

## Arc 1 - Chapter 133 - The End

PoV: Corvus Leander Sylarion

The next few hours were spent meticulously clearing the remaining floors inside the compound.

Every step felt slower, every decision more deliberate, as Corvus reined in their advance.

Part of him was weighed down by the guilt over Thea's death, but the greater issue was the gaping hole her absence had left in Alpha Squad's overall efficiency.

They had always known they relied a lot on Thea's uncanny Perception and Psychic Powers, but it was only now—without her—that they truly grasped just *how much* they had leaned on her skills during every mission up until now.

Navigating the hostile environment without Thea's guidance was like stumbling through the dark. The squad, once a well-oiled machine, now felt more disjointed and hesitant if they weren't paying 110% attention to making sure that they were all on top of their game.

Desmond did his best to fill the void she left behind, going as far as to control three drones at once to mimic the near-omniscient awareness Thea provided effortlessly. But no matter how hard he pushed himself, the squad felt blind in certain aspects in comparison to when Thea had been at the front, silently guiding them away from danger with her sharp instincts.

They encountered two more engagements along the way—minor skirmishes compared to the brutal ambush earlier or the prior, initial engagements, likely a sign of the Stellar Republic's crumbling defence within the compound.

Still, every encounter was nerve-wracking, the squad constantly on edge without the comfort of Thea's precognitive insights.

Desmond's three drones buzzed tirelessly, scanning for threats and providing as much coverage as possible, but it was clear that he was struggling to keep up with the rapid pace of the mission. What Thea had done with a simple sweep of her gaze now took a delicate juggling act of technology and concentration.

It would have been easy to blame Desmond for not fully bridging the gap, but Corvus felt the opposite—he was honestly impressed.

Desmond had slipped into the role with remarkable adaptability, pushing his skills and his drones to their limits to ensure the squad had the intel they needed to keep moving. With a limited set of drone blueprints and an even more limited supply of functioning drones, Desmond's ability to maintain any semblance of Thea's level of situational awareness was commendable.

It wasn't as much about him falling short; it was more about realising just how much of a game-changer Thea had been, making the assessment feel like easy mode simply by being there.

*'I guess that's what happens when you've got a scout on Alpha Squad's level who also has precognitive powers. You get used to that level of intel surprisingly fast,'* Corvus mused, watching Desmond carefully coordinate his drones. The squad's current unease was a glaring reminder that they needed to be prepared for the loss of any member, not just Thea.

*'We're going to need to run squad-wide drills on operating with missing members. This level of vulnerability just isn't acceptable going forward.'*

Despite the clear drain it put on him to operate on this level, Desmond managed to provide the necessary intel, guiding them safely through the rest of the compound.

A few hiccups did occur, however: One of Desmond's drones was sniped by a Stellar Republic soldier who had hidden in an alcove, and another one was destroyed during a skirmish with a small group of stragglers. He had lamented the fact that he could have saved it, if he hadn't been trying to juggle three drones at the same time; but there wasn't much anyone could do to help him in that regard.

Still, they managed to make it to the final floor without much trouble.

The last floor, however, loomed as the true challenge—the most likely place for the remaining enemy forces to make their last stand before the squad could reach the roof and declare the compound fully cleared.

Desmond's Forge had been working overtime throughout the entire operation, cranking out drones as fast as he lost them to enemy fire, but as they prepared to breach, he lost two more.

Even with the continuous production, each loss was a blow to their reconnaissance capabilities—and Desmond's bottom line.

"Not looking good, honestly," Desmond reported, displaying a 3D scan of the floor that his surviving drones had managed to piece together. The holographic map flickered in the dim light, showing a rough layout of enemy positions. "We're looking at about two full squads, but they're not united—none of them are in any proper formation. They're probably the ones that barely escaped from previous fights or were too far from the main clashes, so we're unlikely to see any squad-level tactics. Each group has at least one clone per Original, so we're dealing with about two dozen bodies, minimum. But once we engage, expect that number to double quickly; maybe triple, depending on how much Merit they have left."

His words hung heavily over the squad, the reality of what lay ahead slowly sinking in. They were about to face enemies who were desperate, cornered, and ready to fight to the last.

