

## Arc 1 - Chapter 90 - Sacrum

The squad's strategy quickly evolved after Isabella's insightful observation and the realisation that their initial approach was deeply flawed. Now, they pivoted towards a more direct and potentially impactful strategy—leveraging the destructive capabilities of Thea's Caliburn to neutralise the technology concealed within the Mativ at the hidden outpost.

This new approach simplified their planning considerably.

Within an hour, they had crafted a straightforward yet potent plan for the next day. It hinged on precise reconnaissance to establish the ideal timing and a coordinated effort between Lucas and Thea to identify the most effective firing position for the Caliburn. The key objective was to ensure maximum impact with minimal risk to the squad.

However, a significant concern remained unresolved: Their escape strategy post-attack.

"Even if we position ourselves over a kilometre away, the moment we shoot that thing. They will absolutely come and hound us with *everything* they got, the moment we reveal ourselves like this," Isabella pointed out, her extensive urban warfare expertise evident. "I have no idea how we will get out of this alive..."

This critical aspect of their plan needed urgent attention, as the success of their mission hinged not just on the attack, but also on their ability to safely withdraw from the area.

The group's discussion took a sober turn as they confronted the harsh realities of their mission. Karania, visibly concerned, contributed her thoughts: "I agree with Isabella. Only she and Thea have the necessary skills to navigate through the industrial sector and urban outskirts to even have a chance at successfully evading any pursuers. The rest of us... we wouldn't stand a chance. Even *if* we find a place to hide, it's only a matter of time before we're discovered."

Lucas, echoing the group's growing apprehension, added his perspective: "Considering the cost of a Mativ Beta... Whatever tech's in there, is worth a fortune in credits. It might even be System-tech, for all we know. There's no chance they will *not* hunt us down to the last, if we actually manage to destroy it. Drones, search parties, armoured vehicles—they'll throw everything they have at us. I can't see a scenario where they wouldn't pull out all the stops to find us."

The mood in the office had shifted to one of sombre realisation.

They had identified an ideal target and had the means to strike effectively. However, the crux of the problem remained unresolved: A viable escape plan.

Each proposed strategy they discussed inevitably hit the same snag—how to safely extract themselves after the attack. The realisation that their plan was incomplete without a feasible means of escape weighed heavily on them all.

Their temporary refuge in the office was secure only because they had yet to draw attention to themselves.

However, launching an attack on the Stellar Republic's secret outpost and obliterating the Mativ, along with its precious cargo, would instantly turn the tides against them. In the aftermath of such a high-profile assault, they would undoubtedly become the targets of an intense manhunt.

Lacking the ability to blend into the bustling crowds of the city's populated areas, their options for concealment were limited to the deserted industrial zones and outskirts of the city. In such desolate environments, their chances of successfully evading pursuit were beyond slim.

Corvus, bearing the heavy mantle of leadership, let out a deep, burdened sigh. His next words carried the weight of the difficult choices they faced. "We're left with two paths ahead of us," he began, his voice tinged with the strain of decision-making. "Firstly, we could opt to bypass this opportunity and report our findings to UHF as soon as we're able. Hopefully, the intel can be leveraged effectively in time, before the outpost serves its unknown purpose. Or..."

He paused, visibly struggling with the gravity of the second option he was about to present.

It was unusual for Corvus, always so composed and decisive, to exhibit such hesitancy.

Thea watched him, a sense of foreboding growing within her as she anticipated his next words. Her concern deepened as she saw him grapple with the thought, clearly finding it difficult to even voice the alternative. When he finally did, however, her fears were confirmed.

Gathering himself, Corvus continued, the gravity of his words hanging in the air, "Or... we take a more direct approach. One of us could stay back, take the critical shot, and ensure the outpost is dealt with. Meanwhile, the rest of the squad would press forward towards our primary objective in Nova Tertius proper." The implication of his suggestion was clear, and its potential cost starkly apparent.

Thea felt a chill run down her spine as she realised the full implications of what Corvus was proposing—a sacrifice for the greater good of the mission.

The profound silence that enveloped Alpha Squad in the wake of Corvus' suggestion was almost tangible.

Each member, in their own way, had likely contemplated this stark reality, but hearing it vocalised by their leader lent it a sobering concreteness. The logic was clear and unassailable: Sacrificing one member of the squad to neutralise a high-value target was undoubtedly strategically sound, yet the moral weight of such a decision was immense.

Corvus, burdened with the responsibilities of leadership, gave voice to this difficult choice.

His tone was subdued, the characteristic energy of his speech noticeably dimmed by the gravity of the situation. "The Caliburn's use is not exclusive to Thea. Its potency as a weapon is undeniable, we've all witnessed it multiple times by now—a single shot could achieve our objective. This task doesn't require specialised expertise either, as it has enough power to completely evaporate the Mativ regardless of where it's hit. Thus, anyone here, with the exception of Karania, could potentially do this."

His eyes briefly met each squad member's gaze, acknowledging the heavy decision they faced. The squad absorbed Corvus' words, each member lost in their thoughts, the air heavy with unspoken emotions.

The reality of what was being proposed—the use and sacrifice of the Caliburn and one of their own in such a final, decisive act—was a lot to process. It was not just a strategic consideration; it involved a sacrifice that none of them had anticipated at this point in the assessment.

All members of Alpha Squad were acutely aware that a '*death*' in this assessment like this was not permanent; they would return. However, they also understood the stark reality: Whoever undertook this mission would be isolated from the squad until the UHF fully breached the wall.

This meant being effectively out of the assessment until the final stages of their objectives, an unavoidable certainty.

As they weighed their options, a heavy, unspoken agreement formed among them. Despite being the only feasible strategy, the decision was laden with a deep, poignant sorrow. The notion of deliberately leaving a comrade behind clashed fundamentally with their strong sense of unity that had been developing between them over the past days and weeks, yet they were also well-versed in the ruthless demands of warfare.

