

Arc 1 - Chapter 92 - Burying Light

Leading the rest of Alpha Squad in Corvus' stead, was a strange feeling for Thea.

While it was fundamentally the same exact thing she had been doing for the past few days already, ever since they had entered Nova Tertius and Corvus had ceded the lead to her for her urban expertise, it felt a whole lot more "real" when he was not there to fall back on.

Under her guidance, the pace of their movement quickened, a strategic decision aimed at widening the gap between them and any potential pursuers stirred into action by Corvus's actions.

The urgency of their mission pressed upon Thea, reminding her of the critical balance between speed and caution. She recognized that mere distance wouldn't suffice as a shield against the determined efforts of search teams either. Their safety hinged not just on evading detection but on smartly navigating the desolate landscape that sprawled before them.

Thea's mind raced with plans and contingencies as she led the rest of the squad, her thoughts a continuous whirlwind of strategies and potential pitfalls.

It was now fully on her to make the decisions, decide on their plans and movements and make the tough calls that she *really* did not want to have to make. She found it hard to imagine that she would get even remotely close to Corvus' level of leadership, considering how much better he was than her at this kind of stuff, but she had promised him to try her best—and the best is what she'd try to deliver.

Three hours into their expedited journey, Thea made a decisive shift away from their initial trajectory, a decision born from prolonged contemplation as they navigated the desolate industrial sprawl.

She signalled a halt, leading the squad into a familiar structure, another industrial office building mirroring the one they had encountered the day prior. It was as if each building in this sector was cast from the same mould, adhering to an unspoken architectural uniformity.

Among the squad, only Isabella seemed to embrace the accelerated pace with relative ease.

The others, in stark contrast, displayed their exhaustion openly, seeking immediate respite upon securing a spot within the building's second-to-last floor. They slumped against the walls, collapsed onto the floor, or claimed chairs from the offices, their heavy breaths filling the silent space.

Thea recognized the strain she was imposing on her team, pushing them beyond what Corvus might have deemed reasonable.

Yet, she felt compelled to maintain their swift advance.

The urgency of distancing themselves from the impending destruction of the hidden outpost drove her to demand more from them than perhaps was fair. Their only pact regarding the

timing of Corvus's action was a hopeful alignment with the day's end, under the cover of dusk.

However, the absence of a concrete timeline meant Thea could not afford to let off the throttle for quite some time.

Only when she could assure herself that they had sufficiently obscured their trail from any potential pursuers would she consider easing the relentless pace. Until that moment, she was resolved to challenge them to reach the absolute limit of their endurance if necessary.

They would be able to rest in the coming days, but not today.

"Take five, we'll veer off our previous course and head back into the urban outskirts, before continuing to head to the city," Thea said with as much confidence in her voice as she could muster. "The moment Corvus reveals our existence, they're bound to send out tons of drones to search for us. In the industrial sector here, we won't have any real cover to make use of to continue our advance, but the urban outskirts' many apartment buildings and larger community complexes will allow us to stay out of sight."

Karania, gasping for air, interjected, "We're going to need more than just a five-minute break, Thea. How are you not totally wiped out? Your Strength isn't exactly top-notch. Isabella, sure, but you? You got some serious skills in this whole urban movement regard, but none of us others do. You jump through those windows, up metal walkways and onto walls like it's nothing, but we're *struggling* with those obstacles and trying to keep pace with you. If we push Lucas any harder, the big guy might straight up die. We need at least a fifteen minute break, to catch our breath for this next part."

After assessing her squad more closely, Thea acknowledged the validity of Karania's concern. Lucas, in particular, seemed on the verge of collapse, his face flushed from the exertion and the additional load of Corvus' mission gear he was shouldering.

She realised she might have underestimated the toll their rapid pace had taken on the team.

Despite their superior Strength stats, Thea's unique upbringing in the undercity had provided her with practical skills and a certain amount of agility in navigating this particular type of environment that raw physical attributes couldn't easily match.

"Okay, we'll take a fifteen-minute break. Drink up, rearrange your gear if something's slowing you down, and then we'll get moving again. I'm aiming to create a 40km buffer from the outpost by tonight, but ideally, we'll cover 70-80," she said, softening her stance. After taking a deep gulp from her own canteen, she added, "We're about 100km away from the city's edge from our starting point this morning. With only two days left until the deadline, I'd prefer we reach our destination sooner rather than scramble at the last minute."