This final push would be brutal—especially without their heaviest hitter present.

"So... what's the plan, Boss?" Isabella asked, breaking the tense silence and turning everyone's attention toward Corvus. All eyes were on him to decide their next move...

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“In hindsight, there were definitely things we could have done better,” Corvus admitted to Thea, his gaze steady and honest. “But at the end of the day, much like the whole incident with you, sometimes we just have to make calls and live with their consequences...”

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They settled on a plan that involved holding their current position and keeping a close watch on the stairwell leading up to the final floor for an hour.

Corvus’s decision to wait was driven by two key factors.

First, Desmond’s drones had undoubtedly alerted the enemy to Alpha Squad’s presence.

The sudden appearance and subsequent destruction of the drones would have put the remaining Stellar Republic forces on high alert, knowing that a UHF squad was aware of their exact location. Charging in while the enemy was fully braced and prepared for an assault would be a death sentence.

By waiting, they aimed to let the initial alarm die down, creating a false sense of security in the enemy—making them think that the UHF squad had seen the drones’ footage and decided it was too risky to attack.

Second, staying put gave them a tactical advantage.

By holding their position on the lower floor, they could potentially catch any enemies who grew impatient or curious and ventured downstairs to scout the area. It was a gamble, relying on the enemy’s nerves and lack of discipline, but Corvus had deemed it worth the time.

Their mission was to capture and hold the compound until the end of the assessment, so Alpha Squad wasn’t actually pressed for time at all. Even if the hour waiting yielded no results at all, it would be a minimal loss compared to rushing headlong into a heavily fortified kill zone.

The squad used the hour wisely, preparing for the gruelling firefight they knew was coming.

They meticulously rechecked their magazines, patched up damaged armour with the sprays they’d brought along, and gathered for another close examination of the 3D scan from Desmond’s drones. They discussed their exact movements, pinpointing potential locations of high-priority targets among the enemy forces.

Every detail was scrutinised, every possible scenario considered.

Before they knew it, the hour was already up—unfortunately without any Stellar Republic soldiers venturing down into their kill zone as they had hoped.

With no time left to waste, Alpha Squad left their backpacks behind to lighten their load and steeled themselves for the final push. They prepared to take the last remaining floor, fully aware that it would be a brutal battle against a desperate enemy force.

The fight began with a calculated and chaotic onslaught.

Isabella, Corvus, and Karania hurled a barrage of white- and blue-foam grenades up the stairs, with Isabella's powerful throws sending them deep into the room above, aiming to disrupt as many sightlines as possible, even far towards the back of the enemy's position.

The foam grenades hissed and expanded on impact, rapidly obscuring vision, blocking pathways and providing crucial cover for Alpha Squad's assault.

Simultaneously, Lucas launched a barrage of smoke grenades from his Havoc Launcher, blanketing the entire outer ring of the floor in thick, swirling clouds that further disoriented the enemy. His follow-up shots sent high-explosive and fragmentation grenades into the specific, targeted zones the squad had marked earlier, shaking the building's foundations with deafening booms.

Desmond's drones zipped up into the fray, using the chaos of the explosions and smoke to try and blend into the mayhem. They moved swiftly, dodging gunfire and trying to hide in the pandemonium for later use, but were quickly targeted as the enemy realised the threat they would pose if left unanswered.

With the battlefield prepped, Lucas led the charge up the stairs, his Stalwart shield held firmly in front, anchoring the squad's advance.

The moment they reached the top, all hell broke loose.

Bullets, lasers, and shrapnel filled the air as both sides unleashed everything they had. Lucas immediately activated the Stalwart's grav-lock, planting the shield into the ground to withstand the incredible force raining down on them.

Even with his [Stalwart Stance] enhancing his stability, Lucas struggled to keep the shield upright against the relentless onslaught, his muscles straining as he absorbed blow after blow to protect the rest of the squad.

The firefight was a complete blur of chaos and violence from that point onwards.

Isabella took the brunt of the assault, as per usual, her body battered and bruised as she pushed forward, Devastation roaring in her hands as she cut down enemy after enemy. She was a relentless force, refusing to back down even as her armour was getting shredded and her skin flayed from her bones.

