

## **Arc 1 - Chapter 94 - Efficiency**

With the white-foam grenades primed to explode any moment now, Thea gave the go-ahead for Desmond to initiate his part of their plan. He was tasked with neutralising the surveillance and defence mechanisms that covered the border-wall, effectively eliminating the last technical barrier to their infiltration.

Desmond's sole remaining drone, strategically pre-positioned for this purpose, embarked on its critical mission.

The previous night, Desmond had meticulously mapped out various routes to ascertain the most effective path for his drone to approach the wall without triggering early detection. His objective was to find a trajectory that would delay the activation of the security systems for as long as possible.

Understanding that his drone lacked a legitimate response to the Stellar Republic's standard verification pings, Desmond ingeniously designed a hack.

This hack was to be automatically deployed in response to the first detection signal from the surveillance network. Although the specifics of his hacking technique were complex, involving a sophisticated manipulation of the security system's communication protocols, the goal was straightforward: To have the drone introduce a malicious code upon detection that would cause the cameras and auto-turrets connected to the network to loop their last few minutes of scan data on repeat, creating an illusion of normalcy.

To Thea, the technical jargon and the intricate details of Desmond's plan had been somewhat overwhelming. Despite her efforts to grasp the full extent of the technicalities involved, the finer points of the hack remained beyond her comprehension.

The essence of his strategy was simple, though: The drone needed to be in close proximity to the wall when it received the first ping. At that point, the hack would activate, creating the loop in the camera and auto-turret systems. This loop was critical to ensure they remained undetected as they attempted to blend in with the Stellar Republic forces and slip through the border-wall undetected, as humans were a lot easier to fool than technology when it came to infiltration.

After just around twenty seconds, Desmond breathed an audible sigh of relief as he gave the all-clear.

'*That was fast, damn,*' Thea couldn't help but think, surprised at the speed at which this whole part of the plan had worked.

Desmond had said as much, which was why they had waited until the last minute before detonation of the grenades, but to see it in action was something else entirely.

With the auto-turrets and cameras effectively neutralised, and the white foam grenades set to detonate imminently, everything was in position for the next phase.

The seconds ticked by slowly, heightening the suspense and anxiety among them.

The potential for a direct confrontation, should their attempted ruse be discovered, loomed large in their minds. They were acutely aware that an unplanned firefight would undoubtedly end disastrously, given their precarious position deep within enemy lines.

As the countdown approached its final moments, a palpable tension gripped the squad.

Each member was acutely focused, prepared to spring into action and execute their roles with precision. They understood the critical importance of seamlessly blending into the Stellar Republic's response teams to avoid detection and ensure their passage through the wall.

The moment the wrist-displays signalled the impending detonation of the grenades, they braced themselves.

The detonation of the white-foam grenades echoed in the distance, a series of popping and hissing noises as the two-dozen devices exploded and the white-foam inside expanded explosively into makeshift barricades. Even within the confines of the alley where Thea and her squad sought cover, the sounds were unmistakably clear.

The initial confusion among the Stellar Republic's forces swiftly transformed into heightened alarm as the potential threat became apparent.

Patrols and guards, previously stationed with a sense of routine vigilance, now scrambled towards the northern side where the grenades had unleashed chaos. In the frenzy, only a few guards remained behind, their attention fixed on their departing comrades, trying to piece together the situation.

Seizing this moment of distraction, Thea gave the signal.

With a decisive gesture, she and the squad rose from their cover, their movements synchronised and deliberate. They merged with the small stream of soldiers responding to the disturbance, their weapons discreetly ready for any confrontation.

The squad's integration was seamless, their appearance and demeanour indistinguishable from the genuine patrols, as they put on confused, yet poised faces. As they moved, each member was acutely aware of the stakes, their senses heightened, ready to adapt to any unforeseen challenge, but waiting for Thea to make the final call.

This was something they had clearly talked about during their planning session.

