

## **Arc 1 - Chapter 80 - Weapons**

As soon as Thea issued her warning, the marines surrounding her sprang into action with remarkable efficiency.

Lucas quickly positioned his Stalwart shield in front of Thea and the rest of Sovereign Alpha, forming an impromptu barricade, before the smile on his face from the previous conversation had even had time to dissipate. Isabella pulled her massive rotary machine gun, the Devastation, from her back and stepped protectively in front of Corvus, Karania, and Desmond to shield the more vulnerable members from potential harm.

Desmond immediately launched a drone into the air surprisingly quickly to gain a better vantage point, as if he had been waiting for just this exact thing to happen. Meanwhile, Karania and Corvus armed themselves with their respective rifles and took positions behind Isabella, utilising the cover provided by Lucas' Stalwart and the offensive heavy, to try and get eyes on the potential contacts.

The other Alpha Squads exhibited similar reflexes, each responding according to their specific roles and capabilities. The defensive heavies among them deployed various protective measures, while their teammates sought visual confirmation of the threat as they pulled out their own weapons, maintaining as much safety as possible under the circumstances.

Hegemon Alpha, lacking a defensive heavy, adopted a different tactic.

They quickly deployed individual sections of portable cover: Closest to the area Thea had pinpointed, two marines released white-foam grenades, creating small but effective barricades.

Behind these impromptu shields, the marine in his distinctively unusual armour hefted his heavy-flamer, its threatening muzzle peeking around the foam barrier. Their squad's lone heavy, wielding a gun that appeared to be a more streamlined and agile variant of Isabella's Devastation, similarly shouldered his weapon and aimed in the direction of the potential threat.

The coordination and speed with which all the squads prepared for combat were impressive and a large detour from the jovial, almost festive atmosphere that had been pervading their trek up until this point.

In mere moments, every member was deployed and ready for a potential fight for their lives.

Thea's attention remained trained on the spot where she had detected the subtle anomaly.

Her eyes narrowed as she scrutinised the area next to the massive tree trunk, searching for any sign of the elusive flicker that had initially caught her eye. It was a mere shimmer, an almost imperceptible distortion in the air that would have gone unnoticed by most, but a particular pull deep inside of her chest had ticked her off to its likely true meaning.

As she observed, Thea's experiences from the assessment and cube trial kicked in, her mind piecing together the clues.

*'This has to be some form of stealth/illusion technology,'* she deduced, the realisation sharpening her senses. She felt the familiar surge of her Psychic Powers beginning to augment her perception.

Thea's newfound understanding of her Psychic Powers brought a heightened level of control. Previously, she had relied on sheer concentration to try and penetrate through stealth or illusion technologies, focusing intensely on her target. Now, however, she had a clearer method of engagement.

She actively directed her Psychic Powers, channelling the strange, ethereal energy specifically into her eyesight. This focused application of her abilities allowed her to engage with the powers of her Inheritance more efficiently, attempting to dismantle the layers of the stealth or illusion camouflage with a precision she hadn't managed before.

As she intensified her concentration, Thea felt the ephemeral psychic energy coalescing in her eyes, honing in on the elusive flicker. She was making rapid progress, each moment peeling back another layer of its camouflage, getting closer and closer to unveiling the hidden entity.

But just as she felt she was on the cusp of a breakthrough, she encountered an unexpected obstacle. A baffling, indescribable resistance suddenly thwarted her efforts.

It was as though she had hit an invisible barrier, a metaphysical wall that stubbornly resisted her psychic probing. This abrupt impediment came as a surprise, halting her progress just as she believed she was about to reveal the concealed figure or object.

Thea's mind raced with confusion and concern. *'What's happening? This didn't used to happen before. Whether during the Cube Trial or earlier in the Assessment, any stealth fields I focused on just collapsed at the same speed...'* She had always been able to penetrate such defences with a corresponding amount of effort, but this time was different. No matter how hard she tried, it seemed like the last layers simply did not want to budge.

As she pondered this anomaly, a chilling realisation dawned on her, sending a shiver down her spine. *'Could it be another Psyker...?'*

The realisation that she might be facing an experienced Psyker, potentially one with far greater mastery of their abilities than her own, was deeply unsettling for Thea.