Desmond's drones, essential for recon, were reduced to a single survivor within minutes, forcing him to switch to his rifle and fight directly, something he was far less accustomed to.

Karania's Ruin was barking with every shot as she picked off high-priority targets, always searching for that crucial opening to shift the tide. She moved seamlessly between offence and support, tossing her blood-vials towards squadmates whenever their wounds began to slow them down and coagulating them from a distance to stop any major bleeds.

Corvus, meanwhile, stayed focused on the battle plan, throwing grenades into the spots he had marked before the fight, using them to flush out entrenched enemies and break up defensive positions.

Alpha Squad quickly realised just how much Thea's absence had crippled their overall firepower, and the overwhelming number of enemies became a harsh reminder of the gap she had left behind.

The first brutal exchange of gunfire was unforgiving; none of them escaped unscathed.

Bullets, lasers, and shrapnel tore through the air, slashing into their armour and flesh from all sides. Each squad member sustained medium to serious injuries, their bodies battered and bloodied by the relentless assault—but despite the pain and mounting wounds, they pressed on, having no option but to push through the pain.

Isabella, always quick to adapt, saw the writing on the wall.

Their smoke and foam grenades had created a fragmented battlefield with small pockets of cover and disrupted sightlines. Recognizing the opportunity, she knew they couldn't afford to just sit behind the Stalwart any longer; doing so would get them all killed.

With a fierce battle cry, she dropped her Devastation, the heavy gun clattering to the ground as she pulled out her Decimator—a weapon far more suited for close combat. Without a second thought, she charged forward, sprinting headfirst into the nearest enemy position.

Gunfire erupted in her direction, bullets tearing into her armour and flesh, but she didn't slow down. Her Decimator roared to life, and she hacked and smashed her way through the first group of enemies, breaking their formation with sheer brutality, disappearing into the smoke and chaos.

Meanwhile, Desmond's last remaining drone was buzzing around, trying to keep tabs on the increasingly chaotic battlefield. He barely noticed a grenade sailing past the Stalwart's defences, landing dangerously close to the squad.

With no time to think, Desmond emergency-kicked the grenade away from his comrades, the explosive device bouncing off his boot. It detonated a split second later, tearing through the air with a deafening roar and blasting Desmond's lower leg to shreds, sending him crashing to the ground in a pool of blood.

Karania rushed to his side without hesitation, her Ruin momentarily abandoned as she scrambled to stabilise Desmond. She pulled out her blood vials, throwing them at his wounds to stop the bleeding, her hands moving with practised precision despite the chaos around her.

Corvus, realising how dire the situation had become quickly, decided to go all out.

He yanked the entire belt of grenades from his vest, tossing them with reckless abandon into a nearby cluster of enemies. The blasts rocked the room, tearing through walls and sending clones flying.

But before the squad could capitalise on the temporary relief, a barrage of rockets suddenly smashed into the Stalwart, shattering the grav-lock system instantly.

Lucas and his shield were flung through the room like ragdolls, the force of the impact sending him crashing into the far-side wall of the room, where he lay stunned and exposed, before gunfire erupted from that direction.

Corvus didn't have time to check on Lucas or provide cover; he immediately swung his rifle toward the group of rocket launcher-wielding clones responsible. His gunfire was fierce, tearing through several of the attackers in quick succession, but the remaining enemies were quick to retaliate.

A hail of bullets and energy blasts slammed into Corvus, shredding his armour and puncturing his body in multiple places. He continued firing even as he felt his strength slipping away, managing to take out a few more enemies before the relentless barrage finally overwhelmed him.

Corvus fell to the ground, his vision going dark, leaving the rest of Alpha Squad scrambling for survival in the brutal crossfire of the battle still raging around them...

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“And that's the last I remember before waking up a day later,” Corvus concluded, his voice edged with exhaustion and a hint of disbelief. He glanced over at Lucas. “Pretty sure you died though, right?”

Lucas nodded solemnly, still visibly affected by the memory. “Yeah, that was it for me. Everything went dark the moment those rockets hit—I wasn't even sure what it was, honestly. I was just suddenly flying.”

Corvus sighed and turned his attention to Isabella, raising an eyebrow. “So... how the fuck did any of us make it out of there alive? Isabella?”