Thea found herself reflecting on the "Strike One" mission, where a similar fate had befallen their small team of elite marines to neutralise a key target. Logically, she recognized the necessity of such tactics in the UHF's strategic playbook when circumstances required.

Nonetheless, the concept was a hard pill to swallow.

She felt a crushing sense of responsibility, almost as if she were *personally* condemning one of their own to a lonely fate. Despite her relentless efforts to find an alternate escape route through the recordings Desmond provided, and recalling every structure they had passed, no viable path emerged. As the scout of Sovereign Alpha, she felt the weight of this failure acutely.

It was her role to chart their course, to ensure safe passage, yet in this instance, she had hit an impasse. A route that would lead to nothing but death.

Deep down, Thea knew that the blame was not hers alone to bear.

None of them, despite their combined efforts, had been able to devise a better plan. This was one of those rare, grim situations where a '*good*' solution simply did not exist. Yet, this rational understanding did little to assuage the guilt that gnawed at her, leaving her feeling as though she had let her team down.

Ultimately, however, after a series of solemn exchanges, with each member voicing their thoughts and concerns, they collectively decided to shelve the final decision until the morning. Desmond's input was going to be crucial for this; his technical expertise potentially offering another perspective or, at the very least, help them come to terms with the plan's stark reality.

As they dispersed, the unresolved question hung over them like a dark cloud.

Who would remain to ensure the mission's success? It was a decision none wanted to make, a burden that weighed heavily on their hearts. The plan was clear, its execution meticulously laid out, but the emotional cost of this sacrifice was yet to be fully reckoned with...

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Restless and troubled, sleep had eluded Thea throughout the night.

As dawn broke and the squad convened for their final briefing, the mood in the office was heavy, each member weighed down by the impending decision.

Desmond, having been briefed on the previous night's discussions already, shared in the squad's sombre contemplation. He had meticulously reviewed his drone recordings, paralleling Thea's efforts from the day before, in search of any overlooked detail or alternative. Despite his thorough analysis, his findings only reinforced the inescapable conclusion: Their current strategy was the only viable path forward.

Corvus initiated the meeting, his penchant for leadership evident in these times more than ever. He methodically outlined their plan for the day. "We'll diverge at this point," he began, pointing to a location on the data-pad, displaying Desmond's drone footage. "The designated shooter, yet to be determined, will proceed to the spot marked Alpha, equipped with Thea's Caliburn. They'll set up there, in a position identified by Thea and Lucas as optimal for sniping. The goal is to target the Mativ, and the tech within, from the most advantageous angle available. The shooter will remain on standby, ready to take the shot either when the Mativ is opened and the tech exposed, or by sunset, whichever comes first."

His words were clinical, detached, yet the gravity of the task at hand was not lost on any of them. Each member absorbed the details, their faces reflecting a mix of resolve and the unspoken burden of the sacrifice they were about to make.

"In parallel, the remainder of the team will rapidly advance towards the heart of Nova Tertius. They must cover a minimum distance of 50 kilometres to stand any chance of staying ahead of the search teams before they reach the city's more populated sectors and can hide their presence amongst them. This means no breaks and minimal time for selecting the safest routes. Each of them must be at their utmost alert, constantly on the lookout for potential traps, ambushes, or alarm triggers. Their vigilance in this phase is critical to avoid detection and ensure everyone's collective safety."

With the plan fully laid out and everyone in agreement and understanding about it, Corvus, his voice tinged with gravity, opened the discussion about the real topic of their plight. "We need someone to stay behind for this. Any volunteers?"

Immediately, Isabella, Desmond, and Thea spoke in unison, "I'll do it."

Isabella, with a firm tone, quickly took control of the conversation, overpowering the other two of them. "Look! My role in close-quarter combat isn't needed for stealth operations. I'm an offensive heavy, I do fucking nothing to assist in any kind of stealth operation. Desmond's drones and Thea's urban expertise are far too valuable to lose. Fuck, without them, we

wouldn't have even found this stupid outpost to begin with. There's no shot they'll be less valuable than me going forward!"

Desmond responded, his face etched with a mix of frustration and urgency. "Isabella, you're not seeing the full picture, here! The effectiveness of my drones is *really* limited. What we achieved here with the outpost was more luck than anything else. In the dense urban setting of the city, they'll be way less effective and vastly more noticeable, especially to Stellar Republic patrols or civilians. Plus," he added, emphasising his point, "in a situation where we're cornered or ambushed, your skills in close-quarters combat are indispensable. They could very well be our only way out. You're the ace up our sleeve in those scenarios, so you definitely cannot stay."

Thea, not wanting to be sidelined, asserted herself. "It should be me! Sniping is my responsibility, and this is part of it. I've used the Caliburn the most, know the urban environments the best, when it comes to getting around quickly, and might even be able to escape them! I think it only makes sense that I stay behind for this. Both Isabella and Desmond are—"

Her suggestion was abruptly cut off by a united front from Isabella and Desmond. "That's *not* an option!" they exclaimed together, their voices ringing with determination. Lucas and Karania quickly joined in, reinforcing the sentiment, "You're *not* staying behind, Thea."

Taken aback by the vehement opposition from her entire squad, Thea could only gaze at each of them, her initial resolve faltering under their collective disapproval. The depth of their conviction left her momentarily speechless.

Lucas, his voice tinged with a hint of regret, added, "I'd volunteer myself if it weren't for my role as the defensive heavy. My place is with the main group..."

Karania, throwing her hands up in a blend of frustration and jest, remarked, "And here I am, wishing I could do the 'cool' stuff for once. Being the medic sometimes feels so damn limiting!"

Thea, absorbing their words, thought to herself, '*I don't really think this is about who gets to do the "cool" thing, Kara...*'

The grim reality of their conversation was far from a contest for excitement. They were debating who would make a significant sacrifice, effectively sidelining themselves for a major part of the assessment, to ensure the rest of the squad could advance.

The debate raged on like this, with Isabella and Desmond vehemently advocating for their own stay, each attempting to sway Thea, Karania, and Lucas to their perspective.