She was still grappling with the basics of her newfound psychic identity, barely scratching the surface of what it meant to be a Psyker. The idea of confronting someone who could not only sustain but actively *defend and manipulate* a stealth field with such proficiency was daunting.

This adversary, if indeed a Psyker, would undoubtedly possess skills and experience far beyond what Thea had encountered or trained for.

With a mix of caution and resolve, Thea positioned her Gram, aiming at what she perceived to be the epicentre of the psychic resistance. Logic dictated that the source, likely the enemy Psyker, would be at the heart of the energy concentration.

She steadied her aim and fired, unleashing a focused beam of photons that sliced through the air and vanished into the enigmatic field in an instant.

A heavy sense of disappointment weighed on her as the stealth field remained intact, unaffected by her shot. But her concern quickly escalated to outright panic when she heard a distinct triple chime sound from her communication device, a signal also echoing from the comms of her fellow Sovereign Alpha members, and likely the rest of the Alpha Squads around her too.

That specific triple chime was a signal ingrained in them during their Basic training, its meaning unmistakable and urgent: '*Friendlys, cease fire.*' It was a warning that they were potentially targeting their own allies, a critical cease-and-desist order that demanded immediate compliance.

The realisation hit Thea hard, flooding her with a mix of confusion and urgency as she tried to process the implications of this sudden development.

The rapid unfolding of events transpired in just the brief moments it took for Thea's squad and the other Alpha Squads to assume their defensive positions. As Lucas fully extended his Stalwart shield, providing comprehensive cover for Thea and her squad, the urgent triple chime of their comms echoed, signalling the immediate need to cease fire.

Almost synchronously with this alert, the mysterious stealth/illusion field dissipated, revealing its true nature. A squad of marines emerged from where the field had once obscured their presence. Leading the group was a heavy, donned in ultra-heavy armour and brandishing a Tier 1 kite-shield, confidently stepping forward toward the Alpha Squads.

As Thea observed the approaching squad, a realisation dawned on her. '*That's why my shot didn't disrupt the field. Is that guy the psyker...?*' she pondered, her mind racing to connect the dots. With the immediate threat now identified as friendly, she rose from her crouched, combat-ready stance, relaxing her posture now that the situation had shifted from potentially hostile to unmistakably allied.

The air of tension and uncertainty that had enveloped Thea and her squad was swiftly dispelled by a familiar voice, one that Thea recognized instantly. "See? I told you that my little rabid sniper would catch us and not hesitate for even a second to take the shot. You owe me now, Moira."

The reply came in a tone mixed with annoyance and good-natured ribbing, "Yeah, yeah. Whatever, Vi," grumbled a heavier-set voice. "I still can't fathom how you manage to find these types of people. Must be a perk of being an absolute lunatic, huh?"

Hearing this exchange, Thea couldn't help but let a wide grin spread across her face as she recognized the voices.

Viladia, someone Thea considered to be something akin to her mentor and of course friend, emerged from behind the heavily armoured figure, waving enthusiastically at Thea. Her gesture was so endearing and childlike that Thea instinctively started to wave back, only to catch herself midway and resume a more combat-ready posture.

As expected, Morin, another familiar face, appeared alongside Medic Johnsen, stepping out from the protection offered by the heavy.

Thea also noticed another heavy, whose armour was notably lighter and more offensive in design compared to the usual ultra-heavy gear of a defensive specialist. This marine's armour bore a closer resemblance to Isabella's, suggesting a more attack-oriented role.

The unexpected arrival of Viladia and her squad immediately washed over Thea with a wave of relief and a comforting sense of the familiar. Yet, as she processed their presence, another realisation struck her, one that seemed obvious in hindsight. *'Of course! Viladia is an assassin and expert infiltrator! It makes perfect sense that she and the rest of Staff-Sergeant Venn's special unit would be involved in this mission... How did I not consider this earlier?'*

She acknowledged to herself that her mind had been preoccupied with more immediate and pressing matters, leaving little room for speculation about potential participants in the mission.