The big, mischievous grin that spread across Isabella's face was all the answer they needed; she had clearly been waiting for this moment to tell her side of the story. She leaned back, her eyes gleaming with the thrill of recounting the chaos.

Corvus settled into his chair, eager to hear what came next, as the rest of the squad fell silent in anticipation...

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### *PoV: Isabella Itoku*

The room was a slaughterhouse, strewn with dismembered limbs, shredded bodies, and the bloody remnants of the enemy squads. Walls were painted red with the aftermath of her work, the air thick with the metallic scent of the blood she had spilled.

Isabella was in her element, charging through the wreckage, wielding her Decimator with perfect precision as she hacked and slashed her way through the fray.

Every swing of her weapon was brutal and deliberate, each strike a deadly punctuation in the symphony of destruction she was orchestrating within the enemy lines.

She tore into soldiers and clones alike, their armour crumpling like wet tissue under her relentless onslaught.

The battlefield was utter chaos, explosions still echoing and compounding as cries echoed through the haze. Smoke billowed around her, mingling with the dust and debris, providing her with cover as she hunted down anything that moved.

Her breath was ragged, her vision sharp and tunnel-focused on every enemy she spotted or sensed nearby.

She charged headfirst into clusters of clones, ignoring the burning pain of bullets ripping into her armour and flesh. The adrenaline coursing through her veins numbed everything but the thrill of the fight and the need to keep moving.

She swung the Decimator with reckless abandon, the weapon's sawblades tearing through the entire upper body of a clone before she spun and cleaved through the neck of another, sending its head spiralling into the air, drawing a perfect arc of crimson behind it.

Every scream of terror, every desperate gasp for air, every slight movement gave away the next target.

She pursued them all without hesitation, sprinting across the blood-soaked floor, mauling targets that dared oppose her, smashing in heads and caving in chests as she felt the need to, paying no heed to the mounting injuries or the exhaustion pulling at her limbs.

Her body was a whirlwind of muscle and fury, cutting through the enemy with the savage grace of a predator that knew no fear.

Isabella was unstoppable, leaving a path of pure carnage in her wake.

Her surroundings were a complete blur of destruction as she moved, each enemy falling before they could fully comprehend the storm that had descended upon them.

It was only when there were no more soldiers left to face her, no more clones clawing at the last shreds of their futile resistance, that Isabella finally paused, catching her ragged breath as she stood amid the grisly aftermath of her brutal rampage throughout the room.

It was over. She had done it.

The battlefield was still, save for the occasional crackle of fire and the rumble of the collapsing structures around her.

Isabella's chest heaved as she took in the sight around her, blood dripping from her wounds and pooling at her feet. The smile never left her face, her eyes alight with satisfaction.

She had saved her squad, turned the tide in their favour, and brought an end to the chaos that had almost claimed them all...

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PoV: Corvus Leander Sylarion

“*What the fuck kind of report is that?*” Desmond groaned, throwing his hands up in exasperation. “Seriously? We’re supposed to debrief on what went down, and your whole explanation is basically just, ‘*I went in and murdered everyone, end of story*’?!”

Isabella shot back without missing a beat, crossing her arms defiantly. “Well, I didn’t see *you* step up and handle them all, so yeah! That’s *exactly* what happened! I wrecked their shit, and they died. Simple as that!”

Corvus could only sigh, palming his face as he listened to the back-and-forth.

He really should’ve known better by now.

Isabella was an outstanding marine—one of the best he’d ever seen in the field—but when it came to giving proper reports, she was about as useful as a blunt knife.

It wasn’t even a question of her ability either; he *knew* she *could* put together a thoroughly detailed analysis if she felt like it. He’d seen it in the few rare written reports he’d forced her to write, which were surprisingly thorough and extremely insightful when she bothered.

But Isabella never saw the point in dragging herself through tedious after-action breakdowns when she could be out there training or preparing for the next fight.

She lived for the heat of battle, the immediate feedback of action rather than the drawn-out speculation of what might have gone better or worse. For her, everything was about what she could learn in real time and put into practice the next time bullets were flying.

Corvus couldn’t really fault her for that mindset—reports were a necessary evil, but he knew deep down Isabella would always value hands-on experience over theoretical dissections.