Any potential threats were to be discreetly conveyed to Thea, who would make the final call, even if it seemed like the slight delay might spell disaster for them. The squad had ultimately agreed on it, however, as they each realised that it was more important for the squad to make coherent decisions, rather than a single, potentially misplaced, observation to ruin their only shot at this plan.

As Thea and her squad shadowed the patrols, the atmosphere around them was charged with urgency. Stellar Republic soldiers sprinted past, seeking cover behind previously erected barricades or manning light weapon emplacements in anticipation of an assault.

The air was thick with the sound of orders being shouted and the metallic clank of weapons being readied, a strangely familiar rhythm of preparedness for the perceived threat making itself known.

Continuing their march with the patrols, Thea subtly signalled her team to decelerate, allowing themselves to gradually lag behind the main group. This intentional slowdown was part of their calculated strategy, aiming to position themselves at the edge of the response force as they neared one of the large gates.

Here, a commanding officer, likely a Corporal, as he wore a similar-looking uniform to the woman that had stopped them and Arrow Squad on the asphalt highway, was visibly orchestrating the counter-response, barking orders to the incoming patrols, his focus on marshalling his forces to repel the nonexistent attackers.

By arriving last, Thea and her squad hoped to exploit the chaos, banking on the likelihood that they would be redirected away from the epicentre of the action, back towards the positions they had originally infiltrated.

This manoeuvre was critical, a gambit based on their understanding of military protocols in moments of crisis. While the Stellar Republic was not the UHF, a lot of military protocols existed that were shared between the two Factions—or all Factions, for that matter—as they had simply proven to be the most effective anyone had managed to come up with.

In situations where a new threat was identified, standard protocol dictated that any mobile troops immediately report to the nearest commanding officer, while stationary troops—such as those guarding the perimeter from atop the wall—were to hold their positions.

This strategy was designed to facilitate a swift, concentrated response to threats, enabling mobile units to rapidly converge on a single location, regardless of their initial dispersion across the patrol area.

The inherent drawback of this tactic, and the one Alpha Squad was now hoping to exploit, was the inevitable tendency to overcommit mobile troops to a singular point of interest—in this case, the nearest commanding officer.

This overreaction was widely recognized as a tactical vulnerability inherent to such a response system. It was, however, generally accepted as a manageable risk, under the assumption that stationary troops would continue to monitor and report any new or additional threats, thus maintaining a level of continuous perimeter defence.

Consequently, once a commanding officer assessed that sufficient forces had been redirected to address the immediate threat, a significant portion of the mobile units would be instructed to return to their original patrol routes. This reassignment aimed to minimise disruption to their established patrol patterns, ensuring that the security coverage remained as consistent as possible despite the temporary reallocation of resources.

Approaching the commanding officer, Thea braced herself for the directive.

“You lot,” he barked, gesturing at Thea and a couple of other squad leaders, “head back to your patrols. We’re swamped with boots on the ground here. Listen, I get it. Everyone’s

eager to teach those fucking undead a lesson for messing with the Stellar Republic, but our patrols can't just *stop*. Who's to say what kind of messed-up shit they've got planned after yesterday's bang-up job? That fucking explosion took out a good chunk of the night-shift 'cause they're all fucking blind now. That's gotta be a prelude for *something*, so we can't afford to have you lot join this counter-response and leave the rest of the border unpatrolled."

A chorus of "Yes, Sir" responded, tinged with a hint of disappointment, a sentiment Thea tried echoing as best she could while maintaining her role.

Without hesitation, she turned on her heel, signalling her squad to follow.

Lingering around a Corporal, or any higher-ups, was the last thing she wanted, keen to move away and continue their mission under the guise of obeying orders.

Everything was, surprisingly enough, going according to plan so far, as they headed back towards the direction they had just come from.

This first part of the plan, however, was arguably the least likely to go wrong, as the chaos of the moment provided a large distraction that would almost guarantee their presence was going to go unnoticed. The next part, which included blowing open the quick-access door from the outside, was bound to pose a lot higher risk of detection.

Alpha Squad adeptly continued their masquerade as members of the Stellar Republic forces, returning to their point of entry and adopting the patrol patterns they had meticulously observed the previous day and night.