The conversation gradually became more heated, as Lucas and Karania began to offer their insights, transforming the dialogue into a fervent exchange of personal convictions rather than a focused strategy session.

As opinions clashed and emotions ran high, the discussion strayed further from its intended purpose.

It seemed to morph into an outlet for airing personal insecurities and frustrations, particularly from Isabella and Desmond, who both felt their skills were less useful than others despite their clear importance to the team.

Amid the cacophony, Thea struggled to steer the conversation back to a productive course. She could tell they weren't getting anywhere, but didn't know how to intervene and manage to get the discussion back to where it needed to be.

As she mulled over this problem, however, her keen perception allowed her to pick up on a deep sigh from Corvus amidst the noise, followed by his calm but firm voice cutting through the din, "I'll do it."

Thea's eyes widened in shock at his declaration.

The rest of the squad, caught up in their heated exchange, didn't seem to notice. '*Corvus? You can't! You're the squad leader!*' she thought frantically, desperate to intervene. Yet, the resolved expression on Corvus' face gave her pause, his steadfast demeanour reflecting a decision made not in haste, but with the weight of leadership.

"I'll do it," Corvus reiterated, his voice rising above the others, instantly quieting the room. "I'll stay behind and take the shot at the outpost." A profound silence enveloped the squad, each member staring at him, their expressions a mix of shock and disbelief. Seizing the moment of stillness, Corvus continued.

"It comes down to simple logic: We can't spare Isabella, Desmond, or Thea for this, at all. And Lucas and Karania aren't even in the running for this, as they're both completely irreplaceable in all aspects and not suited for the task either way. That leaves me as the logical, and only, choice," he spoke with a gravity that underscored the weight of his decision.

"Each of you has a unique and irreplaceable skill set that is crucial for this squad. Something that is downright irreplaceable. Losing any one of those capabilities could make the upcoming parts of our mission completely impossible. My role as the squad leader is to amplify your strengths. I'm a force multiplier, nothing more."

With a self-deprecating chuckle, he continued, "My *unique* skills? Leadership, tactical oversight and social skills. But in this phase of the assessment, those skills are neither as critical as what each of you brings to the table, nor actually of much use to begin with at this stage. Lastly, Thea here has already demonstrated she can step up in the leadership department when needed, as long as it's primarily about manoeuvring the squad through an urban environment. This decision, while difficult and potentially unorthodox, is the most strategic one for our squad's success."

Thea, unable to contain her frustration, burst out, "That's *bullshit*, Corvus! I can't just take over for the whole assessment. I'm not a squad leader, and I don't want to be one! Every time I have to make a call like this, I feel completely out of my depth. There's no chance I can do this!"

She was adamant, her voice laced with a mix of desperation and conviction. "You're just as irreplaceable as any of us! I should be the one to stay behind. In terms of urban navigation, Isabella can take over, and Desmond's drones can handle the scouting just as well as I can, if not better. I don't bring any unique skills to this squad, certainly less than you think *you* do."

Corvus gave her a stern look, halting her mid-tirade.

His expression was an intricate blend of authority, empathy, and frustration. "I'm staying and taking this shot. You'll become interim squad leader until I return to the squad, there's no arguing about this."

As Thea opened her mouth to retort, Corvus added forcefully, "That's an order, Thea!" And with a more sombre tone, "My last one." His words left no room for further debate, underscoring the finality of his decision.

Thea, momentarily taken aback by his commanding tone, fell silent.

The room resonated with the gravity of his words, and the responsibility now placed upon her shoulders. Despite her protests, Corvus' decision was made, and his role as leader was evident, even in choosing to step away for the greater good of the squad.

"When I mentioned earlier that any one of us, barring Karania, could undertake this task, I was serious. My position as squad leader doesn't exempt me from making tough calls like this," Corvus stated firmly. "What kind of leader would I be if I allowed crucial, irreplaceable skills to be sacrificed, just because I hold slightly more authority than the rest of you? I'm not doing this out of vanity or to avoid squad disagreements, Thea. This decision is about logic, not ego."

He let out another heavy sigh, one that seemed to momentarily alleviate the gravity he carried. "Now, I do need a quick tutorial on the Caliburn. It would be quite the irony if, after all this big talk, I ended up botching the shot due to my unfamiliarity with the weapon." His words carried a hint of wry humour, subtly lightening the tense atmosphere.

The rest of Alpha Squad, each of their faces etched with a tapestry of complex emotions, slowly began to pack up the remnants of their intense discussion. Their faces reflected a blend of resignation, respect, and unspoken concerns as they returned to their preparations for the day ahead. Corvus' decision, though heavy, was accepted as an order, and the team moved forward, albeit with an air of sombre acceptance.

Thea, meanwhile, found herself caught in a whirlwind of internal conflict.

Thrust unexpectedly into a leadership role, she grappled with feelings of reluctance and unpreparedness. Part of her desperately wished for Corvus to stay, to spare her the burden of command. Yet, another part, more rational and grounded, recognized the truth in his words. His logic was sound, and his decision, while difficult, was strategically apt.

Swallowing down a surge of emotions and unsaid arguments, she acknowledged the futility of further resistance. With a quiet resolve, Thea retrieved her Caliburn and began the task of instructing Corvus on its intricacies. As she detailed the weapon's mechanics and nuances, she did so with a newfound sense of responsibility.

It was more than just teaching him about a weapon; it was an unspoken passage of trust and duty, a moment marking her transition into a role she never sought and found herself utterly unsuited for but now had to embrace for the next while...

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Thirty minutes later, the squad was fully geared up and ready to depart. Lucas, taking on additional responsibility, carried two backpacks—one his own and the other Corvus's, now unnecessary for the remainder of his mission.

Corvus, distinct and solitary from the group, had the Caliburn slung over his shoulder.

He held his AR-303 in one hand as he addressed the squad. "Alright then, this is it... Alpha Squad, I have *complete* faith in you. Follow Thea's directions, no matter how unorthodox they may seem. She might not see it, but we all know she's more than capable of keeping us all safe and on track."