He just wished, sometimes, that she’d put a bit more effort into it when the squad needed a proper recounting of events, especially after a fight as insane as this one and without any alternative points of views to work with.

Clearing his throat to settle the bickering squad members and doing his best to ignore Thea’s cackling and wheezing from the end of the table, Corvus redirected the conversation back to where it needed to be.

“You didn’t happen to see what went down after you kicked that grenade, did you?” Corvus asked, his tone gentle yet probing.

Desmond’s expression soured instantly, his face tightening as his hand instinctively drifted towards the stump of his missing leg. The memory was clearly still raw, and the pain of that moment flickered across his features.

“No... nothing. It’s all a blur,” Desmond admitted, voice strained. “The second that thing blew, everything just... blanked out. I remember pain, like... nothing I’d felt before. And



Karania... I remember her hands, the feeling of her trying to stop the bleeding, and her voice in my ear, shouting at me to do things, keep awake, or something, maybe?—I don't even remember what she was saying, honestly.”

His words trailed off, eyes distant, as if he were still trapped in that moment of chaos and confusion. Corvus had immediately noticed the subtle tremor in Desmond's voice, something he hadn't picked up on before.

It was clear the injury had affected him more deeply than Corvus had anticipated.

He quietly adjusted his mental file for Desmond and made a note to be more mindful of that type of vulnerability in the future, especially when asking him to recount his side of the story.

Turning his attention back to Thea, Corvus decided to continue recounting his side of the rest of the assessment, at least as far as he could...

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Corvus woke up sometime later, his entire body a mess of pain and soreness, but somehow, against all odds, he was still alive.

Karania gave him a quick rundown of his condition: He wouldn't be anywhere near fighting shape, but he could still take a shift on watch with a gun strapped to his left arm—the right one was too damaged to save.

The firefight had torn through his body, ripping apart vital organs, and he was essentially bleeding out despite Karania's best efforts. Without a proper surgery—which they lacked the tools, setting, and time for—his condition was terminal.

Desmond had been outfitted with one of Karania's makeshift prosthetics, cobbled together from hardened blood, metal parts, and a dose of sheer improvisation. It was functional, if not exactly pretty.

Isabella, on the other hand, had, somehow, through an act of sheer divine intervention by the Emperor himself, narrowly escaped any life-threatening internal damage, though she had suffered *significant* tissue trauma and blood loss. Karania had burned through a large portion of her blood vials just to get Isabella back on her feet.

Surprisingly, Karania herself was the least injured, escaping the fight with only a few gunshot wounds.

The next few days were spent guarding the compound, now mostly cleared of Stellar Republic forces. They held positions on the roof and top floor, taking advantage of the elevated sightlines to keep watch over the surrounding area.

Their main objective was to prevent any significant counterattacks until UHF reinforcements could arrive and fully fortify the compound as a staging ground for the upcoming assault on the SADD.

Roughly a day after their brutal battle, Corvus received updates from other advance squads.

The reports confirmed that most of the compound had been successfully captured by the various elite and alpha squads assigned to the mission—a solid win for the UHF.

Over the next two days, the Stellar Republic attempted several half-hearted counterattacks.

Small squads would strike here and there, but they lacked coordination and resolve, so they were easily repelled by the now more organised advanced squads on the UHF's side.

It was clear the enemy was spread thin, preoccupied with the larger threat posed by the UHF's main forces and unable to mount a serious effort to reclaim the compound.

On the third day, Karania approached Corvus with a grim expression, and he knew immediately what she was about to say.

He offered her a resigned smile, understanding that his time was running out.

The pain in his body had been growing unbearable, worsening with each passing hour despite Karania's downright excessive use of painkillers and her constant efforts to keep him stable.

The resurrection chamber had started to seem like a mercy more and more, however.

Corvus issued a final set of orders, officially placing Karania in command for the remainder of the mission. Accepting her offer of an easier end, he took his leave, confident that the last three remaining members of Alpha Squad would see the mission through...

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“And that's basically that,” Corvus concluded with a shrug that was far too casual for the weight of the story he had just shared.

