

Arc 1 - Chapter 114 - Exchanges

The sound of Isabella's Devastation roaring from the alleyway on Thea's left was like music to her ears. Taking out the designated snipers had apparently been enough for the squad outside the building to resume their fire support.

Still pressed tightly against the wall of the office building, Thea waited a few more heartbeats before trying to move—only for her psychic senses to once again scream in danger.

'Not yet, huh? Alright then,' she thought to herself, deciding to wait a bit longer.

The gunfight had rapidly escalated from a controlled skirmish to complete and utter chaos.

More and more Stellar Republic Soldiers were converging on their position, evidenced by the increasing amount of blind gunfire crashing through the smoke and debris inside the office building.

Thea knew the real problems were just beginning.

It was one thing to avoid line of sight and seek cover from lasers or ballistic weaponry, but heavy weapons and explosives were an entirely different beast. Flattening herself against a wall wouldn't help when the entire building was brought down on her head or the room was set ablaze.

According to Corvus' calculations prior to their attack, they had another one or two exchanges before the Stellar Republic's heavy weapon teams reached their position. The occasional heavy weapon fire they faced now was only a prelude, after all.

Before the real bombardment began, they needed to cross the street to avoid getting bogged down in the rubble. It was going to be a lot harder for the Stellar Republic's forces to use their explosives and heavy weapons, when they were in the same building as them.

Unfortunately, her current suite of Active Abilities didn't offer any means of escaping this situation she had placed herself in, a flaw she definitely intended to rectify as soon as she could.

'Really wish I had that [Shadow Step] Ability right about now...' Thea mused, semi-patiently waiting for her psychic senses to stop screaming that moving from her current position was a guaranteed death sentence.

The prattle of gunfire hitting solid metal wafting over to her was the first indication that the rest of her squad was fighting tooth and nail to make this assault a success.

Focusing on the sound, Thea tuned out the majority of the deafening gunfire around her to pinpoint its location—something she had gotten more and more used to over the last week of consistent urban combat.

Where once she had to concentrate intensely on the sounds themselves to get anywhere, it now came more naturally. This was likely due to both experience and her vastly higher Perception compared to the last time she had actively used it.

Selectively disabling or enhancing certain aspects of one's own perception was apparently quite common at higher Levels, as she had learned. It required reaching a certain minimum threshold of Perception and a thorough understanding of meditation or similar conscious mental agility.

Once mastered, it became easier and easier to rely on it as another "soft" Ability, as some of the more experienced Scouts she had talked to over the past week had called it.

Selectively cutting through the cacophony, she heard the slow advance of careful, heavy footsteps coming closer and closer, as the noise of the prattling increased.

It wasn't hard to figure out what was going on: Lucas was coming to get her, Stalwart in hand.

Heavily armoured step by heavily armoured step, Lucas approached as the gunfire continued to rattle against the Stalwart like a torrential downpour, yet the defensive heavy of Alpha Squad simply kept moving undeterred—he had long bested far worse than this.

A sense of elation rushed through her at that, as she hadn't even needed to ask him to do it—over the last month of the assessment, they had managed to build a bond of understanding inside the squad, where some things were obvious without having to be specifically called out. Considering the hours they had spent coming up with ways to beat auto-turrets together and drilling those moves, it made perfect sense.

Thea smirked, ready and eager to jump back into the fight.

As Lucas drew closer, the noise of the bullets slamming into his shield grew louder, but it didn't deter him. She simply waited as he methodically closed the distance, his steps steady and unnaturally unyielding despite the increasingly desperate-seeming onslaught.

Once Lucas was close enough, she would simply jump behind his shield, and together, they would slowly walk out of the building, with the Stellar Republic unable to do anything about it—they lacked the level of firepower required to beat Lucas' Stalwart, as long as they didn't get flanked or otherwise tricked.

The plan was simple but effective, relying on their teamwork and the trust they had built up during the assessment.

Broken glass crunched underfoot as Thea shifted her position slightly, preparing to move.

She repeatedly tried to move, sick and tired of being sidelined for so long, but her Psychic Senses held her back every time. The amount of blind, suppressing fire levelled against her and Lucas was too extensive to rush through, so she had no choice but to continue to wait for the defensive heavy to get closer.

