

Arc 1 - Chapter 77 - Alpha Squads

As they set out from the barracks, Sovereign Alpha directed their steps towards the north-eastern expanse of the forward operating base. The decision was unanimous: They would don their full gear, masks, and helmets, aiming to project an image of unyielding strength and resolve. It was a moment to make an impression, a brief opportunity among the tremors of all-out war to flaunt their preparedness and prowess in a safe environment.

Thea, shrouded in her Spectre armour, felt a wave of confidence wash over her.

The hood concealed her features, casting a shadow over her face, further obscured by the full-mask. At Karania's suggestion, she had set the visor to transparent, allowing her self-illuminating eyes to gleam from the depths of her hood.

Karania had a point—the eerie glow of her eyes, peeking out from the shadows, added an extra layer of intimidation to her already formidable appearance.

'That dramatic entrance during the assessment prep really did leave an impact,' Thea mused internally, a small smirk playing on her lips beneath the mask.

The memory of surprising her squad with her complete gear still brought her a sense of satisfaction. Now, if she could evoke even a sliver of that awe in the other Alpha Squads, it would be a gratifying bonus to their display of unity and force.

As they made their way across the FOB, Lucas assumed the role of the squad's pack mule, a duty he volunteered for with a mix of earnestness and a desire to flaunt his strength.

Clad in his imposing ultra-heavy armour, he was an extraordinary spectacle, effortlessly bearing the collective weight of over 250 kilograms of backpacks and equipment. In his hands, he nonchalantly carried his Havoc and Stalwart, walking with a casual ease that belied the massive load he carried.

To the seasoned marines of the UHF, familiar with the enhanced capabilities granted by the Allbright System, Lucas's feat might seem unremarkable, an expected display within the realm of their heightened physical attributes. Many of them, regardless of whether they were outfitted in heavy or medium armour, could likely achieve vaguely similar feats due to their enhanced Strength.

However, to the members of the other Alpha Squads, freshly integrated into the System barely two weeks prior, much like Sovereign Alpha, Lucas's display of raw physical power was bound to be a source of awe and inspiration. For these new recruits, witnessing such a demonstration served as a potent reminder of the extraordinary capabilities they were now part of and the incredible potential that lay within their grasp.

Among the members of Sovereign Alpha, it was Karania who truly stood out with her exceptional ensemble. Embracing her [Surgeon's Toolkit], she had transformed her remaining organic hand into a fearsome array of elongated, razor-sharp bone-scalpels.

The transformation was so striking that her hand resembled the lethal claws of a creature from the darkest voids of space more than any medical instrument. The bone-scalpels extended menacingly, prioritising length and intimidating thickness over the precision and subtlety typically associated with surgical tools.

Karania, with her characteristic blend of humour and audacity, had whimsically christened this fearsome transformation "War-Kara." It was a moniker that Thea found utterly fitting, considering the formidable and slightly terrifying appearance Karania now presented.

Thea couldn't help but feel a twinge of wariness as she recalled the sheer lethality of Karania's bone-scalpels, having experienced their extreme sharpness and formidable power firsthand during their Practical spar.

To Thea, these menacing claws were far from a mere jest; they were a potent and very real threat to anyone unfortunate enough to incur Karania's wrath.

Adding to the daunting appearance, Karania had artistically utilised her blood-related Abilities to coat the bone-scalpels in a chilling display of dried, caked blood. This macabre addition only served to enhance the already unhinged and fearsome aspect of her appearance.

Thea found herself somewhat surprised at Corvus's acquiescence to their squad's dramatic show of force within the FOB. It seemed he was intent on leaving a lasting impression on the other Alpha Squads, revealing a competitive side Thea hadn't quite anticipated.

'Perhaps,' she considered, 'being part of an Alpha Squad naturally breeds a sense of rivalry and competitiveness. Maybe it's an inherent trait in all of us here, something that drives us to constantly push our limits.'