He then turned to Thea, his gaze locking onto hers, and to her astonishment, she heard his voice resonating in her mind. She was startled for a moment, until she remembered that he had picked up [Private Communication] before the assessment had started. "*And you, Thea: Use this opportunity to confront some of your self-doubt. This is a trial by fire, granted to you by the circumstances. I have no doubt about your capabilities; it's time for you to see them too.*" His words, internal and profound, were a mix of encouragement and challenge, urging her to embrace the leadership role she had reluctantly accepted and find her self-worth within it.

Flashing a broad grin at his assembled squadmates, Corvus rallied them with a playful yet determined tone. "Let's go all out, shall we? Give them everything we got at every opportunity. Make sure I don't end up regretting this decision. Ooh-rah?"

A robust and spirited "Ooh-rah!" echoed back, igniting smiles across the faces of the squad members, except for Thea. She was still grappling with the gravity of Corvus' parting advice and the weight of leadership now resting on her shoulders.

Sensing her hesitation, Corvus turned to her and prompted, "Well then, Interim Squad Leader, your turn to lead."

Startled, Thea initially responded with a timid "Ah. Right..." But quickly correcting herself, she adopted a more assertive tone, "Alright, Alpha Squad, let's move out. We've got a long distance ahead, and we need to ensure Corvus doesn't get us all killed in the process. So, let's pick up the pace!"

With a newfound determination, she led the squad out of the office building, the rest of the members following her lead, leaving Corvus standing alone, ready to play his final part in the mission...

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PoV: Corvus Leander Sylarion

Perched up high at the chosen vantage point on the top floor of an abandoned factory, Corvus was diligently setting up for the task at hand. The hidden outpost of the Stellar Republic, about 1.5 kilometres away, lay within the view of his scope.

Concealed beneath one of Thea's camouflaging nettings, augmented with industrial debris and dirt to disrupt his outline, he was virtually invisible against the backdrop.

He had meticulously calibrated the Caliburn's scope following Thea's instructions, its bipod firmly grounded. The rifle was loaded with the first of several magazines filled with the armour-piercing, high-explosive slugs that she customarily used—Thea's generous contribution. "Without the Caliburn, I won't need them. You might as well have extra ammo," she had said with a pragmatic shrug.

Chuckling to himself, Corvus found her logic undeniable yet tinged with an overly heavy dose of optimism. "There's no way I'll need all these rounds, Thea," he mused quietly, returning his focus to the outpost.

The sight before him matched Desmond's recordings: A secluded, heavily guarded facility, perpetually on high alert. Guards manned watchtowers and patrolled the courtyards, while others secured the building they occupied. The outpost was a fortress, validating Karania's earlier assertion that a direct approach would have been futile.

Corvus couldn't help but joke to himself, a wry smile on his lips, "I just hope what we're after isn't some bizarre ice-cream machine. Explaining that in the debrief, why I went solo on a suicidal mission for the enemy's leisure appliance, would be awkward." Despite the gravity of his situation, he felt an unusual serenity, a calmness that had eluded him for quite some time.

For him, the solitude was a refreshing change.

As much as he cherished his role as the squad leader, this moment of isolation brought a sense of peace reminiscent of the quieter times before his life with the UHF, before the rigours of integration and the assessment.

Raised to ascend the ranks of the UHF's military from a young age, he rarely experienced a life devoid of heavy responsibilities. The fleeting moments of freedom and personal enjoyment during his childhood were sparse.

Now, these hours of solitude, with nothing but the waiting game and the perfect shot to focus on, felt like an unexpected gift, a brief return to those rare, simpler times.

Yet, a part of him remained restless, his thoughts frequently drifting back to Alpha Squad. '*I hope they manage to get through without me...*' he mused.

His confidence in Thea's capability to lead them and bring the mission to a successful close was rock solid, but he was more than aware of her self-doubt and how it could potentially affect the squad as a whole, with her at the helm.

It baffled him how she could possess such low self-esteem when it was crystal clear to everyone else in the squad that she excelled beyond them in almost every aspect. Despite their best efforts, they always seemed to be not just a single, but several steps behind her seemingly innate talents.

He didn't know what kind of background she had, outside of the fact that she supposedly grew up in an undercity in one of the mid-worlds in UHF space, a fact that had initially taken him by surprise. Her journey from such a challenging environment to passing the trials, being selected by the UHF, and ultimately securing a place in Alpha Squad was nothing short of surprising.

Although Corvus had never personally experienced the mid-worlds, let alone their undercities, the stories he had heard from his family members painted a vivid picture of the tough living conditions and the myriad of challenges one would face there. Understanding these parts of Thea's roots only deepened his astonishment at her presence in Alpha Squad, yet her undeniable talents made it clear she belonged among them.

He remembered his first impression of her during the induction ceremony clearly.

She had seemed timid, almost entirely retreating behind Karania, but that perception had dramatically changed the moment Major Quinn showcased the girl's abilities. The demonstration of her reacting to a point-blank pistol shot had been a revelation.

It was then he realised he was very far from being the top contender in the squad.

Thea's exceptional perception and reflexes, although partly attributed to her Psychic prowess, were talents he knew he could never match. Regardless of the source of her abilities, it did not lessen his respect for her as the scout/sniper of Alpha Squad.

Quite the opposite, in fact.

Thea's potential for growth, as a direct result of this fact, was unparalleled within Alpha Squad. While the others were limited to advancing along a single axis until they unlocked their own Psychic Attribute, Thea was already progressing her capabilities on two fronts simultaneously.

Her burgeoning Psychic abilities promised to elevate her far above the rest, complementing her already exceptional Perception and quick thinking.

In his view, the only other squad member who elicited a similar sense of awe was Karania, albeit for entirely different reasons.

Her brilliance was undeniable.

From their very first conversation, Corvus had been struck by her extraordinary intellect. Her way of thinking, so thoroughly incomprehensible and unique, yet entirely profound, often seemed almost alien to him, especially during those rare times when they had delved into deeper, more complex discussions.