The squad took the break as an opportunity to catch their breath and make some necessary adjustments to their gear. While Isabella and Thea were slightly winded, they bounced back with ease.

Observing her team, Thea pondered if her leadership approach was too demanding.

Lucas and Desmond, in particular, seemed to bear the brunt of the physical challenge, with Karania faring somewhat better due to her agility, lighter load and natural aptitude at learning. She was rapidly becoming proficient in the type of movement required to quickly traverse through the abandoned industrial sector. With a speed that was honestly quite frightening.

Thankfully, she received some nicely timed feedback from the person bringing up the rear.

"You're really pushing them hard, Thea," Isabella said after leaning near a wall close to Thea, "You gotta remember that they don't have our experience in these types of environments. Whenever you're jumping up a walkway to get across some machinery, instead of going around or climbing over it, I can practically see Desmond and Lucas silently begging for mercy."

With a light laugh, she recalled a moment of struggle they had witnessed, "I'm not saying you're in the wrong. You keep doing your thing, I'll make sure we don't lose anyone on the way, 'cause I definitely agree with your sentiment. Urban warfare is *all* about intel, even more so than any other form of warfare that I've seen. Having more ways to avoid the inevitable swarm of drones that'll try to chase us down is definitely the right play. Sure, it might drain their stamina, but it's a lesson worth learning. You gotta remember, we're Alpha Squad. Pushing limits is part of who we are and how we got here. They'll adapt, trust me."

Her words, a mix of advice and encouragement helped put Thea's mind more at ease.

"Thanks, Ela," she said, with genuine appreciation for the advice. "I'll trust you to make sure that nobody falls behind then."

As they waited for the squad to regroup, Isabella and Thea exchanged stories, with Isabella highlighting moments when their team faced unexpected challenges.

One memorable incident involved their attempt to navigate over industrial machinery, only for a belt on it to collapse from under them. While none of them were injured, it had forced Lucas, Desmond, and Karania into a laborious re-climb.

Alongside these tales of squad mishaps, Isabella wove in narratives from her own past, sharing the trials and lessons learned throughout her service before she had joined the UHF, all while ensuring the rest of their team had ample time to recuperate.

"You know, my first city deployment was to tackle some seriously bad fuckers. Fuck, was I a mess back then... Every civvy that walked by felt like a potential threat, every shadow in a window, every corner of an alley seemed to hide danger. It was a complete nightmare," she confided, her voice carrying echoes of those tense days.

"The squad I was with, especially the vets, however, kept their cool, always alert. They saved me from spiralling too far. It took fucking ages to adjust, but let's be real, you never truly get *cozy* with urban warfare. That stuff is a whole other level of messed up, Thea." Isabella paused, reflecting on the possible challenges ahead.

"I'm crossing my fingers we dodge heavy firefights in the coming days. Not sure how the squad would cope; mentally that is. Battlefield stress hits differently in a city. You're wired to

see cities as safe havens, y'know? My first stint fucked me up so much, I was unable to leave my house for months afterward... My mentor had to do some serious heavy lifting to help me get back on track..." Her words trailed off, leaving a silence filled with a heavy tension.

Thea quickly found words to bridge the heavy silence left by Isabella's revelations. "I really hope we can steer clear of that kind of chaos," she offered, trying to lighten the mood, "Though, I guess if anyone can navigate through this mess, it's us. As you said, we're Alpha Squad for a reason, right?"

Isabella's laughter cut through the lingering heaviness. "Exactly," she replied, her usual confidence seeping back into her voice. "Just focus on leading us forward, Thea. I'll handle any surprises we run into along the way and make sure we don't have anyone falling behind." Reassured, Isabella returned to her gear, which she had shed near the entrance of the office, and checked her own supplies to keep herself busy.

Meanwhile, Thea took a moment to mentally run through their route once more, double-checking the mission data she had gotten from Corvus before they had parted, ensuring their path was as safe as possible for the squad's continued advance...

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An hour into their journey, the stark industrial landscape they had been navigating began to merge back into the deserted outskirts of Nova Tertius.

Thea, maintaining their brisk pace, had skillfully guided Alpha Squad through a labyrinth of factories, warehouses, and office buildings, favouring the cover and concealment they offered over the exposed routes outside. This strategy was partly in anticipation of any early detection by the Stellar Republic's forces following a potential exposure of Corvus; something he himself had advised her to do.