However, she couldn't help but feel that she might have anticipated Viladia's involvement. Given that the operation was orchestrated by Staff-Sergeant Venn and had a clear focus on assassination and infiltration tactics, it would have been a logical conclusion that an expert like Viladia would play a key role.

Just as Thea's tension had begun to ebb away, she tensed up again at the sound of additional footsteps and the distinct creaking of branches overhead. Before she could react, Viladia's voice reached her, calming yet firm, "Don't shoot, Thea. They're with us—the rest of the infiltration squads." Her tone was reminiscent of someone gently dissuading a guard dog from reacting to friendly visitors.

From their hiding places—camouflaged behind tree trunks, nestled within bushes, blended into the undergrowth, and even perched in the trees above—a variety of marines began to emerge. They appeared in small, well-coordinated groups, each squad consisting of 4-6 members, decked out in an array of different armour styles, indicating their various specialisations and roles.

*'I didn't even know they were here until they just started moving...'* Thea thought to herself, awed at the sheer level of skill at display.

Morin, who exuded a commanding, yet also characteristically resigned, presence suggesting a leadership role, approached Corvus and the other squad leaders of Alpha Squad. They had congregated in a central area, seemingly in anticipation of a debriefing or further instructions.

Thea, curious about the unfolding meeting, was considering moving closer to overhear the discussion. However, her plans were quickly thwarted as Viladia, assuming the role of an enthusiastic mentor, latched onto her.

With a mixture of pride and eagerness, Viladia began leading Thea around, introducing her to the members of her squad. The way Viladia presented Thea to the others was akin to a proud parent showing off their child, a combination of pride and affection evident in her demeanour.

First, she brought Thea to Medic Johnsen. The medic offered a friendly, albeit reserved, greeting. "You look much better than the last time I saw you," he remarked with a slight smile, clearly referencing the time right after her Focus Overdraw, before Thea had joined the rest of the squad on the 'Strike One' mission. "Glad to see your injuries have healed up nicely."

Next, Viladia introduced Thea to the defensive heavy of their squad, known simply as Crusher. He responded to Thea's introduction with just a grunt, prompting Viladia to comment, "We think he might be mute. He hasn't spoken to anyone as far as we know." She paused before adding, "Though Morin insists he's not mute. I have my doubts."

Despite his silence, Crusher's presence was formidable. He was around the size of Lucas, but seemed to radiate a more experienced and even calmer, yet undeniably powerful aura, that spoke of many past battles.

The last introduction was to Moira, who immediately captured Thea's attention. Up close, Thea noticed the intriguing contrast in Moira's appearance—heavy armour coupled with equipment that hinted at a sniper's role. The thing that gave it away the most was Moira's weapon, a formidable-looking lever-action sniper rifle, that was slung casually over her shoulder.

Viladia introduced her with a mix of respect and humour, "This is our mountainous sniper, Moira! She's even sneakier than I am, when it comes to moving around without Abilities. And, believe it or not, she can crush your skull with one hand!" Moira rolled her eyes at the description, clearly accustomed to Viladia's dramatic introductions, yet there was an underlying sense of friendliness between them.

"Good to meet you, Thea. Vi's been talking you up quite a bit," Moira greeted, her voice carrying a hint of warmth as she extended her right hand for a handshake. Thea grasped it, feeling a sense of mutual respect in the firm, confident grip.

As their hands met, Thea instantly recognized the truth in Viladia's earlier description of Moira's physical prowess. '*She wasn't exaggerating; Moira really **could** crush a skull with this hand,*' she thought, thoroughly impressed.

Despite its surprisingly small size relative to Moira's imposing stature, the hand felt incredibly powerful. The muscles underlying it, combined with the thick, sturdy gauntlets of her heavy armour, gave the impression of shaking hands with something unyielding and formidable, akin to a mountain.

The handshake conveyed a raw power that was difficult for Thea to describe fully, leaving her with a deep impression of Moira's physical capabilities and the latent strength she undoubtedly possessed.

Thea could muster only a brief "Likewise" in response, finding herself momentarily speechless in the face of Moira's imposing presence.