Large parts of the back of the office building had long been blown out by it, which had somewhat alleviated some of the noise, smoke and debris, but Thea wasn't counting on being able to remain in this building for their continued gunfights either way.

Corvus' plan involved rushing across the street after the first few exchanges, in order to pre-empt the heavy weapons, after all.

Then, finally, after what felt like forever, Thea's Psychic Senses didn't cry out when she attempted to dash toward Lucas. Without wasting any time, she pushed herself off the wall and sprinted over to him, sliding behind the Stalwart and tapping his back twice to let him know she was there.

"Glad to see you finally decided to stop being lazy," Lucas greeted her over the close-range squad comms with a smile in his voice. With a more serious tone, he continued, "We have to get out of this building, Thea. It's already precariously damaged, and if any more explosions hit it, I doubt we'll have many options left."

Nodding to herself, as Lucas couldn't see her behind his broad back, Thea replied, "The big boss would be very cross if we got ourselves killed here, for sure. We takin' the stairs or...?"

Lucas had more knowledge about the other room than she did, as he had been holding down the fort near the stairs this entire time. The stairs were the most secure option if they hadn't been blown apart by random gunfire or blocked by debris yet, but she had no way of knowing whether they were still intact.

"Nah," Lucas replied, starting to back up step by step. Thea instinctively mirrored his movements. "The stairs are probably blocked by now. We'll likely just jump."

There was more than one reason they had chosen this particular alley to fight in.

Both buildings on either side were only a few stories tall, making it unlikely that massive mounds of debris or entire chunks of the buildings would collapse into the alleyway and block or crush them.

The other reason was that being stuck inside a building wasn't ideal for any of them. Blowing the back wall of a simple rockcrete construction was easy enough with the arsenal at their disposal.

Corvus had been *very* adamant about having an alternate escape route out of whatever building they started in—a little too enthusiastic to be merely tactical or strategic, Thea had thought.

Slowly but surely, they made their way toward the back of the office, where large parts of the wall had already collapsed. Gaping holes let in some early morning sunlight, despite the screen of smoke and dust that limited their actual visibility outside.

Thea tapped Lucas' back twice again as they reached the crumbling parts of the back wall to ensure he didn't accidentally squish her as she tried to find a suitable spot for them to jump down from.

Thea peeked through one of the larger holes, assessing the drop and the side of the street below. The ground was littered with chunks of rockcrete, twisted metal and cars crushed by the larger chunks of the wall falling on them, but it was clear enough for them to land moderately safely.

“Looks clear enough,” Thea reported. “Just watch your step on the way—JUMP, NOW!”

Her Psychic Senses screamed at her, warning of imminent mortal danger if she didn't leap out of the building immediately. Thea was already mid-air, instinctively reacting, when Lucas jumped backward out of the building as well.

The rest of Alpha Squad had long learned to trust Thea's instincts implicitly over the past weeks inside the assessment; her psychic powers had never led them astray.

The moment Lucas' feet left the ground, a massive explosion struck the front of the Stalwart.

If the Stalwart had been grav-locked at the time, it would very likely have tanked the hit without problem, but the forces at play would almost certainly have severely injured or killed both her and Lucas, even behind the cover it provided.

A thunderous roar and a blaze of fire engulfed the office space they had just been in, violently throwing Lucas and Thea away from the building. The shockwave of the explosion sent them flying with a force that felt like the hand of god swatting them aside.

Lucas crashed into the street below, barreling right into and *through* an abandoned car, before slamming into another vehicle, severely denting it and slumping to the ground unmoving.

Thea was similarly thrown around, her body careening through the air.

She hit the asphalt of the street below at dangerous speeds, the metal of her armour shrieking in agony at the forces applied to it, trying its best to keep her from becoming a red smudge on the ground.

She tumbled across the ground, her world spinning over and over with no sense of up or down, trying her best to desperately protect her limbs from snapping or being ripped off by random cars or other debris.

Thea finally came to a stop when she collided with yet another one of the abandoned cars, all the way across the street from the building they had just been thrown out of, her left side slamming into the metal with bone-shattering force. She felt a row of ribs simply snap, the pain searing through her side as she lay motionless for a moment, trying to gather her bearings.

Around them, the street was filled with smoke, debris, and the distant echoes of the continuously ongoing battle at the compound. The explosion had left a massive crater where the office building's wall once stood, and fires raged in the remains of the second floor of the building where the explosion had struck the Stalwart.