—

Upon reaching the staging ground for the infiltration mission, Thea's gaze quickly shifted to the squad already assembled and waiting. It was apparent that Sovereign Alpha wasn't the first to arrive. The other squad, mirroring their own, consisted of a familiar mix: two heavies, three marines in medium armour, and a single lightly armoured individual.

Thea's attention was particularly drawn to the lightly armoured marine, who she surmised was probably her counterpart in what appeared to be one of the other Alpha Squads. Her eyes narrowed as she carefully observed the marine, analysing their stance, equipment, and overall demeanour.

The lightly armoured marine of the other Alpha Squad wore a distinct T1 armour.

Unlike Thea's Spectre, this armour was slightly bulkier, featuring a more angular design that allowed for denser armour plates while still maintaining a sleek silhouette. It struck a balance between agility and protection, clearly designed for a soldier who valued mobility but didn't want to sacrifice defence entirely.

Held in the marine's grip was a ballistic-type sniper rifle, one that Thea recognized from her visit to Bullseye's Rifle. It was the T1 "Lawbreaker," a model she had found particularly intriguing.

The Lawbreaker was a formidable heavy sniper rifle, known for its powerful shots.

It eschewed the rapid-fire capability of more DMR-style rifles like the Gram in favour of greater power per shot, albeit with a significant cycle time between each firing. It was a weapon that demanded exceptional precision and patience, traits that Thea respected in a fellow sniper.

She had considered the Lawbreaker herself as an alternative to her Caliburn during her shopping trip, weighing it as an option if she had chosen to use her Tier-up voucher for her armour or main weapon instead. Observing the marine's choice, Thea couldn't help but feel a sense of respect. The marine's choice to wield such a potent yet demanding weapon spoke of supreme confidence in their own skill.

They moved with a certain poise and a swivelling head that suggested a keen awareness of their surroundings, something that was downright essential for a sniper.

The choice of wielding the Lawbreaker, coupled with the angular T1 armour, painted a picture of a sniper who was prepared to hold their ground and deliver devastating shots from a distance, even if they, themselves, ended up being under fire.

'So they're specialised for counter-sniping and assassination, I'd assume... With those thicker plates on their armour, they could likely deflect some serious gunfire at extreme distances; something my Spectre would definitely not be able to handle,' Thea mused as she finished her customary analysis of her first direct-peer.

As Thea's gaze shifted from the sniper, she took in the rest of the squad, noting their armour and equipment choices with a keen tactical eye.

The squad's two heavies were imposing figures whose armour choices surprised Thea, as they were both clad in T1 Ultra-Heavy Armor, similar to Lucas.

Their armours were unmistakably modified with omni-plating, a versatile choice suitable for all combat scenarios. One heavy wielded a T1 ballistic minigun, very akin to Isabella's own Devastator, its multiple barrels a promise of relentless firepower and destruction. It was likely chambered in a slightly smaller calibre, however, as the barrels were decidedly less chunky than the ones Thea could see on Isabella's weapon.

The other heavy in the squad, brandishing a T1 rocket launcher, exuded a sense of danger that was palpable even from a distance. This weapon, known for its devastating impact against armoured targets, was not something to be taken lightly.

The marine also had a standard AR303 assault rifle casually slung over their shoulder, indicating it as their regular choice of weapon when the more destructive power of the rocket launcher wasn't necessary. Their choice to prominently display the rocket launcher suggested a shared sentiment with Sovereign Alpha—a desire to make a strong impression.

The medium-armoured marines, while not immediately standing out to Thea, displayed a level of preparedness and versatility with their gear. Each wore fairly standard T1 medium armour, none of them standing out in one particular area or another. They were a reliable choice for those needing a balance between mobility and protection.

Their armaments were an assortment of ballistic and laser-type assault rifles, indicating a focus on adaptability in various combat scenarios. What they lacked in immediately noticeable specialty, they made up for in being well-rounded combatants.