Viladia jumped in, seemingly not wanting to be left out of the conversation for longer than a few seconds, "I'm probably jumping the gun here, but what the heck: We're going to be infiltrating together, Thea! 'Strike One' reunites! Well, except for Einor. I have no clue where he's at..." She paused, a hint of concern flickering in her expression, then her enthusiasm rekindled. "But hey, we've got Moira, Johnsen, and Crusher on board now! Upgrades all around, really!"

Thea, still processing this new information, remained silent.

She realised that she had been so caught up in Viladia's exuberant energy that she had drifted away from her own squad. Glancing around, she noticed Sovereign Alpha standing a short distance away, grouped near Corvus and the other squad leaders, seemingly waiting for further instructions.

Seizing the rare opportunity both to satisfy her curiosity and to work on being more approachable, she turned her attention back to Moira with a question about her unique weapon. "That's an impressive-looking rifle you have there. I don't think I've ever seen one quite like it. Would you mind telling me a bit about it?" Thea asked, her interest genuine.

Viladia, who had been brimming with excitement over her announcement, deflated slightly at being sidelined in the conversation. She pouted, feeling a bit overlooked as the topic shifted from her thrilling revelation to Moira's weapon. Moira, on the other hand, flashed a smug smile at Viladia before turning her attention back to Thea, clearly pleased to discuss her prized rifle.

"You probably haven't seen anything like it because it's a Tier 2 weapon," Moira explained, her voice tinged with a hint of pride. "I got it using a Tier-Up Voucher from one of my accomplishments. Those vouchers are pretty rare, especially among Tier 1 marines."

As Thea opened her mouth, wanting to mention her own T2 weapon, the Caliburn, Moira dove enthusiastically into the specifics of her rifle, leaving no room for interjection. "This here is the 'Vigilant,' a T2 Lever-Action Sniper Rifle. What's unique about it is the lever-action system—it's equipped with two separate ammo rails. You can load each with different types of rounds, and during the action of the lever, you can choose which rail engages. It allows for rapid switching between ammunition types, making the Vigilant incredibly versatile in combat situations."

Moira's eyes gleamed with pride as she continued, "What's more, both the ammo rails and the barrel are coated with a special Tier 2 material. This coating allows the gun to accommodate a wide range of bullet sizes—from the smallest calibres up to the maximum diameter the barrel can handle. This means I can use almost *any* rifle ammunition available! I can't tell you how many times that saved my ass, really. Being able to just pick up random

magazines, pop up the bullets and use them for my gun has been an absolute life-saver on so many occasions..."

Thea listened intently, fascinated by the advanced capabilities and innovative design of Moira's rifle. The weapon's versatility and adaptability were remarkable, and it was clear that Moira had a deep understanding and appreciation of her firearm's unique qualities.

Before Thea could delve further into the specifics of Moira's impressive 'Vigilant,' Viladia, eager to regain some of the spotlight, interjected enthusiastically. "Hey, don't forget about me! I've got a Tier 2 weapon too, Thea. Check this out!" she exclaimed, keen to show off her own advanced equipment and share in the excitement of discussing high-tier weaponry.

Viladia, with a flourish that seemed to conjure magic, produced a compact, hand-sized tube seemingly out of thin air. Thea watched, fascinated, as the tube unfolded and transformed before her eyes into a sophisticated compound bow in mere moments.

The weapon had a sleek structure composed of various Tier 2 materials, each distinguishable by their unique coloration and hues. The frame of the bow shimmered with an iridescent sheen, indicating a lightweight yet incredibly strong alloy, while the string and pulleys had a darker, almost carbon-like appearance.

"This," Viladia announced with a hint of pride, "is my Tier 2 Compound Bow, aptly named the 'Shooting Star.'" Thea, while unfamiliar with the use of bows in modern combat, couldn't help but be intrigued. She figured that she knew Viladia well enough to trust that she wouldn't choose any random weapon, just for the sake of it looking cool, that wasn't optimal for her style and efficiency.

Viladia explained further, "The Shooting Star, thanks to the advanced T2 materials, can launch arrows and various payloads at velocities comparable to most rifles."