Despite the ringing in her ears and the throbbing pain in her side, Thea managed to roll onto her back, gasping for air and blinking away the dust and tears blurring her vision.

They had survived, but just barely.

Her brain felt utterly scrambled; thinking was hard, but she forced herself to focus—a voice inside reminded her that lying there until someone picked her up was unacceptable for a UHF Marine.

Taking a few deep breaths—as best she could, considering the shattered ribs in her side—Thea rolled onto her belly.

With a myriad of curses and gritted teeth, she got herself back on her feet.

The world spun in her hazy vision, and the deafening ringing in her ears made it difficult to gather her thoughts. Gradually, a coherent thought formed in her jumbled mind: *'I gotta find Lucas... Then find Kara.'*

With this simple plan in mind, Thea stumbled through the debris-strewn street, heading toward where she had last seen Lucas while they had been tumbling through the air.

Each passing second sharpened her vision, the ringing in her ears subsiding as her thoughts became clearer.

She found Lucas not long after.

He was still slumped halfway into a car. Or rather, she found the Stalwart, its extended form still firmly in his hands. The massive shield peeked out over the random debris, cars, and other visual obstructions in the street, making it easy to locate.

Thea limped over to him, every step sending jolts of pain through her side. She pushed through it, her determination overriding the discomfort.

As she got closer, she could see Lucas stirring, his head swivelling as if he had just woken from a serious concussion, trying to get his bearings.

"Lucas," Thea called out, her voice raspy and strained. "We need to find Kara."

She realised how nonsensical that was when she couldn't even hear her own words, the ringing in her ears still too loud to actually allow her to hear anything—Lucas was likely even more messed up, considering his proximity to the explosion.

Lucas groaned, trying to push himself upright but finding his lower body trapped in the twisted wreckage of the car. Thea quickly moved to help him, pulling at the mangled metal with all her strength.

The wreckage was utterly unyielding; her Strength, while superhuman, wasn't enough to make any significant difference. She needed more power, more force—Isabella would have easily been able to rip the remnants of the car to shreds to free Lucas, but she was not Isabella.

Frustration bubbled up inside her, but she pushed it down, focusing on what she could do.

Pulling out one of the knives of the Throatcutter at her side, she activated the vibroblade and started using it to cut away at the metal. The blade hummed as it easily sliced through the wreckage, sparks flying as she worked to carefully cut the defensive heavy out of the metal.

Piece by piece, she cut away the twisted structure, the high-pitched shrieking of metal giving way to the rapidly vibrating blade not particularly helping with the headache that had made itself known, but she didn't stop.

Lucas gritted his teeth, trying to push himself free with each piece that was removed.

Finally, after cutting away multiple larger parts and through a combined effort, Lucas managed to break free, pulling himself out of the wreckage.

They both stumbled back, breathing heavily.

"Thanks," Lucas muttered, his voice barely audible over the persistent ringing in Thea's ears. He grabbed the Stalwart that he had momentarily let go of in an attempt to get more leverage to free himself from the wreckage and looked towards Thea.

"Let's find Kara," Thea repeated, hoping he could hear her this time.

A nod indicated that he got the general gist, if nothing else.

Just as the two of them turned, intending to head toward the alley where she knew the rest of the squad should still be, Thea came face-to-face with the squad's medic.

"Well, would you look at that! Seems like you found me," Karania offered with a playful wink, before gesturing for the two of them to follow her.

'Of course she's already here... And people say my Psychic Powers are bullshit,' Thea thought with a smile. She could always trust Karania to make the right moves before anyone else could even think of them.

Karania led them closer to the alley, where echoes of Isabella's Devastation roaring could still be heard, then asked them to sit down so she could do some quick first-aid before they rejoined the fight.

"Seems like you guys got hit pretty bad," Karania said as she used a series of injectors on both Lucas and Thea in turn. "Corvus thinks it might have been some kind of Ability. That explosion was absolutely massive; not something a simple T1 launcher should be capable of, unless there was some kind of special ammunition involved."

Thea wanted to chime in, but Karania turned to her with a knowing smile, "Desmond's already looking for the shooter; you should have your target once we're done here. Now sit still."

Satisfied with that, Thea leaned back against the wall of the building they had taken cover behind while her friend finished up the brief first-aid session.