They made a conscious effort to remain in proximity to the same segment of the border-wall, aiming to normalise their presence to the stationed guards. The squad reasoned that it was improbable for anyone to scrutinise a patrol that seemed to be performing its routine duties, especially after having been visible in the area multiple times before.

Aware that the effectiveness of their diversion was bound by time—the white-foam grenades serving as a temporary ruse with no real assault to back it up—they recognized the need for speed in executing the next phase of their strategy.

However, they also understood the importance of not rushing to the extent that it might draw suspicion.

The balance between speed and caution was delicate, and Thea felt the pressure acutely.

Juggling the dual roles of leader and scout was proving to be an immense challenge, stretching her mental capacity to its limits. She silently cursed Corvus's decision to entrust her with such responsibility once again, feeling thoroughly ill-equipped for the dual burden.

For the next ten minutes, they convincingly played their part, seamlessly blending into the background of the Stellar Republic's defensive operations.

Their efforts paid off, as not a single guard gave them more than a cursory glance, allowing them to move unchallenged and unnoticed.

This brief period of successful deception was crucial, buying them the time they needed to prepare for the most perilous stage of their plan.

Thea was acutely aware that their window of opportunity was narrowing. *'The counter-response teams will soon catch on to the absence of attackers at the white-foam barricades. We need to act now,'* she thought, her mind racing with concern.

While their current guise as patrolling soldiers provided a veil of safety, initiating the next phase of their operation would strip them of any pretence of security. From that point on, there would be no turning back; success or failure would hinge entirely on the execution of their plan.

This realisation weighed heavily on her, the pressure of the entire squad's survival resting on the timing and accuracy of her decision. The prospect of misjudgment, and the catastrophic consequences that could follow, caused her to hesitate. The thought of rendering Corvus' sacrifice in vain was unbearable.

Yet, understanding the necessity of moving forward, Thea took a moment to collect herself. With a deep, steadying breath, she sought to quell the storm of apprehension within her.

Then, with resolved determination, she signalled to her squad, indicating it was time to embark on the next, critical stage of their plan.

As Alpha Squad began edging closer to the quick-access door, the tension among them was palpable. Their entire operation hinged on maintaining the illusion of being Stellar Republic soldiers for just a little longer.

Isabella had briefed them that setting up the shaped explosive charge on the door would take approximately a minute—a minute during which their cover could not be blown.

To obscure Isabella's work from prying eyes, the squad concocted a plan.

Lucas and Karania took up positions that would obscure Isabella's actions from potential onlookers, employing a bit of theatre to aid their subterfuge. Karania feigned concern for Lucas's health, leaning in as if conducting a medical inspection, while Lucas convincingly mimicked the symptoms of severe nausea, complete with audible dry-heaving.

This act mirrored a ruse they had previously executed on the asphalt highway.

Desmond, meanwhile, pretended to operate one of his drones, adding another layer of authenticity to their ruse, as if conducting a routine surveillance operation.

Thea's heart nearly stopped when a guard from atop the border-wall called out to them. "Hey, you lot. You good down there?"

The sudden attention felt like a flood-spotlight on their deception.

Swallowing her panic, she turned to address the guard with a composed exterior that belied her inner turmoil.

"Everything's fine," she called up, her voice steady. "Just dealing with a bit of... excitement, if you catch me. Patrick over here thought we'd finally have a go at some undead, only to get reassigned to patrol again. It's been a bit rough on the stomach, you know? Last night's ration didn't bode well with him either, so it's just all kinds of messy now. We'll get back to the patrol once the medic gives him a stim. Thanks for checking up on us!"

The guard seemed satisfied with her explanation, looking a bit taken aback by the graphic noises that Lucas was giving off, nodding and turning his attention back to his duties.

Thea let out a silent sigh of relief, her heart still racing from the close call.

Meanwhile, Isabella worked as quickly and efficiently as she could, her hands steady as she placed the explosive charge on the door. The squad's collective effort to shield her actions seemed to be working, but they all knew that their safety was a delicate veneer, ready to shatter at the slightest misstep.