Moira, half-jokingly, interjected, "*Definitely* not as fast as the Vigilant, though." But before Moira could elaborate, Viladia swiftly countered by showcasing her specialised ammunition. From hidden compartments in her armour, Viladia retrieved different sets of arrows, each with unique characteristics.

One arrow featured menacing barbed sections along the shaft, that Viladia elaborated was primarily for punching through and biting into particularly hard targets. Thea had no idea what that would be useful for, in particular, but the way Viladia talked about it seemed to mean that she used them a lot.

Another had a peculiar design, almost like a bullet affixed to the front of an arrow, hinting at a potential hybrid approach to traditional and modern ballistics. The following explanations confirmed this suspicion, as Viladia mentioned that this particular type of arrow made use of a lot of the aerodynamics and ballistics of rifle bullets to increase the overall speed and penetrative capabilities of her arrow.

The third arrow was particularly striking, with a cerulean, bulbous tip that suggested some sort of high-tech or explosive payload. "This one," Viladia explained as she held it up for Thea to examine, "is filled with liquid Glacium. It's a T2 material, as you might have guessed.

It freezes down whatever it hits to absolute zero, making for some very potent and versatile arrows!”

Thea watched in amazement as Viladia effortlessly produced arrows from seemingly nowhere, her adeptness at concealing and accessing her ammunition from the hidden compartments within her armour was remarkable. This display of skill and the lethal diversity of the arrows further enhanced the allure of the ‘Shooting Star.’

Thea's initial thoughts were reaffirmed; Viladia's choice of a bow as her weapon was no whim. It was a decision marked by careful consideration and strategy, tailored to her unique style and the demands of her role as a stealth expert and assassin.

Thea's respect for Viladia's meticulous planning and adaptability grew, recognizing the thoughtful process behind selecting such an unconventional yet almost assuredly effective weapon for what she needed to do.

The playful banter between Moira and Viladia continued for a few more minutes, each enthusiastically extolling the virtues of their respective weapons. Their conversation gradually shifted from practical features to increasingly whimsical and eccentric uses.

Viladia, with a gleam in her eye, boasted, “Well, sure, but don't forget that the Shooting Star can shoot an arrow and then catch it afterwards!” Thea listened, finding it hard to imagine a scenario where such a capability would be of any practical use.

Moira, not to be outdone, retorted with a smirk, “That's all well and good, but at least my Vigilant is solid enough to use as a club. I could bash someone's skull in and it wouldn't even get a scratch!” Thea, bemused, realised that their conversation had veered well away from practicality and into the realm of playful but pointless competition.

Caught between these two dynamic and extroverted personalities, Thea felt somewhat out of her depth, more a spectator than a participant in their light-hearted rivalry.

Just then, the gathering of squads began to disperse, signalling a shift in focus back to the mission at hand. Viladia, observing the movement, quickly wrapped up their discussion. She deftly collapsed the Shooting Star back into its compact cylindrical form and secured it to her armour, ready for later use.

“Looks like we're getting started,” Viladia commented, her tone switching to a more serious and operational focus. “Sovereign Alpha will be supported by my squad and an additional infiltration unit. We'll split into four separate groups from here, keeping about two kilometres between each to avoid detection. We need to minimise our presence in the forest—even with our stealth, moving in large numbers would be too conspicuous.”

The three of them moved back towards Sovereign Alpha and the approaching additional squad, to get some last-minute briefings about their exact proceedings. Things could always change, so it was prudent to check if the plan that had originally been put into place still held water.

Ultimately, however, everything seemed more or less as expected, as they started their trek towards the wall. This time around, Thea found herself nestled between Sovereign Alpha



and Morin's squad, which she learned was simply called "Arrow". Viladia couldn't help but boast it was named solely because of her aptitude with the Shooting Star, which was quickly shut down by both Moira and Morin.

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As they continued their trek, Thea recalled the earlier conversation about Tier 2 weapons. She decided to revive the discussion by revealing her own T2 weapon, the Caliburn, as she hadn't gotten around to doing so earlier and felt that it might be useful for them to know about. Gently unholstering it from its place on her backpack, she thought, '*I should show them my weapon too. It might be something Moira could use in combination with her Vigilant in the future...*'

Approaching Moira and Viladia, Thea felt a slight hesitation.