Their progression through the industrial sector was notably smooth, thanks to the lack of traps or alarms—a stark contrast to what they now faced again upon reentering the residential outskirts. The sudden shift necessitated a considerable decrease in their speed.

Thea had to once again meticulously scan their surroundings for any signs of traps or alarms that could compromise their safety, especially whenever she decided to lead them through larger complexes or community areas.

Upon reaching a seemingly safe apartment complex, Thea signalled a halt, choosing it as their temporary refuge for rest and recuperation. "Alright, everyone, let's catch our breath for fifteen minutes here," she announced, her voice carrying an undertone of cautious relief. "We're about 90-95 kilometres from the city proper, so we can't afford to dawdle at any point today. Also, take this chance to refill your canteens. The water supply here is still running—I made sure of it during a quick recon earlier. Just be mindful of any potential traps inside the apartments, however. I only checked this first floor, so don't go too far."

The squad, visibly fatigued from the relentless pace, welcomed the break with quiet nods of appreciation. They dispersed within the complex, each member moving with a well-practised caution honed by their recent experiences and observation of Thea herself.

Thea felt slightly off, ever since they had left the industrial office building that morning.

It was the missing weight of the Caliburn, that usually hung from the back of her pack. The powerful weapon, now entrusted to Corvus and stationed near the outpost for a crucial part of their mission, had rapidly become an extension of her being ever since she had acquired it, a key part of her entire role and a massive influence on her assessment so far.

'The Caliburn has absolutely been the best purchase I've ever made... It's come in handy on so many occasions already, it's honestly quite scary. I wonder how things would have turned out, if I hadn't found it, or simply decided to go with any of the other available T2 options that I had—like the Wraith, or maybe one of the T2 DMRs...' She mused to herself, a sense of reminiscing coming over her unexpectedly.

She had a very precise idea of why the thoughts were coming to her now as well, as the day continued to progress.

Before parting ways, she had imparted to Corvus a solemn piece of advice, a last resort that underscored the gravity of their situation. If it came to it, that advice would mark a definitive end for both Corvus and the Caliburn, a sacrifice to prevent the weapon from falling into enemy hands and incurring a severe penalty for the loss of such critical Tier 2 equipment—or more specifically: The material that powered said equipment.

The Caliburn was, as Thea now knew from reading through the technical documentation on her downtime, and what had been further emphasised by the quartermaster that had helped her print the new copy after the assault on the wall, powered by a small lump of an extremely volatile, and similarly rare, T2 material called Solarium.

Solarium's name, derived from its star-like fusion process, was a moniker for its capability to mimic the nuclear fusion at the heart of stars, offering a near-inexhaustible wellspring of energy without the need for external fuel or power sources.

However, the promise of unlimited power came with a steep price, as any such promises naturally would.

Solarium's extraction and refinement processes were fraught with tremendous danger, its volatile nature prone to initiating fusion reactions that could obliterate anything within its vicinity, making its handling and storage a high-stakes endeavour.

This particular characteristic rendered Solarium a logistical nightmare on the battlefield, feared by all factions from the UHF and Stellar Republic to Terra itself. The mere thought of Solarium's potential for destruction made its presence near any strategic location, like an HQ or an FOB, a risk no commander was willing to take lightly.

In stark contrast to other hazardous materials like Ignium, which could be neutralised or contained through various means, Solarium demanded a singular, specific approach to containment.

The only known method to safely house this formidable substance was to suspend it in a perfect vacuum, ensuring it remained isolated from any contact that could trigger its catastrophic fusion potential—a highly delicate balance of power and peril, encapsulated within the Caliburn's sleek frame and reinforced with a vast variety of safety protocols and redundancies.

The instant that vacuum broke and the Solarium came into contact with *anything*, it would violently start nuclear fusion, which ultimately was what powered the massive energy demands of the Caliburn's shots.

Due to this, however, she was also acutely aware that losing the weapon behind enemy lines, without making sure it could not be recovered, was equivalent to throwing away a massive amount of points for the leaderboards. Both Corvus and her would undoubtedly get massive penalties, if that were to happen—the quartermaster that had helped her with the printing of this version of the Caliburn had been very explicit about this part in specific.