Ironically, he, who had been groomed for the UHF from a young age, now felt perhaps the least remarkable member of Alpha Squad.

This realisation brought a chuckle to Corvus. He pictured his father's reaction if he were to voice such an admission. "He'd be furious," Corvus thought, a grin spreading across his face at the prospect. It was a thought that filled him with an unexpected sense of amusement, a lightness he hadn't experienced in a while.

Refocusing on his mission, Corvus spent the following hours meticulously surveilling the compound through his scope, patiently awaiting the optimal moment to act. Each passing minute was beneficial for Alpha Squad, as it meant they were moving further from his position, enhancing their safety.

Lucas had provided him with precise instructions on when to strike the Mativ, particularly if the Stellar Republic were to open it for inspection or retrieval of the tech. "The Mativ Beta, despite its robust protection and impeccable, specialised design for transporting highly volatile materials, has a well-known vulnerability," Lucas had explained.

"When its rear is initially opened, a seal is disrupted, temporarily weakening the vehicle's internal structural integrity. This period is brief, just a few seconds, but it's crucial. An explosion at this moment would be drawn into the Mativ, magnifying the impact and triggering a chain reaction that will assuredly obliterate the truck and its cargo. The Caliburn's firepower is probably more than enough in this scenario, but we should leave nothing to chance. We need to ensure total destruction of both the Mativ and its contents."

With Lucas's strategy in mind, Corvus remained vigilant, his finger poised near the trigger, ready to exploit this fleeting window of opportunity to its fullest extent should it present itself.

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As the hours ticked by uneventfully, the sun began its descent, painting the sky in hues of orange and red. For Corvus, this was a clear sign that his time in the sniper's nest was drawing to a close. The plan had been clear: Exploit the vulnerability Lucas had described or, should nightfall arrive first, barrage the Mativ with multiple shots from the Caliburn until it was confirmed to be destroyed.

Their priority was to ensure the vehicle and its contents were fully neutralised before the day's end, to prevent any unforeseen complications from derailing their sabotage efforts.

With this in mind, Corvus heightened his alertness, his body tensing in anticipation as he continued to survey the target through his scope.

*'I'll wait out another hour, just until the sun is almost completely set. Maybe the Emperor will favour me yet,'* he thought, his gaze unwavering.

He revisited his escape plan in his mind, that he and Thea had come up with. Despite the high likelihood of this mission being a one-way trip, Corvus wasn't prepared to simply resign himself to fate. Although he lacked the thorough expertise of Thea or Isabella in traversing urban environments like this, his teenage years had included some basic instruction in urban evasion.

It was a slim chance, but Corvus was resolved to seize any opportunity to survive this dangerous play. He had died quite enough times in this assessment already in his eyes, so he would try whatever he could to get out alive.

As the sun dipped further below the urban skyline, casting long shadows over the sprawl of Nova Tertius, Corvus's impatience grew. He watched the Mativ intently, muttering under his breath, "Come on... You haven't checked the tech all day. There must be some tests or procedures due... Don't let this be a wasted vigil."

Then, finally, there was movement.

"Yes! Open it, just open it," he urged silently, tensing in anticipation. He observed a group of Stellar Republic soldiers, accompanied by two individuals who appeared more civilian in clothing and demeanour, approach the Mativ.

They paused in front of the vehicle, engaged in an inaudible discussion.

*'Don't let me down now. Open the truck,'* Corvus silently willed them, as if his thoughts could influence their actions. To his relief, one of the apparent technicians stepped back, while the other began manipulating the truck's rear.

A soft, triumphant "Yes!" escaped his lips as he quickly engaged the Caliburn's grav-lock, a feature Thea had emphasised repeatedly. "Do not. And I repeat, *do not* ever fire the Caliburn without grav-locking it, Corvus. It's a heavy anti-materiel railgun. It accelerates slugs the size of your hand to hypervelocity in a miniscule fraction of a second. If you don't grav-lock it, the kickback on this thing is going to utterly ruin you in every possible way imaginable. *Do not* forget to grav-lock it" she had drilled into him. Heeding her stern warning, he made sure that the weapon was properly secured, readying himself for the critical moment.

Time seemed to stretch into an eternity as Corvus watched, his eyes wide open, determined not to miss the crucial moment. The technician at the Mativ's rear worked methodically, unlocking two hefty doors and security mechanisms to access the inner containment unit nestled deep within the vehicle.

There was a brief pause, perhaps a security clearance being verified through a cybernetic interface or personal identification, before the unit yielded. As it began to open, Corvus noticed a visible rush of air swirling dust into the Mativ's interior—the exact phenomenon Lucas had described.

The momentary disturbance signalled the breaking of the internal seal, momentarily equalising the internal and external pressure that caused the deepest parts of the vehicle to become exposed—the one, critical vulnerability in the Mativ Beta's otherwise impeccable design.

Corvus's heart pounded with adrenaline.

*'Now,'* he thought, seizing the opportunity. With precise control, he gently pulled the trigger, the Caliburn's crosshair fixed on the exact spot he aimed to strike, just behind the unsuspecting technician.

The Caliburn roared to life as Corvus pulled the trigger, unleashing its armour-piercing, high-explosive slug at hypervelocity in an instant. The release generated a colossal shockwave that sent a maelstrom of dust, rust, and small debris swirling into the air around him. The platform he was perched on trembled dangerously under the force, threatening to shake him off his steadfast position.

In that fleeting, singular moment, as the Caliburn discharged its payload, Corvus experienced a glimpse of what he figured it must be like to possess Thea's extraordinarily high Perception. The adrenaline coursing through his veins seemed to heighten his senses to an almost supernatural level, allowing him to momentarily perceive the world in a way he never thought possible.

The experience was nothing short of breathtaking.

For an instant, he felt attuned to every detail of his surroundings, each movement, and reaction unfolding in an almost surreal clarity. It was as if time had slowed, granting him a brief window into a world of enhanced awareness—a world where every subtle nuance was magnified and every action rippled with significance.