Lucas quickly ceased the audible portion of his theatre at Thea's behest, as she knew that the noise itself would very likely draw eyes they didn't want on them. It was a good play to start with, but dragging it out would seem more suspicious than it would help their case.

Thea breathed a sigh of relief as the guard's inquiry remained the only challenge to their cover before Isabella quickly finished her task and signalled the all-clear. With this precarious phase behind them, their path into Nova Tertius was now practically wide open.

The next and essentially final stage of their plan involved breaching the quick-access door, entering the service-tunnels, and then sealing the entrance behind them using white-foam grenades. This would not be a permanent barrier, and blowing the door would certainly expose their ruse, but once they were inside the service tunnels, evading the Stellar Republic forces would become significantly more feasible.

The network of service tunnels stretched beneath the wall and sprawled into the city, branching out to numerous exits.

The vast array of possible routes made it nearly impossible for their pursuers to predict their path. Thea was grateful for the comprehensive data-package from the UHF; having a detailed map of the tunnel system was invaluable. She meticulously reviewed their planned entry point and the route they needed to take, ensuring she knew the precise turns to avoid leading the squad into military outposts also connected to the tunnel system.

Double-checking their planned path against the map, Thea mentally prepared for what was to come.

*'Alright, we're set. Now we just need to hope the tunnels aren't swarming with soldiers for whatever reason. We will not really be able to avoid confrontation once inside,'* she thought, steeling herself for the tense moments ahead.

Thea's slow, deliberate nod was the signal for Isabella to initiate the most daring part of their plan.

In an instant, the squad shifted from stealth to aggression.

Isabella expertly set off the charge to blow the door's lock, while the rest of the squad launched into a fierce firefight, their primary objective to neutralise as many nearby guards and patrols as swiftly as possible.

Thea's Gram emitted laser beams with lethal precision, each shot finding its targets among the enemy soldiers, the close range lending an even greater lethality to her shots than usual.

Similarly, Desmond and Karania were firing their own weapons into the unsuspecting patrols and guards, who had been thoroughly caught off-guard by the abrupt chaos. Karania's Ruin howled with every shot, the large-calibre rounds piercing through armour like it didn't even exist, exploding chest cavities, limbs and heads alike.

Desmond has decided to simply unload the entire magazine of his AR-303 into the first few squads he could see, holding down the trigger and letting the gun go to town, not bothering with any kind of precise aim which would have been wasted at this short-range anyway.

Lucas, ever the dependable protector, had raised his shield to cover the squad immediately.

It absorbed the brunt of the counter-fire, its surface pockmarked by the impact of bullets almost immediately, as the few Stellar Republic soldiers that managed to find any form of cover nearby opened fire back at them. The squad huddled close behind this makeshift barricade, their coordinated fire creating a formidable front.

Isabella's shout cut through the chaos, announcing the door's breach.

Without missing a beat, the squad surged forward into the newly opened passage, with Lucas taking up the rear, shielding them from the return-fire with his massive shield.

As they crossed the threshold, each member tossed a white-foam grenade behind them, both out the door, barely in front of it and the last two went straight at the open door itself.

The grenades rapidly expanded upon detonation, spewing out a dense rock-crete mixture that solidified quickly, effectively sealing the entrance and cutting off any immediate pursuit.

This action, while securing their escape, also irrevocably barred their way back.

With urgency driving their every move, Thea immediately took the lead, navigating the first turns and descending into the service tunnels with Lucas following closely. His Stalwart was at the ready, prepared for any threat that might emerge from the shadows of the tunnel.

The squad moved quickly and quietly, descending deeper into the labyrinth beneath Nova Tertius, each member alert and ready to adapt to whatever they might find inside the tunnels...

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Several minutes into their descent, the squad felt a gradual decrease in tension, as they encountered no resistance in the tunnels.

Thea had harboured concerns that the Stellar Republic might have called in reinforcements from nearby military outposts, potentially using these very tunnels for rapid deployment.