But, ultimately, she had given Corvus all the necessary information to make sure that would not happen. All that Thea could do now, was hope that he would have the time to put the plan into action, should the need arise.

Inwardly, she hoped that he would never figure out what would happen if he followed her plan.

She'd much rather that Corvus returned to them over the next few days, which was very much his stated intention and they had dubbed plan A...

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Continuing on their journey, Thea and the rest of Alpha Squad pressed on through the urban outskirts of Nova Tertius, their pace deliberate yet cautious, contrasting sharply with the relentless speed of their earlier traversal through the industrial sector. Breaks were sparse and brief, as their slowed down speed had made it far easier for the rest of the squad to keep up and not overexert themselves needlessly.

If anyone was becoming thoroughly exhausted by this section of the trek, it was Thea herself, as the heightened vigilance required in the residential areas was slowly starting to take its toll on her. Coupled with that, an unsettling silence had started to slowly precipitate over them, punctuated neither by the distant echo of an explosion nor the telltale hum of Stellar Republic surveillance drones.

This absence of expected conflict or detection only served to heighten the squad's collective unease. Doubts about their plans and decisions began to cloud their thoughts as the day waned, the lack of any sign from Corvus or indication of their impact on the Stellar Republic's operations weighing heavily on their spirits.

In these moments, Thea keenly felt the absence of Corvus' leadership.

His ability to rally the squad with the right words or a reassuring strategy was a void she found herself unable to fill whatsoever. Despite her best efforts to emulate his confidence

and maintain morale, her own concerns mirrored those of her teammates and she lacked the words of encouragement to ease either her squad mates or herself.

The silent question hung between them: Had they made the correct decision in splitting their forces, entrusting Corvus with such a critical and dangerous task all by himself? Should they have simply ignored the outpost and moved on as a full unit instead?

Navigating the quiet, abandoned streets, Thea wrestled with her role as their temporary leader. She endeavoured to mask her own anxiety, focusing instead on guiding Alpha Squad safely through the maze of residential complexes. Yet, the growing tension was palpable, a shared apprehension for what the silence might signify about the fate of their self-assigned mission—and Corvus...

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By the time the sun began to set, painting the sky in shades of orange and red, Alpha Squad found themselves still without any sign or sound from Corvus. The ambiguity of their "sunset" agreement—was it the start of the sunset or its complete disappearance?—only added layers of tension among them.

Thea's thoughts repeatedly circled back to the expected explosion. '*Surely, even from this distance, the blast would cut through the silence of these empty streets...*' Yet, she chose to keep these doubts to herself, understanding that sharing them would only undermine the squad's morale.

Instead, she pushed the squad onward with a renewed increase in their pace.

It was a lesson she remembered from James, but only now truly started to understand: "Marines are only ever as anxious as they are not exhausted."

Then, as the sun edged closer to the horizon, marking the end of the day, they finally encountered a glimmer of hope—a moment that signified their first significant achievement in this leg of their mission, offering a brief but potent boost to their spirits amidst the prevailing uncertainty.

Thea motioned for a halt, guiding Alpha Squad into a towering apartment complex to establish a temporary overwatch. Settling in, she briefed them on their progress, "We've made it to the edge of Nova Tertius' outskirts. Covering about 80km today, even with our diversion through the urban area, is an achievement we should all take pride in, especially since we've remained undetected—as far as I can tell, at least."

She pointed north, referencing a map she had received from Corvus as part of the mission package, "Based on this, we're close to the border-wall dividing Nova Tertius from its outskirts and industrial zones. Crossing this wall is our next challenge. Corvus warned it's heavily monitored with alarms, cameras, and traps, but it's unlikely they can man the entire length, so we should be able to find a way through if we're careful."

Turning her attention to Desmond, she inquired about his technical capabilities, "Desmond, can you handle the surveillance cameras if we get your drones close to them? I'm relying entirely on your expertise here, so let me know what's feasible and what isn't."

After a moment of consideration, Desmond confidently responded, "Yes, I can work with the camera feeds. Given an hour or two, I can loop the feed for a specific area, assuming they're on the same network. For a quicker approach, I can disable them directly, though that would be vastly more noticeable."

"We'll make the time for it," Thea decided, favouring Desmond's stealthier approach to avoid detection during their mission. Their goal was to remain unnoticed as they edged closer to the bustling city.