In this heightened state of awareness, he could clearly see the trajectory of his shot and the impact it made.

In less than a heartbeat, the Caliburn's slug tore through the air, leaving a trail of iridescent plasma in its wake. Its bluish hue sliced through the dusky reds and oranges of the setting sun, resembling an azure comet streaking across the twilight sky. The scene was thoroughly surreal, majestic and unfathomably moving, a moment of violent beauty in the midst of impending, utter destruction.

As the slug reached its target, it vaporised the technician's neck in an instant, continuing its path unimpeded as if the body had been mere air. Then, with unerring precision, it struck the back of the Mativ exactly where Corvus had aimed. The projectile easily penetrated the vehicle's exterior, burrowing deep into its core before detonating its explosive payload.

The explosion was monumental, magnified exponentially by the Mativ's design flaw and further intensified by the mysterious tech it had housed.

The result was a cataclysmic detonation that erupted into a massive, green-hued sphere of destruction. The ball of fire and energy expanded rapidly, vaporising a significant portion of the nearby outpost in an instant.

Corvus, with his temporarily heightened senses, observed the chaos with unnerving clarity.

The shockwave from the explosion rippled outward, its force so intense that it tore through nearby buildings and structures with ease. Soldiers who were in close proximity to the Mativ had no time to react; they were engulfed by the fiery maelstrom, their figures disintegrating before they could even register what was happening.

Further away, the effects were equally devastating but slightly more varied.

Some soldiers were thrown off their feet by the sheer force of the blast, sent flying through the air like ragdolls, before colliding with walls or other objects with a force that completely shattered their bodies into lifeless lumps.

Others, caught on the furthest periphery of the outpost, were ripped apart by debris, the fragments of the outpost turned into lethal projectiles by the explosion's might.

The entire scene unfolded before Corvus in a series of vivid, almost hyper-realistic images.

He could see the expressions of shock and horror on the faces of the surprised soldiers, the way the air shimmered with heat and energy around the epicentre of the blast, and the gradual collapse of the structures as the shockwave travelled outwards.

It took another moment before the air was filled with a cacophony of sounds—the deafening roar of the explosion, the crumbling of large, towering factory buildings, and the distant cries of the injured and the shocked.

For a brief moment, Corvus lay frozen, his mind grappling with the staggering scale of destruction he had just unleashed. The vividness and detail with which he had perceived the event were beyond anything he had ever imagined possible. The cataclysmic scene he had just witnessed, so clear and intense, momentarily overwhelmed his senses.

However, the sudden impact of retaliatory fire, landing perilously close to his position, jolted him back to reality. The rounds striking mere centimetres from his face shattered the trance-like state he had found himself in.

With no time to spare, Corvus quickly disengaged the Caliburn's grav-lock, slinging the heavy weapon over his shoulder after racking the bolt and releasing a miniature fireball from the gun. He then made a swift descent down the factory's stairwell, each step fuelled by a renewed surge of adrenaline.

His escape was imperative; he knew that with the outpost's destruction, he had become the primary target. The pursuit was on, and his survival now hinged on his ability to evade and outmanoeuvre the enemy forces converging on his location.

Propelled by sheer adrenaline, he navigated the pre-planned escape route with Thea's urban expertise solidly etched in his mind. He moved with a sense of desperate urgency, vaulting through windows, scaling walls, and dashing up and down staircases and metal walkways.

His physical limits were pushed to the extreme, each stride powered by the primal instinct of survival. The rush of adrenaline in his veins urged him to move faster, to push harder, as he weaved through the industrial labyrinth.

His breaths became ragged quickly, but he didn't dare to slow down, knowing full well that hesitation would mean certain death. The echo of his footsteps on metal and concrete was drowned out by the singular focus to escape.

However, his relative solitude was relatively short-lived, despite his best efforts.

The low hum of drones overhead and the distant thrum of engines signalled that the Stellar Republic forces were rapidly closing in on his position.

Without breaking his stride, Corvus shouldered his AR-303 hanging from the sling on his shoulders, firing back at the drones that sought to track him. His shots were precise, each one aimed to disable the mechanical eyes following him from above.

The need to eliminate these aerial threats was crucial—he had to disrupt their tracking to have any chance of finding a hiding spot.

He had hoped for more time to create distance between himself and the pursuing forces, but the efficiency and speed of the Stellar Republic soldiers were far greater than he and Thea had anticipated.

The realisation that he was up against a more formidable enemy than expected spurred him to try and adapt more quickly. Each decision, each turn, and each shot was now critical to staying one step ahead of the rapidly converging danger.

Recognizing that the original escape route would no longer serve him well, Corvus made a split-second decision to veer east, towards the urban outskirts. His plan—to seek refuge in the denser, more residential areas—was a massive gamble.

These neighbourhoods promised more reliable cover than the expansive, open industrial zone where he currently found himself. The journey to the outskirts, however, was daunting, several hours away at best, but it was the only viable option he had left.

As he navigated through the maze of factories and warehouses, Corvus took brief, calculated pauses. Perched atop a metal walkway or crouched on the roof of a building, he used these fleeting moments of elevated positioning and respite to aim and eliminate one drone after another. Each shot from his AR-303 was a desperate bid to buy more time, to remain undetected a little longer.

But the drones seemed endless, a relentless wave of mechanical hunters in the sky, continuously bearing down on his position, following him like bloodhounds chasing after injured prey.

Despite his efforts to stay ahead, the physical toll was quickly becoming evident.

His breaths became more and more laboured, every inhale burning his lungs as if on fire. His legs, pushed to their limits by the relentless, full-speed sprint, began to falter, causing him to stumble occasionally.

Yet, he pressed on, driven by an unyielding will to survive.

The fear of death, or even worse—capture, propelled him forward, each step a raw display of his sheer force of will.

The relentless pursuit continued regardless, a grim dance of hunter and prey.

