inquiring and attempting to use their squad comms—a suggestion from Desmond, who reasoned that Corvus should still be accessible since they hadn't changed their call signs in the assessment so far—they finally received a response from their missing squad leader.

“I can't say I'm particularly unhappy to hear y'all's voices, but at the same time... Probably means we didn't quite get the mission done, huh?” Corvus' voice crackled through the squad comms, prompting a series of sheepish grins among the squad members.

The plan had initially been straightforward: Regroup within the city once the UHF had breached the Wall, a task contingent on disabling the enemy control stations with Corvus embedded in the main army.

The very fact that they were reaching out like this, in the middle of the underground tunnels in front of the Wall, was a stark indicator that their mission hadn't *quite* gone as planned.

Taking a deep breath and stepping into her role as the leader in Corvus' absence, Thea responded, “Yeah... I'm really sorry, Corvus. We didn't manage to take down any of the control stations. The one we targeted was heavily fortified; we encountered a pair of Psykers who nearly decimated us—we managed to eliminate them, but barely. We were in no condition to proceed after that engagement.”

There was a brief pause, and then she hastened to add, “Oh, and the last known enemy Ace was there too. But that's not really on us. Arrow Squad encountered him and was wiped out almost instantly. It turned into a complete disaster, honestly...”

“No need to apologise, Thea. Don't feel bad; I'm sure you all did your best. I was just making a joke,” came Corvus' response through the comm, his voice tinged with a tinge of sympathy that even Thea could discern. “We definitely bit off more than we could chew with this mission. I'm in chamber B-R-C143; just follow tunnel BR6 until you reach the chambers, then follow the RC numbers until you get here. I can't wait to catch up and hear what you guys have been up to!”

With uplifted spirits, the squad nodded to one another, their faces lit with smiles as they prepared to move out. Thea, feeling a mix of relief and anticipation, led the way with renewed vigour.

Reuniting Sovereign Alpha was the immediate goal, and for Thea, it also meant she could relinquish the heavy mantle of leadership she had been carrying.

Despite the undeniable growth she had experienced as a temporary leader, she couldn't deny the relief she felt at the thought of returning to her role as the scout/sniper of the group, where she felt most at home.

Spurred on by the thought of finally getting rid of the additional weight on her shoulders, Thea was leading the rest of the squad with a brisk pace through the tunnels, following Corvus' directions in order to reunite the whole squad...

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Once they managed to meet up, there was a flurry of hugs and quick pats on the back.

The squad immediately found a quiet corner to settle into, quickly spiralling into a detailed exchange of their separate adventures since splitting up. The conversation lasted about an hour, with Corvus deeply engaged, frequently interjecting to ask for more details or to clarify points, and repeatedly praising the squad for their courage and quick thinking.

"I honestly didn't know what to expect with the Caliburn, I'll admit," Corvus started, sharing his own experiences. "I'd seen Thea use it a couple of times, but holding it myself was... something else. It's a mix of terror and thrill that's very hard to explain. The sheer power of that weapon is staggering."

Thea nodded in agreement, feeling a familiar thrill at the memory of using the weapon.

Even after numerous uses, the sensation of firing the Caliburn still sent chills through her, each and every time.

"It's interesting to hear about the Caliburn's final moments; I honestly don't remember much from the end of that chase. I was worried it might have been lost," Corvus continued, giving Thea a sideways glance.

She awkwardly looked away, guilt flickering over her face.

She had advised him to keep firing until the end, to ensure the enemy couldn't capture the weapon, but she hadn't actually clarified the potential consequences of overloading the gun to him whatsoever.

"Now that I know what it does, I might have to keep a tighter leash on our rabid sniper here," Corvus joked, his eyes twinkling with amusement as he teased Thea.

Her head whipped around, her expression a mix of shock and indignation.

His comment drew a burst of laughter from the rest of the squad, and Corvus, grinning widely, added, "Just kidding, of course. You handle your powerful, explodey toys just fine, Thea. Just try not to blow us up, okay?"