Their strategy was subsequently solidified after several more inputs from the rest of the squad members.

The immediate plan was to approach the border-wall for a closer examination, allowing Desmond a chance to assess the security cameras' setup. The decision to actually cross the wall was deferred to the next day, prioritising their need for rest after the day's exhaustive journey.

The consensus was that attempting to infiltrate the city at their current level of exhaustion could lead to unnecessary risks, including the possibility of a chase. A fresh start in the morning would provide them with the best chance of a successful and discreet entry into the city proper.

Stepping back out into the eerily silent streets of the urban outskirts, Thea led Alpha Squad towards the border-wall, taking an even slower approach than before.

'There's no way they don't have a bunch of traps and alarms set up near the border-wall. We've not run into a lot, considering the vast distances we've covered today, but we're bound to find some around here, I guarantee it,' she mused to herself, as she re-engaged her heightened focus for the next, and last, leg of today's journey.

As they navigated the tight space between two identical high-rise apartments, a distant rumble abruptly halted their steps. The sound, initially faint, grew into a distinct roar of an explosion from the industrial sector behind them.

Their eyes met in silent acknowledgment, a shared realisation without words: Corvus had succeeded.

Subdued cheers and whispers of triumph broke the tension that had clung to them for hours.

Despite their need for stealth, the momentary lapse was understandable, their relief palpable.

"Yees!", "He fucking did it!", "Way to go, boss," their whispered celebrations echoed softly in the alley.

While Thea wanted to keep their stealthy approach as quiet as possible, she couldn't blame any of them for their brief lapse in judgement. She, too, was feeling the high. The only reason she managed to suppress her own excited outburst was the fact that she was very aware that the real test for Corvus had only just begun.

She quietly reminded them, "This accelerates our timeline. Security at the border-wall will tighten now that our presence is known. Plan A is for Corvus to rendezvous with us inside the city. We need to make it there first."

Their nods were more than mere agreement; they carried the weight of her unvoiced concern: Without a plan B ever having been established, Corvus' failure to meet them meant a grim outcome.

Thea, privy to the grim details of Plan B, carried the weight of its implications alone.

Before moving on, she turned to her squad with a solemn expression. "Listen up," she began, her tone firm yet measured, "No matter what happens, don't look back towards the industrial sector tonight. That's *an order*." Puzzled looks crossed their faces, but no one openly questioned her command.

Each member of Alpha Squad acknowledged her directive, albeit with evident confusion.

Thea didn't offer any further explanation as she resumed leading the way. She had learned from Corvus that sometimes, withholding certain information was necessary for the squad's focus and morale. If Plan B was to unfold, they would be briefed in due course.

Otherwise, there was no need to burden them with possibilities that might never materialise.

With each step forward, Thea meticulously scanned the surroundings for signs of traps or alarms that the Stellar Republic might have set up, her eyes sharpened and her movements calculated and honed from years of dangerous urban traversal in the undercity. The squad followed her lead closely, trusting in her ability to detect and avoid the myriad dangers that lay in their path.

As the twilight deepened further towards the night, the urban landscape around them became a maze of shadows and silhouettes, each potentially concealing a threat. Thea's intuition and experience guided them through narrow alleys, over overgrown walls, and past abandoned vehicles, always with an eye out for the subtle signs of traps: A tripwire here, a pressure plate there, or the slight glint of a camera lens hidden among the debris.

The detours were many, as Thea's cautious approach led them around areas she deemed too risky. Each detour added time to their journey, stretching each minute into five or sometimes even ten.

The squad moved in silence, their footsteps a soft echo in the otherwise quiet evening.

Despite the slow progress, there was an underlying sense of urgency, a silent acknowledgment that every moment spent avoiding traps was a moment closer to reaching their destination and, potentially, to a rendezvous with Corvus in the city proper.

Finally, after navigating through what felt like an endless series of obstacles, Thea signalled for a halt.

They had arrived at the base of a structure she had spied from afar, a building ideally suited for their needs—a six-story residential tower capped with a roof adorned by a gazebo. This

spot promised a blend of concealment from prying drone eyes and a broad vantage point over the imposing border-wall.

The gazebo's presence suggested a measure of shelter, crucial for evading detection while maintaining an expansive field of view for their surveillance efforts.