Corvus understood quickly that his current strategy was unsustainable. The urban districts, with their promise of cover and concealment, were agonisingly far out of reach. The vast, open industrial terrain offered little in terms of hiding spots, making it all too easy for the unending swarm of drones to track him.

He very much knew that he couldn't outrun them indefinitely.

Resigned to the inevitable confrontation, Corvus abruptly changed course, heading toward a nearby office building reminiscent of their previous hideout. He moved swiftly, his survival instincts guiding him as he ascended to the second-highest floor. There, he hastily erected a rudimentary barricade at the stairway, creating a choke point to slow any pursuers.

Panting heavily, he tried to calm his racing heart and steady his severely laboured breathing.

The urgency of the situation was clear: He needed to thin out the ranks of his pursuers to dissuade them from further pursuit, at least for a short time. He needed that extra bit of distance between them, in order to hopefully get to the urban outskirts.

With a sense of grim determination, he reloaded his AR-303 and positioned the Caliburn within easy reach. He then settled into a strategic vantage point, his rifle aimed toward the staircase.

In this makeshift stronghold, Corvus prepared for the impending confrontation.

He knew that his chances of survival depended not just on his marksmanship, but also on his ability to outsmart and outlast the enemy forces converging on his position. The stakes were high, and the next few moments would be crucial in determining his fate.

He had brought just four grenades with him, all that would fit in his pockets without overburdening him—he had, after all, planned to run more than fight. They were now placed next to him on a table, ready to be deployed when necessary.

The first sounds of armoured footsteps echoed up the staircase, signalling the approach of his pursuers. Corvus knew his AR-303 wouldn't be effective against heavy armour, so he quickly switched to a more suitable tactic.

Reaching for one of the four grenades he had brought—a last resort intended for desperate situations just like this—he readied himself for the crucial moment.

As soon as he caught a glimpse of movement, the silhouette of an enemy soldier ascending the stairs, he pulled the pin and released the grenade. The explosion was immediate and overwhelming, the confined space amplifying the blast, leaving his ears ringing and his senses momentarily disoriented.

The explosion seemed to halt the enemy's advance temporarily, but it wasn't long before they regrouped and continued their ascent.

Corvus, recovering from the disorientation, resumed his position.



He peered through the sights of his rifle, taking down the advancing soldiers who weren't equipped with heavy armour. Each shot was precise, aimed to incapacitate with lethal efficiency.

Corvus targeted vital areas only—heads, throats, upper chests—anything within his line of sight that would ensure a quick and violent death of his assailants. At such close quarters, his AR-303's rounds effortlessly penetrated the T1 armour of the advancing soldiers, assuming they were not wearing heavy armour.

He was methodical and precise, his every shot calculated down to an art.

Mindful of his own vulnerability, he shifted his position after every second shot. Staying mobile was crucial; it prevented him from becoming an easy target for the predictive fire that the enemy soldiers were using in their attempt to flush him out.

The battle continued to intensify at a rapid pace as grenades were lobbed in his direction, but Corvus deftly evaded them, by ducking behind desks, nearby walls or throwing himself on the ground. Despite his agility, the confined space of the office became a maelstrom of destruction.

The shockwaves and shrapnel from the explosions mercilessly tore through the office rooms he sought refuge in, turning them into an ensemble of chaotic ruins. Shards of debris had managed to pierce his armour in several places, embedding themselves painfully into his flesh. While these injuries were not immediately life-threatening, they added to the growing list of his physical tolls.

In this desperate standoff, Corvus became a one-man fortress, countering the relentless assault with a blend of tactical acumen and sheer willpower.

Every once in a while, he strategically used his remaining grenades against the rare heavily armoured foes attempting to breach his defences. He threw them with careful timing, ensuring they detonated before the soldiers could reach and potentially dismantle the barricade—his only life line standing between him and certain death. The blasts tore through the narrow stairwell, disrupting the enemy's momentum and buying him precious time that he used to reload and reposition.

With each passing second, the fight continued to escalate further and further, as some of the drones equipped with weapons that had been chasing him for a while started taking shots at him through the walls from the outside, blindly firing into the office building.

Corvus operated on instinct alone, alternating between gunfire, grenades and tactical repositionings while trying to predict where the drones were going to shoot through next.

He held the line against the relentless, unending advance of Stellar Republic clones.

His makeshift fortress had become a devastated battleground in mere minutes, and he fought with the ferocity of a cornered animal, determined to survive against the overwhelming odds at all costs.

By the time Corvus's AR-303 finally clicked empty, signalling the end of his ammunition, he surveyed the chaos around him. The stairwell lay in ruins, battered by the relentless exchange of grenade blasts and rifle fire.

His defence had been beyond fierce, but it had not come without cost.

He was wounded, battered by gunfire from the soldiers storming up the stairs and the drones blindly firing from outside. In the confined space, his options for evasion were limited, and his luck in avoiding the unseen assailants from outside had dwindled and ultimately ran out.

Yet, amidst the pain and exhaustion, Corvus refused to concede defeat.

None of the shots had struck his vital organs, but he was bleeding heavily from numerous gunshot wounds. His uniform was soaked in blood, each movement complete and utter torment as his body tried to give out with every step.

With a grim determination, he steeled himself for the next phase of his fight. *'I can still make it... I just need to clear the stairway, take down those drones, and I can escape. Keep going, Corvus,'* he repeated internally, using sheer willpower as a crutch to keep himself upright.

His body screamed for rest, pushed far, far beyond its limits, but his spirit remained unbroken, fueling his resolve to survive and escape.

Struggling to reach the spot where he had left the Caliburn, Corvus felt each movement send jolts of pain throughout his battered body. Lifting the heavy weapon was an agonising effort, but he managed to position it toward the stairwell, grimacing with each tormenting movement.

He activated the grav-lock mid-air, only leaned against a nearby wall for support, a risky manoeuvre that would strain the mechanism heavily, but necessary under the circumstances. He knew that if he attempted to crouch or lie down for a more stable positioning, he would not ever rise again.