With a playful pout after being the subject of the joke and a nod, Thea listened as Corvus continued his story.

"After I respawned in the pod, it's mostly been mundane here, no grand heroics like you guys," he shrugged. "I was reassigned to the eastern front, as you see, and have been here with the other marines, slowly making progress on the Wall. We've made some decent headway in the last couple of days, thanks to some of the control stations finally being taken out."

He then turned to Thea, curiosity piqued, "You mentioned a major order coming through soon? What's that about?"

Thea, lacking more specific details, replied with a shrug, "Corporal Panteol hinted at a major order and mentioned something about us getting VIP seats to witness 'the might of the UHF,' whatever that means."

The squad mulled over this vague snippet of information, the conversation momentarily dipping into silence before Corvus spoke up again, "Well, whatever it is, we'll find out soon enough. On a different note, I found out something interesting when I used the Caliburn: The System actually lets you know if you've done something that would have earned a higher Accomplishment, but couldn't due to DDS limitations."

His face showed a mix of amusement and disappointment as he continued, "When I checked my notifications after waking up, it said I should've earned a Platinum-ranked Accomplishment, but because of DDS restrictions, it was downgraded to Gold."

Despite the downgrade to a Gold-ranked Accomplishment, Corvus aimed to lighten the atmosphere, "Still got a Gold, which isn't bad. It keeps me in the game along with the rest of you and your Gold Accomplishments from the mission, right?"

He chuckled to himself, easing the tension further; losing out on a Platinum-ranked Accomplishment was a big sting, even for those that hadn't even been in the running to get it.

It would have been a massive get for the squad as a whole to have someone with a Platinum-ranked Ability, after all. "Honestly, I didn't expect us all to make out like bandits like this. Getting Gold ranks all around seemed unlikely, but hey, I'm certainly not complaining!"

The squad shared a moment of collective pride, their hard-earned Gold Accomplishments a point of celebration. The reunion of Alpha Squad reignited their camaraderie, and Corvus's knack for engaging everyone ensured that no one lingered on their recent ordeals for too long—even Thea, despite her best attempts at sulking in a corner about not being able to keep her promise to him.

However, about an hour into their low-key celebration—marked by the clinking of soft drink cans rather than alcoholic toasts due to front-line regulations—their comms buzzed simultaneously with a new directive.

Catching each other's glances, they all recognized the signal: the anticipated major order had arrived.

"Well... Looks like we're back on," Corvus announced, half-joking yet with a trace of command in his tone. "Thea, I'll be taking back the squad leader role, if that's alright?"

“Oh, please do!” Thea exclaimed, her relief palpable. The rest of the squad couldn't help but laugh at her dramatic plea. “Never again,” she added emphatically. “Next time, I might just blow myself up instead. No more leading for me!”

Corvus smiled as he stood, shouldering his gear.

“Everyone ready?” he asked, scanning the group. Seeing their affirmative nods, he declared, “Then let's move out, Alpha Squad...!”

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Two hours later, Alpha Squad was at the forefront of a formidable column of marines and armoured vehicles, pushing through the dense forest just outside the influence of the Stellar Republic's SADD field.

They were part of a major strategic shift—their orders, monumental in scope, had come through clear and urgent.

Nearly 90% of the forces stationed at the eastern front, including Alpha Squad, had been commanded to join the main army concentrated at the central battlefield.

The remaining 10% were tasked with creating diversions—using up the leftover ordnance and engaging in skirmishes at the Wall to draw attention and cover the massive troop movements.

Despite their efforts to conceal the manoeuvre, the scale of the redeployment was too vast to go unnoticed.

It was imminently clear for everyone: The UHF was orchestrating a decisive, all-out assault aimed at the central section of the Wall, signalling what could be the culminating offensive in this prolonged engagement.

As they approached the treeline marking the edge of the central battlefield, Thea paused to don her full-face mask, bracing herself against the overwhelming stench of gunpowder, scorched ozone, and the unmistakable smell of molten flesh mingling with the decay of countless fallen bodies.