Thea noted the absence of any apparent drone operator like Desmond, nor could she immediately identify who among them might be the medic. *'A hidden medic could be a tactical choice,' she thought, 'keeping their role concealed to prevent them from becoming a targeted priority for enemy snipers or covert operatives.'*

This approach differed from Karania's more overt presence, but it made sense in its own way—sometimes the best strategy was to keep crucial roles under wraps, especially in complex urban environments where the threat of snipers and assassins was likely to be ever-present.

As they stepped up closer towards the other squad, they collectively turned their attention towards them, their eyes underneath their helmets undoubtedly mustering them in the same way that Thea had just done.

Without missing a beat, Corvus stepped forward another little bit, putting himself clearly in front of the rest of the squad while saying, "Pleasure to meet all of you. I hope our cooperation for this mission will be fruitful. My name's Corvus and I'm the squad leader for Sovereign Alpha."

As they approached the other squad, a palpable shift in the atmosphere occurred. The members of the other squad, previously engaged in their own discussions, turned their attention toward Sovereign Alpha.

Their postures subtly adjusted, indicative of a trained military discipline and readiness to assess new allies or potential threats. The way their heads tilted slightly, even beneath the obscuring helmets, suggested a keen interest and evaluation, mirroring the scrutiny Thea had just exercised.

Corvus, recognizing the moment as an opportunity to establish rapport and set the tone for the upcoming collaboration, confidently stepped a few paces ahead of the rest of Sovereign Alpha. His stance was one of open diplomacy yet underscored by the unmistakable authority of a squad leader.

With a voice that carried both respect and a hint of underlying strength, he introduced himself and his squad, "Pleasure to meet all of you. I hope our cooperation for this mission will be fruitful. My name's Corvus and I'm the squad leader for Sovereign Alpha."

As Corvus introduced Sovereign Alpha, a perceptible change washed over the members of the other squad. Their body language, initially relaxed and inquisitive, shifted to a more guarded and tense posture.

The name "Sovereign Alpha" seemed to have somehow resonated with them, stirring an air of recognition that instantly altered their demeanour from casual interest to a more serious, almost wary engagement.

After a momentary, yet palpable silence, a figure from the other squad stepped forward.

Towering above Corvus by more than three heads, the marine, clad in formidable ultra-heavy armour that made his already impressive stature more imposing, extended a hand in greeting.

Contrary to Thea's expectation of a deep, resonating voice, his tone was surprisingly normal, almost disarmingly so. "Pleasure to meet ya, Corvus. Name's Hammr," he said, his grip firm yet respectful.

"These lousy excuses for marines behind me are the rest of Emphyrean Alpha." His words carried a hint of humour, softening the otherwise tense atmosphere. His gaze, though obscured by his helmet, seemed to appraise Sovereign Alpha with a mixture of curiosity and expectation.

"I hope the whispers about your squad aren't just for show, 'cause this job ain't gonna be easy. We'll be in your care." His statement, delivered with a straightforward honesty, acknowledged both the challenge ahead and the implicit reliance on Sovereign Alpha's rumoured capabilities.

Thea couldn't help but wonder just what exactly the other squad had heard about them to be the cause for such a forward and somewhat belittling greeting from Hammr. His words seemed to imply that they would be following Sovereign Alpha's lead, which seemed contrary to what Thea had expected—a thoroughly competitive gathering of elites.

As Sovereign and Emphyrean Alpha exchanged brief, cautious pleasantries, their guarded demeanour reflected a mutual wariness, typical of elite squads meeting for the first time. Conversations were polite yet superficial, each member seemingly weighing the words and measuring the strength of their newfound allies.

Nobody had approached Thea or Karania, so the two of them simply stood behind the rest of Sovereign Alpha, observing the going-ons.

In the midst of this tentative social dance that she tried to avoid as much as possible, Thea's sharp eyes caught the first glimpse of the two remaining Alpha Squads making their way through the throng of marines. Her exceptional Perception allowed her to distinguish the approaching figures while they were still blending with the larger crowd.