Determined to sidestep the sense of confinement that had nagged at her during their prior hideout in the industrial office building, where window peeks had limited her assessment of the surrounding area, Thea yearned for the freedom of roof access.

"This is where we'll set up for the night," Thea declared, imbuing her directive with a firmness that underscored her current role. "We'll organise shifts for keeping watch and conducting reconnaissance. Our objective is to dissect the wall's security measures, decode any patrol routines we come across, and identify potential vulnerabilities."

Ascending the building, Thea, aided by Isabella's fledgeling skills with explosives, defused a trio of security measures—two traps and an alarm. Together, they conducted a comprehensive inspection of the highest floor, asserting it as their temporary stronghold.

Assured of their relative safety, they stealthily advanced onto the rooftop, seeking refuge under the gazebo's shadow together, as they all wanted to take a proper look at their next obstacle together, before they headed off into their respective watch groups.

In the twilight's dimming light, they gazed upon the imposing structure of the border-wall that delineated the urban outskirts and the industrial sector from the sprawling megacity of Nova Tertius.

The wall itself was a monolith of solid rock-crete, rising several metres into the air, its breadth spanning at least a metre across, ensuring an unyielding fortification against any who dared approach. Its surface was unadorned, save for the grim functionality of its design, embodying an insurmountable obstacle that stretched as far as the eye could see.

Strategically placed at intervals along the wall were guard towers, their silhouettes casting long shadows in the fading light.

These towers housed vigilant sentries, their eyes scanning the expanse for any sign of unauthorised movement. The checkpoints, heavily fortified and manned by stern-faced guards, punctuated the wall at the main thoroughfares, serving as the only sanctioned points of entry into the city's heart.

The land immediately surrounding the wall had been deliberately cleared of any natural cover, paved over with unyielding asphalt to expose any who ventured too close. This barren no-man's-land served as a deterrent, its emptiness a clear message to would-be infiltrators like them: Don't try it.

Atop the wall, an array of security measures was in place: Cameras that swept the area with their unblinking gaze, automatic gun turrets poised to respond to the slightest infraction, and the rare, occasional patrol.

Each component of this extensive security network worked in concert to maintain the integrity of Nova Tertius's last line of defence against infiltrators, making the task of crossing it a daunting challenge for any who sought to breach the city's well-guarded perimeter.

As they surveyed the daunting structure stretching before them, each member of the squad fell into a contemplative silence, weighing the obstacle against their individual skills and pondering how they might collectively overcome the formidable barrier.

Suddenly, without warning, the hues of the evening sky shifted dramatically, capturing their attention and prompting an immediate, unified reaction. Instinctively, they all hit the deck, their hearts racing as they tried to discern the cause of this sudden change.

Before Thea could issue any commands, Karania cut through the tension with a sharp, whispered warning, her voice laced with undeniable fear, "Don't look! Close your eyes, if you have to!" Her words sent a chill down their spines, magnifying the gravity of the situation.

In the blink of an eye, their surroundings were bathed in a blinding light, a radiant fusion of white and gold that filled the world around them. The abrupt transition left them disoriented, their senses overwhelmed by the intense glow that seemed to emanate from everywhere and nowhere at once.

As though a newborn star had erupted within the city, its intense light seemed intent on erasing their very existence with its overwhelming brilliance. The luminosity was so piercing that even with their gazes cast downwards towards the gazebo's wooden floor, shielding their eyes as much as possible, they felt a severely painful sting. Heeding Karania's earlier caution, Thea shut her eyes tightly, aware of the devastating origin of this sudden illumination.

Then, as quickly as it had enveloped them in daylight's clone, the light vanished, plunging the surroundings back into the night's embrace with such abruptness that it left them feeling momentarily blinded, the darkness now seeming impenetrably deep in stark contrast.

"Fuck me! What in the shit was that?!" Desmond's whispered exclamation broke the silence, a sentiment echoed by the entire squad in hushed, anxious tones.

Karania's words proved eerily prescient, "Fuck me is right... That was like a massive fusion reaction or something. If we hadn't looked away or shut our eyes, we'd probably be blind right now. What the fuck was that...?" Her gaze fixed on Thea, who had signalled the danger before it occurred, her eyes filled with a mix of fear and inquiry.

Exhaling a breath heavy with the weight of unspoken grief and the burden of knowledge, Thea's voice was tinged with profound sorrow as she admitted, "That... That was plan B..."