The air was thick, laden with the acrid fumes of war that even their distance from the main battlefield couldn't completely keep at bay.

Stepping further beyond the shelter of the trees, the entire squad and a large section of the column came to a stunned halt, caught off guard by the harrowing vista that unfolded before them.

Positioned on a slight elevation, they looked down upon the expansive planes that stretched out before the central segment of the Wall. The view provided them with a stark perspective of the battlefield that had been the scene of relentless clashes since the UHF's initial landing.

What lay before them was a landscape so ravaged by war it was beyond comprehension.



The lush green plains that once bordered the outskirts of Nova Tertius had been utterly transformed; charred to a stark blackness by the unending conflict. The earth itself bore the scars of the warfare, pockmarked with a network of craters, trenches, and fissures—wounds inflicted by heavy artillery and explosive ordnance that had torn through the terrain.

Thea regretfully observed the landscape spread out before them, wishing she could erase the gruesome images from her memory immediately.

Her previous experiences on the eastern front, daunting as they had been, hadn't prepared her for the sheer scale of destruction that lay before her eyes now.

While the scarring of the land was daunting, it was the staggering loss of life that was unmistakably evident across the battlefield, that truly burned itself into her mind.

Not only were the remnants of military hardware scattered around—burnt-out husks of tanks, transporters, and artillery—but more horrific were the makeshift mountains of deceased combatants.

These macabre mounds were likely constructed in a desperate bid to clear the trenches, pathways for armour and makeshift fortifications, and minimise the spread of disease, a grim yet practical measure in the chaos of war.

The terrain was sodden with a gruesome sludge, a mixture of soil and red-brown human remains, trampled and degraded to the point of being unrecognisable. This viscous mud clung to everything and the continuous rotting produced an ever-present mixture of steam-like gas that hung slightly above the entire battlefield.

As the pervasive stench of decay became increasingly difficult to ignore, Thea realised the magnitude of what they were stepping into. The central battlefield was not a strategic location for military engagements; it had simply become a massive, open-air tomb.

The scope of death here dwarfed anything they had seen on the eastern front and anything that Thea could even have fathomed. The indiscriminate IgT-artillery bombardment there paled in comparison to the wholesale slaughter that had occurred here.

Even from her limited vantage point, Thea could see literal scores of body piles, each containing the remains of hundreds, or more than likely thousands. The sheer number of fallen was overwhelming, and she found herself grappling with the scale of human loss, each pile a sombre marker of lives abruptly ended in the meatgrinder of war.

As they stepped out of the protective cover of the forest, the full brunt of the battlefield's stench hit them like a physical force. Several marines around them retched, overwhelmed by the sudden onslaught of decay no longer tempered by the forest's greenery.

Thea was grateful for her full-face mask's filters, cranked to their maximum setting, though they struggled against the pervasive odour. Despite the filtration, she felt her stomach churn, threatening to expel even the mild soft drink she had earlier.

"I guess... We got lucky with the eastern front, huh?" Desmond's voice broke through the uneasy silence as they trudged forward into the devastated landscape. Their orders were clear: move forward and link up with the main army, a couple of kilometres to the northwest.

"Never thought I'd say that... but yeah. The IgT-shelling was a mercy, compared to... Whatever this is," Karania added, sweeping her cybernetic arm to encompass the devastation that surrounded them on every side.

With every step, their boots made sickening squelches as they sank into the mire of decayed remains and mud. The sound made conversation nearly impossible, and everyone focused on the task of keeping their composure amidst the burgeoning horror around them.

Thea's mind raced as they marched, *'Just a couple more kilometres and we'll reach the active part of the battlefield... What kind of apocalyptic warfare is happening out there, to leave an area in such a state...?'*

Anxiety and fear gnawed at her as she pondered the horrors that awaited them further ahead.

Regardless of their overall feelings however, their order were clear:

Link with the main army and push through into Nova Tertius...