Their conversation had moved on, and she hadn't been a part of their more recent discussions. However, determined to be more assertive in her social interactions, she knew this was an opportunity to step out of her comfort zone.

With a voice that she hoped sounded confident, she introduced her weapon, "This is the Caliburn, my T2 anti-materiel heavy railgun. It's been incredibly useful for taking down heavily armoured targets, stealth generators, and fortified positions. I highly recommend it."

Proud of her assertive start, Thea's confidence began to falter as an uncomfortable silence ensued. Doubt crept in, '*Did I mess up again, somewhere...?*'

Her question was answered when Moira suddenly exclaimed in shock, "You have a fucking T2 weapon?! Vi, I thought you said she's just a Recruit?!" Her outburst was loud enough to draw a sharp rebuke from Morin, reminding them of the need for discretion and quiet in their current environment.

Viladia, equally surprised, responded in a fluster, "I... I didn't know!" She then turned to Thea, her expression a mix of surprise and irritation, "Thea, what the fuck?! You have a T2 weapon?! When did that happen?!"

Thea, momentarily taken aback by the unexpected intensity of their reactions, quickly regrouped. Determined not to let the conversation peter out after having successfully initiated it, she elaborated on her experience with the Caliburn. "Ehh... I've actually had it since the Cube Trial. I earned an Accomplishment during it and decided to purchase it before we started the assessment. Unfortunately, it was overheated during the Strike One mission, so I couldn't use it there. But it was instrumental in destroying the stealth generator in the second ambush on the first day, and I also took out three anti-armour cannons with it during the assault on the wall. It's a really effective weapon!"

Thea's enthusiasm for the Caliburn was evident. She was trying to upsell Moira on the Caliburn's good points, to maybe get the other sniper to pick it up in the future.

She genuinely believed it would be a great addition to Moira's arsenal, particularly considering Moira's heavy armour. Unlike Thea, who always had to be mindful of finding

cover, Moira could potentially use the Caliburn's firepower without as much concern for immediate retaliation.

Moira, still grappling with the information, replied incredulously, "...since the Cube Trial? What in the world happened during that Cube Trial?!" She turned to Viladia, her expression a mix of surprise and curiosity.

Viladia, equally astounded, could only shrug and respond in kind, "Don't ask me! I'm hearing this for the first time myself! Seriously, Thea, what's the story here?!"

Thea's unexpected disclosure about the Caliburn had successfully captured the attention of Viladia and Moira, igniting their curiosity about her adventure during the Cube Trial and how she came to possess such an advanced weapon so early in her career.

This was not exactly the direction Thea had intended the conversation to go, but it presented an opportunity for engagement—a valuable chance to participate in a dialogue of her own making, something she had been very much striving to improve at.

Seizing the moment, Thea spent the next twenty minutes recounting her experiences during the Cube Trial.

She aimed to provide a detailed narrative, hoping to weave in as much information as possible while subtly guiding the conversation back to the specifics of the Caliburn. Her story was engaging, filled with insights and anecdotes that even had Viladia and Moira ask a myriad of clarifying questions.

Just as she was about to reach the pivotal moment in her tale—the shopping expedition with Kara aboard the Sovereign, which would have seamlessly led the discussion back to the Caliburn—she was interrupted.

Both Corvus and Morin, the respective leaders of their squads, broke into the squad comms.

They called for everyone to regroup and urged heightened awareness of their surroundings.

The interruption was timely, signalling a shift back to the operational focus of their mission, but it left Thea's story tantalisingly unfinished and the conversation about her T2 weapon momentarily suspended.

Thea cast a rueful glance back towards where Sovereign Alpha was regrouping, her thoughts still lingering on the conversation about her Caliburn. She heard Viladia and Moira moving away, returning to their respective squads, and a tinge of disappointment crossed her mind,

*'But... I didn't get to finish talking about my Caliburn...!'*

The operational demands of their task reclaimed priority over personal discussions and shared interests, as they neared the Stellar Republic's defensive wall once again...