“What about the rest? Desmond, you didn't make it all the way through, right? How did you end up kicking the bucket before it all wrapped up?” Corvus asked, glancing between Isabella and Desmond—the only two left who had witnessed the final stretch of the mission.

Isabella's smug grin spoke volumes before Desmond even had a chance to respond, her expression practically dripping with amusement. Desmond, on the other hand, looked as if he'd rather be *anywhere* else, his face twisted in a grimace of embarrassment.

“Oh, this is good,” Isabella teased, leaning back in her chair, clearly relishing the opportunity to spill the details. “Go on, Desmond, tell 'em just how you managed to get yourself killed literally a day before the assessment ended.”

Desmond groaned, rubbing the back of his neck as he avoided eye contact. “Do we really have to—”

“Oh, we absolutely do,” Isabella cut in, her grin widening as she took another bite of her food. “You were just complaining about the lack of detail in my reports, so show us how it's done. It would be downright hypocritical to refuse now, no?”

Desmond shot her a glare before finally giving in with a resigned sigh. “Alright, alright... But just because that hulking meat-sack over there sucks at reports! Long story short, we were just about done. We’d been holding the compound, keeping watch, doing everything by the book. The medic had us in overlapping shifts of two, which worked pretty well...”

He trailed off for a moment, his frustration palpable before he sighed deeply. “But you know how it goes when you’re stuck staring at the same damned surroundings for days on end—boredom and complacency creep in. So, there I was, tinkering with my drone controls, trying to boost the signal or get the damned thing to work better for the next time our scout bites it, when I hear this faint crack and then a hiss. Just a tiny, quiet hiss...”

Isabella’s snort interrupted him, barely able to contain her laughter, but Desmond glared at her and pressed on. “Turns out, I wasn’t paying enough attention. I accidentally punctured one of the energy capacitors while I was getting a bit frustrated at screwing around with the drone, and... yeah, it blew up. Right in my hands.”

Isabella immediately lost it, breaking into all-out laughter, her voice echoing through the room. “Oh, man! That explosion took out a whole chunk of the office you were holed up in! I swear, I thought we were under attack, but when I rushed in, Devastation at the ready, I looked over and saw parts of you halfway across the room, I couldn’t believe it. The whole place looked like a warzone, thought we had some infiltrators, but Karania told me nope, Desmond here made his own fireworks!”

Thea, who had been trying to suppress her own laughter, finally let out a snicker, shaking her head in disbelief. “Seriously, Desmond? You blew yourself up? With your own drone? I didn’t even know that was possible...”

Lucas, who had been stoically listening, finally cracked a smile, chuckling softly. “You’ve got to be the only guy who can manage to turn a scout drone into a bomb.”

Desmond buried his face in his hands, his cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. Not my finest moment, alright? But hey, at least I figured out another way to use the basic scout drones; just need to rig the right kind of remote-detonator to it that punctures the capacitor in the same way I did by accident and voila, I got myself an anti-personnel bomb!”

Corvus couldn’t help but chuckle, his initial worries about their bickering potentially causing issues fading away in the light of the absurdity. “You really do have a talent for that, Desmond. Also, congrats on discovering a new use for your drones—you *have* been complaining about not being versatile enough, so... mission accomplished?”

He turned his attention back to Thea, who was still grinning ear to ear. “And that’s pretty much the end of the assessment for us. We’ll need to wait for Karania to get back to fully piece together everything that went down. She’s probably working on a detailed report already, knowing her—likely 300 pages long, as always. So we’ll get the complete breakdown whenever she’s around.”

Corvus rose from his chair, stretching slightly before gesturing to the rest of the squad, signalling that the after-action report was officially concluded. “I’m sure most of us are

completely spent, even if not physically, then at least mentally. I suggest we all grab some sleep before the award ceremony tomorrow morning. I've got a feeling it's going to be a lot—whether it's good, bad, or just plain exhausting.”

With those parting words, he gave them all a casual, half-hearted salute and made his way towards his room. The thought of a hot shower and a real bed for the first time in what felt like an eternity was almost too tempting to bear.

The squad's laughter and banter echoed faintly behind him as he walked away, putting a content smile on his face.

The squad was alive and well after that gruesome month, and seemingly closer than ever before...