As the first soldier of the next wave breached the remains of his once-protective barricade, Corvus didn't hesitate. He pulled the trigger, and the Caliburn unleashed its fury, emitting a sound akin to a thunderclap concentrated at a single point.

The indoor shockwave was immense, bursting his eardrums instantaneously, even through the maxed out protection of his helmet, nearly making him pass out from the sheer pain and the massive wave of pressure it shot through him.

The slug from the Caliburn met its target with brutal efficiency in the blink of an eye, piercing through the soldier's heavy armour, fully obliterating his upper body, and tearing through the wall behind him before detonating in the far-off distance.

Racking the bolt of the Caliburn for the next shot was just as torturous as lifting it, yet he did it anyway. Each movement was a battle against his own pain and fatigue, but he vividly recalled Thea's stern warning: "Always release the heat after firing the Caliburn. Trust me."

*'Just one more shot, Corvus. One more shot,'* he told himself, his eyes starting to grow heavy as his vision blurred. *'Keep it together, you're nearly out of this. They can't have many more clones available, then it's just the drones and a short jog towards the urban outskirts. Keep it together.'*

He fired the Caliburn, again and again, each time racking the bolt with what he assumed was the last vestige of his strength, yet he managed to keep going for just one more shot.

By the time Corvus had emptied the Caliburn's magazine, a first in its history, and replaced it with one of the spare ones Thea had given him "just in case," he realised he had lost vision in his right eye.

Uncertain whether it was due to blood, some other obstruction, or his body's own failings, he pushed the thought aside.

It mattered little in the face of his grim resolve. Standing with the Caliburn gripped tightly, he continued to unleash its fury on the decimated staircase, shot after relentless shot.

Suddenly, a fresh wave of pain surged through him as a bullet tore through his right lung.

In an instinctive reaction, he swung the Caliburn toward the staircase leading from the floor above and fired, eliminating another hidden adversary who had completely caught him off guard.

As he coughed up blood, a morbid chuckle escaped his lips, tinged with blood foam. "I'm sorry, Thea. I forgot your advice... I might... I might not make it, after all," he rasped between coughs.

With the next discharge of the Caliburn, the grav-lock failed spectacularly, its demise marked by a loud crack that Corvus felt more than heard, his eardrums already beyond functioning.

The recoil, no longer mitigated by the device, struck him with brutal force. It shattered his medium armour as if it were glass, sending shards flying, and brutally pulverising every bone in his right shoulder as he was flung across the room, painfully hitting the wall on the far-side of it.

He momentarily blacked out, but quickly got back to his senses, a relentless mantra echoing in his mind, *'Just one more shot. One more shot, Corvus.'*

He had known that this was the end for a while now, but he had not wanted to allow it to happen. Now, however, with his ammunition depleted, his grenades used up and his body so battered, beaten and broken, that he doubted even Karania would try to save him, he had to admit that it was over.

He was going to die here, despite his best efforts.

A sense of regret swept through him, as he inadvertently thought about what he could have done different. Take a different path here, move along another alleyway there.

But it didn't matter. Not really.

Another Stellar Republic soldier climbed up the staircase from below and Corvus, after re-engaging the grav-lock of the Caliburn, as it was now firmly placed on the ground, fired it again.

And again.

By the time he fired it the third time, the heat radiating off of the weapon next to him was scorching the flesh off of his bones, like he was in the epicentre of a dying star.

But it didn't matter. Not really.

Thea had told him in no uncertain terms, that if he knew the end was coming. He should go out with a bang. "If... if you know you can't win... Keep shooting. Tell yourself, '*Just one more shot*' and never stop, Corvus. Don't rack the bolt of the Caliburn, just keep shooting, alright? Only... Only if there is absolutely no way for you to come back to us."

With excruciating effort, Corvus struggled to move his right index finger. His hand muscles, melding grotesquely with the fragments of his disintegrating armour, were barely functional. Yet, driven by sheer will and recalling Thea's last piece of advice, he persisted: "Just keep shooting."

By the time the fourth shot was loosened, something inside the Caliburn, something profound and important, snapped. He could not hear it, but he felt it.

It started like a deep, resonant hum, reminiscent of a planet-sized earthquake brewing in the distance. The vibration intensified, climbing to a stark, shrieking pitch, before it abruptly stopped.

In that moment, it wasn't just the sound from the Caliburn that ceased; all sound vanished.

The world fell into an eerie, profound silence, as if the volume of existence itself had been muted. It was an uncanny stillness, a void filled only by the pervasively silent scream of the Caliburn's death throes, marking the end of its lethal symphony.

In his final moments, Corvus managed a weak chuckle intertwined with a blood-filled cough. Murmuring, "Just keep shooting..." he summoned the last of his strength to pull the trigger.

His one last shot.

What he witnessed then, in the very instant of his final moment, was a blindingly white and golden spark, a brilliant burst of light that marked the Caliburn's catastrophic death.

Pushed far beyond its limits, far beyond every safety mechanism built into it, the weapon's advanced technology broke down, unleashing an explosion that dwarfed the earlier destruction of the Mativ many times over. This massive eruption illuminated the night sky over the desolate industrial sector of Nova Tertius with an intensity far surpassing the midday sun.

The blast's brilliance was so overwhelming that soldiers miles away suffered permanent blindness upon merely glancing at its source.

Those attempting to shield their eyes found the light penetrating through armour, skin, and bone and even soldiers inside of buildings found themselves temporarily blinded by the light penetrating through the rock-crete walls.

In a radius of four kilometres, nothing was left standing.

Every structure, every remnant of the area, was utterly annihilated down to their very atoms in the wake of the Caliburn's brutal demise.

The most eerie part, however, was that the explosion was devoid of any sound or shockwave. It was as if a literal star had briefly come into existence, vaporising everything in its silent, indifferent fury, and then just as quickly, it vanished.

The landscape was plunged back into pure and utter darkness, a stark, unnatural-feeling absence of light that contrasted sharply with the ephemeral but intense luminescence of the Caliburn's final moment and Corvus' last stand...