Her gaze immediately sharpened, the competitive drive within her igniting like a beacon. Eagerly, she began to assess the newcomers, her focus sharp and unyielding.

Thea wasn't just observing; she was evaluating, comparing, searching for any sign of a rival who might challenge her for the top spot in her role of a scout/sniper. This wasn't just about proving her capabilities to others; it was a personal challenge, a silent vow to herself to excel and achieve the #1 position on the leaderboard, at the very least, for her own role.

As the first of the two incoming Alpha Squads emerged from the crowd, Thea's keen observation skills kicked in, dissecting their composition and equipment. The squad's structure was indeed unusual, deviating from the standard makeup she had come to expect.

The squad's lone heavy was not clad in the typical Ultra-Heavy armour, but rather in a slightly less bulky suit, more akin to Isabella's than Lucas', hinting at a more offensive-oriented role than a purely defensive one.

This choice intrigued Thea. The absence of a dedicated defensive heavy suggested a unique approach to squad tactics, likely relying more on agility and offensive power than on traditional head-to-head combat prowess.

Among the four medium-armoured marines, one stood out with the distinctive "Forge" armour, unmistakably marking him as a drone operator akin to Desmond. The presence of a specialised drone operator within their ranks further hinted at a tactical advantage in surveillance and information gathering, which could partially compensate for the lack of a traditional defensive heavy.

The last member of the squad was the most enigmatic, however. Where Thea had expected a lightly armoured individual, filling the scout, assassin or sniper role, she found something entirely different.

Their armour was an odd amalgamation of medium and light, bulkier around the shoulders and chest, but tapering off into a slimmer profile akin to Thea's Spectre armour around the waist. The top-heavy design was peculiar, potentially indicating a specialised role or a unique set of abilities that required such an unconventional armour setup.

The weapon cradled by the enigmatic marine was a heavy-flamer, a sight that immediately drew Thea's attention. The weapon's main body was bulky, with reinforced plating that gave it a robust and unyielding appearance. Its barrel, large and tapering out to a nozzle-like contraption, was designed to project a fearsome stream of a specific type of incendiary material over a considerable area.

The most striking feature of the heavy-flamer was the sizable tank-like magazines attached to its underside. These bulky containers, seemingly as heavy as the weapon itself, were crucial for its operation.

Thea realised with a mix of irony and discomfort that these tanks were likely filled with the Ingi-Tenax compound, the very same incendiary material that had left such a devastating impression during the assault on the wall. This connection to the horrific bombardment they had endured made the sight of the heavy-flamer all the more impactful.

Despite its formidable appearance and destructive potential, Thea was well aware of the heavy-flamer's inherent limitation: Its range.

As a weapon designed primarily for close to medium-range combat, it was highly effective in tight spaces and urban environments, where it could unleash its fiery wrath upon adversaries.

However, this focus on short-range combat meant the squad lacked significant long-range offensive capabilities. Double-checking her earlier observations about the rest of the squad, Thea noted the absence of other long-range weaponry.

This lack of distance engagement options indicated that the squad was specifically tailored for close-quarters battles, relying on overwhelming firepower and aggressive tactics to overpower their foes.

The heavy-flamer, with its reliance on the volatile IgT-compound, added a layer of further complexity and potential danger to the squad's operational strategy. Its use in urban settings could be both a significant advantage and a liability, depending on the circumstances.

The squad's specialisation in close-medium range encounters, coupled with their exceptionally potent firepower, marked them as a unique and likely thoroughly devastating component of the infiltration mission.

As Thea watched the squad with the heavy-flamer, her thoughts swirled with concern. *'I hope they're not assigned anywhere close to us during the mission. That heavy-flamer is a disaster in the making,'* she thought apprehensively.