Fortunately, their path remained clear.

Isabella's quiet utterance broke the silence at some point, "I can't believe that actually worked," her voice a mix of disbelief and relief. Her words resonated with the shared sentiment of the group.

Thea found herself nodding in agreement. Despite having essentially devised the plan, together with help from Karania, she had harboured her own doubts. "I wasn't expecting it to go this smoothly either," she admitted. "I'm glad it did, but I was half-prepared for a bullet in the back at any moment."

Karania, ever ready with a playful jab, chimed in, "As if anyone could get the drop on you with your psychic bullshit." Her teasing tone drew light chuckles from the squad, cutting through the residual tension.

Thea offered a weak retort, "Yeah, yeah, whatever." She knew denying the advantage her precognitive skills provided would be futile. It was a unique edge that set her apart from the rest, and in moments like these, it was an undeniable asset, one that she wouldn't dare downplay, even in jest.

She had felt first-hand how much of an advantage it had provided her so far, when she had been momentarily without it during the assault on the wall. While she hadn't lost the ability, it had been effectively nullified by the Stellar Republic's Faction Trait coming into effect, denying her the ability to use her precognitive powers to pinpoint any Duplicators during her entire stay on the battlefield.

Knowing now that this was the level of struggle that everyone else went through at all times while fighting the Stellar Republic, she wouldn't dare to downplay her massive advantage like that in front of her squad ever again.

Thea gestured for them to resume in silence, not wanting to lower their guard quite yet. Until they were in the city proper, with countless citizens around them to blend in with, she wouldn't feel safe enough for them to fully relax.

This diligence immediately came into play as they finished their descent and came face-to-face with a group of Stellar Republic soldiers, who were heading in their direction through the tunnels, chatting animatedly.

Thea and the rest of the squad set up just behind the corner where the staircase met the tunnels and on a finger-count of three, burst around the corner.

The ambush was over in the blink of an eye.

Thea's Gram emitted a dual-display of beams that seemed to dance through the air, each one finding its mark with brutal accuracy, leaving behind nothing but the smell of charred flesh and two dead bodies.



Karania's Ruin unleashed a similarly devastating shot, its projectile tearing through the first soldier it hit with explosive force, rendering them unrecognisable as their back exploded onto the wall behind them.

Desmond's AR-303 rattled off a rapid succession of shots, each bullet meticulously aimed to ensure maximum damage, turning his designated soldier into a sieve at almost point-blank range.

Isabella left the biggest carnage, however. With her Devastation, she laid waste to any potential remnants of resistance, as the massive calibre rounds streaked through the hallway, the staccato of her machine gun echoing off the walls, completely silencing any cries of pain as the rounds found their targets and simply ripped them limb from limb.

Wherever a round from her Devastation hit, at this range, no amount of armour could protect the soldiers from their fate. Limbs were ripped off, heads exploded and bodies were sent tumbling backwards and against the nearby walls for the unlucky few that got hit multiple times in rapid succession.

In mere moments, the corridor was silent once more, save for the echoes of their assault.

The squad quickly navigated past the carnage they had wrought, careful to tread lightly around the expanding pools of blood.

Resuming their path with a renewed sense of urgency, Alpha Squad pressed on, their movements now horizontal as they sought to penetrate deeper into the heart of Nova Tertius.

They had now reached the proper service tunnels, no longer having to go down spiralling staircases and long-winded ramps.

Here, their paths opened up a lot, as more than three dozen options presented themselves to the squad, when it came to choosing what exit to go for in order to get into the city.

Thea had a favourite already selected, but had also earmarked a couple of alternatives, should they run into any trouble on the way or the exit she had intended for them to use ended up being guarded.

It would be best if they could simply disappear into the city, without the Stellar Republic being aware of where they surfaced.

While they undoubtedly knew they were inside the tunnels by now, they had no real way of knowing where or when they might exit, which granted them practically limitless stealth, should they manage to get out of the tunnels and into the city before they were found...