Even if the tanks were designed to be explosion-proof, the weapon itself, particularly in an urban setting, was still likely to spell disaster. The mere act of *deploying* such a weapon in the city, which could turn entire blocks into a raging, all-consuming firestorm in mere moments, was frightening. The potential for wide-spread and rampant collateral damage was not just high; it was practically *guaranteed* to be astronomical.

Thea's mind raced with the implications, hoping their paths wouldn't cross in a way that would necessitate dealing with the aftermath of such a weapon.

To further distract herself from those unsettling thoughts, she started analysing the second squad squeezing out of the crowd, the last and final Alpha Squad of their mission.

The second squad that emerged had a more traditional composition, featuring a clear defensive-heavy that was strikingly similar to Lucas in both stature and equipment.

Clad in one of the telltale ultra-heavy armours, this marine was also wielding a Stalwart shield, their presence exuding a sense of steadfast protection. The defensive heavy was almost a mirror image of Lucas, if not for the subtle differences in their respective armour's designs.

Beside the defensive bulwark was an offensive-heavy, unmistakable with a massive weapon resting on their shoulder. Its fierce and formidable appearance suggested a weapon of devastating power, likely designed for dealing with heavily fortified positions or dense enemy clusters, but Thea's attention rapidly flitted away from it, before she could fully figure out what kind of weapon it was.

Accompanying these two heavies were two medium-armoured marines, their gear standard but efficient, likely indicating a balanced approach to combat versatility. She similarly skipped over them, not wanting to waste any time on the "unimportant" members of the squad.

For what had truly caught Thea's eye was the light-armoured marine among them.

This individual was decked out in one of the T1 armors that Thea had considered before settling on her Spectre. It was the T1 light-type armour called "Dragonfly", which was particularly focused on mobility, coming with a pre-installed, advanced version of the grappling module that Thea had equipped her Spectre with.

Intriguingly, this marine was also armed with a Gram, though Thea noted it was the ballistic variant, contrasting her own laser-based model. The choice of a ballistic Gram suggested a preference for more traditional, more sneaky sniping over the adaptability and direct-confrontation power offered by laser weaponry.

It wasn't just the choice of a ballistic model over a laser variant that had given rise to this assumption, however, but the significant suppressor seamlessly integrated into the barrel as well. This wasn't a simple add-on; it was a fundamental alteration to the weapon's design. The intricacy of this modification suggested a sniper who valued stealth and precision, perhaps even more so than Thea herself.

Her fascination with technology and weaponry bubbled to the surface, and she had to exercise restraint to keep herself from peppering the marine with questions about the weapon. It was evident that this sniper had chosen their gear with careful consideration, optimising for specific combat scenarios that likely aligned with their unique skills and tactics.

As the two new squads made their approach, Thea discreetly nudged Corvus, drawing his attention to them. Recognizing the importance of the moment, Corvus smoothly disengaged from the social mingling, and together with Hammr stepped forward to meet the leaders of the incoming squads.

The chatter around Thea dwindled to a hush, everyone's focus shifting towards the new arrivals. The squads had a commanding presence, capturing the attention of all present. It was clear that nobody wanted to miss out on sizing up the rest of their peers.

Hammr, the towering figure from Empyrean Alpha, took the initiative as he turned the visor of his helmet transparent, figuring that a more personal touch might not go remiss.

His voice effortlessly filled the space around them, despite the busy happenings inside the FOB. "Greetings. My name is Hammr, I'm the squad leader of Empyrean Alpha. I hope that we will work well together in this mission."

His tone was firm yet approachable, similar to how he had approached Sovereign Alpha as well, setting a collaborative tone for the forthcoming operation.

As Hammr extended his hand in greeting, one of the medium marines from the first squad that Thea had identified earlier stepped forward with a confident stride. They similarly turned the visor in their helmet transparent, revealing a face marked by sharp, intelligent features and a gaze that was both calculating and direct.

"My name's Nieka," she announced, her voice carrying a tone of authority and self-assuredness. She shook Hammr's hand with a grip that was both strong and respectful.

"I'm the squad leader of Hegemon Alpha. We specialise in close-quarters and mid-range engagements. Our focus is on raw firepower," she added, her words crisp and to the point.

Nieka's demeanour was that of a seasoned leader, comfortable in her role and confident in her squad's capabilities.

"We'll leave the long-range combat to you," she concluded, her eyes sweeping over the other squads with an assessing glance, clearly gauging their strengths and potential roles in the upcoming mission. Her statement efficiently outlined Hegemon Alpha's operational preferences and expertise, setting a clear expectation for their contribution to the joint effort.

Thea watched Nieka intently, her presence commanding and assured.

'*She exudes so much confidence...*' Thea mused to herself, slightly awed by the other woman's formidable aura. Nieka's ability to command attention and convey her squad's role with such certainty left a lasting impression on Thea, stirring a mix of respect and a hint of envy within her.

The assertive tone, the clear-cut introduction, it was a display of social acumen that Thea would aspire to emulate going forward. '*Maybe one day, I can project that level of confidence too,*' she thought, feeling inspired by Nieka's poise and decisiveness.

Thea's attention was sharply drawn back to the scene unfolding before her as the lightly-armoured marine from the last squad stepped forward. The transparent visor revealed a face with dark skin and eyes of a striking green hue, creating a captivating contrast. The marine extended his hand to Hammr, who by now seemed to be the de facto greeter.

"Appreciate the warm reception, Hammr," Kar'al's voice rumbled, surprisingly deep and resonant, belying his slender and agile appearance. "I'm Kar'al, leading Ascendant Alpha. Our squad's adaptable, ready for any role needed."

Thea noted an intriguing moment when Nieka, the assertive leader of Hegemon Alpha, appeared momentarily taken aback by Kar'al's declaration. Her expression quickly morphed into one of subtle amusement, her gaze shifting towards Corvus with raised eyebrows, as if silently questioning the veracity of Kar'al's claim. The interaction hinted at an underlying dynamic, perhaps a shared history or knowledge between the squads, piquing Thea's curiosity.

As Thea observed the interactions between the squad leaders, she found herself reflecting on Corvus's presence among this diverse group of personalities.

Compared to the formidable and larger-than-life Hammr, the lightly armoured Kar'al, and the straightforward, assertive Nieka, Corvus struck a more relatable and grounded figure. His demeanour, lacking the overt mystique or commanding aura of the others, lent him a certain relatable quality that Thea found both endearing and reassuring.

'*Stay strong, Corvus,*' she thought, offering a silent word of encouragement to her squad leader. In her mind's eye, she could only imagine the overwhelming pressure of standing among such distinct and strong personalities.

If she were in Corvus's shoes, anxiety would have undoubtedly crippled her, particularly now as the collective attention of the group shifted expectantly towards him.

The realisation dawned on the others that the one remaining figure, somewhat understated yet composed, must be the leader of Sovereign Alpha—a squad that had seemingly garnered some kind of mystique and rumour-laden reputation among the rest of the Alpha Squads, as far as Thea could tell.

Corvus confidently stepped forward. He extended his hand towards the two new squad leaders, embodying the same warmth and openness that was so characteristic of him. “Hello, Kar’al, Nieka. Glad to have you. My name is Corvus, and I lead Sovereign Alpha. I’m eagerly looking forward to our collaboration on this mission,” he said, his voice carrying a genuine note of camaraderie and anticipation.

As Corvus spoke, subtle shifts in the body language of Nieka and Kar’al, as well as their respective squads, were noticeable.

There was a slight stiffening, a momentary pause, indicating that Sovereign Alpha's enigmatic reputation had preceded them. This reaction was telling; it was clear that some rumours or information about Sovereign Alpha had circulated among the other Alpha Squads.

This revelation thoroughly intrigued Thea.

Despite being a part of Sovereign Alpha, she, along with her squadmates, seemed to be in the dark about whatever narrative was shaping their squad's image among their peers...