The smell of smoke, charred metal and the burning office to their right was thick in the air, but the sounds of distant battle provided an odd sense of normalcy in the chaos. It was reassuring to know that the rest of their squad, as well as the other advance squads, were still fighting even without her.

It was something she still struggled with quite a lot; the feeling of being the centre of everything; but she was making strides towards realising that even without her being directly involved, things could still get done...

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By the time all the injectors had been administered to her, Thea felt like the whole first part of the battle hadn't even happened—she was full of energy, the ringing in her ears had completely disappeared, and there was not a speck of pain to be felt.

"Thanks, Kara. We owe you."

"Nonsense. Fixing you lunatics up is *literally* my job. Just like yours is to take out that launcher. Go fuck 'em up, Thea," Karania waved her away as she pulled out another two injectors to finish up with Lucas.

Thea wanted to linger for just a moment to make sure Lucas was fine, but she knew better than to disobey the squad medic's orders.

Grabbing the Gram, which had thankfully not been completely trashed by the tumble into the street—only a couple of nasty scratches and visual scars—she made her way towards the alley as she called in on the squad comms.

"Desmond, you have a target for me?"

Immediately, she received the exact specifications she was looking for. "Fifth floor; right side. 204 from our position; heavy."

"Thanks, good work out there," she replied, scanning the area for any cover that might help her get a line of sight on the target.

In the back of her mind, she couldn't deny that Desmond's expertise at finding high-priority targets with his drones had drastically improved over the past weeks.

It had become a real treat to work with him.

While she still didn't exactly like him—she likely never would, considering how their acquaintanceship had started—she had to admit that having a drone operator in their squad, even as early as it still was for him, was extremely worthwhile.

Without him, she would have had to try and get eyes on the enemy herself first and then somehow figure out who had shot at her and Lucas. That was assuming she could even manage to get them in her line of sight.

But now, she had the exact data she needed, right when she needed it, and she could fully focus on her actual job—finding a position and taking the shot.

At the end of the alley, she could see Corvus, Desmond, and Isabella huddled behind cover, trading fire with the Stellar Republic forces inside the compound on the other side of the street. To her left was another office building, similar to the one she had been in earlier, while on her right, the rooms of the building she and Lucas had just left were still aflame, sending up tendrils of black smoke.

It didn't take a genius to figure out that there was no spot inside this alley that would allow her to take a shot at her target.

'If directly up front, left, right, and back aren't options... Then there's only one option left.'

Keeping the target data in mind, Thea chose the building on her right and fired the grappling hooks from her Spectre all the way up to the top of the building. The T1 hooks easily penetrated the rockcrete, granting her a secure anchor point before pulling her up at a rapid pace.

She stopped just short of the flat-top roof, angling her feet to give her a solid footing as she positioned herself and the Gram in a way that would allow her to simply lean forward to peek over the top of the building. The smell of smoke and burning debris was stronger here, mixing with the metallic scent of scorched rockcrete, but she paid it no mind; she had a job to do.

Considering her target was on the fifth floor of the compound and the building she was on was only two stories tall, she had to be careful with how much she revealed herself.

The enemies on the roof and the sixth floor were bound to see her by the time she got a shot on her target, but as long as she exposed herself just a smidgeon, they were unlikely to pay any attention until she took the shot.

Sniping, Thea had learned, was as much about taking calculated risks as it was about proper setup. More often than not, you simply had to accept that people might see you if they paid enough attention, to get your target into your line of sight.

The only real saving grace was that barely anyone ever did.

If there wasn't a specific scout or sniper set aside to keep an eye out for enemy snipers at all times, it was extremely unlikely that you'd be found out before you took the shot.

It still sometimes happened, of course, but very rarely.

Peeking over the top by slightly adjusting her angle, Thea looked through the scope of her Gram, quickly taking stock of the enemy lines as she swivelled towards the position indicated by Desmond's earlier report.

It was immediately apparent that the small advantage they had managed to claw out at the start of the engagement by destroying the two auto-turrets had long passed. The Stellar Republic's Soldiers had ended up with enough time to really make use of their Faction Trait.

Where they had originally assaulted a position with maybe two squads worth of Soldiers, they were now facing upwards of five or six squads—the exact amount hard to tell with the quick glance she took.

Sure, the clones weren't exactly smart or quick to adapt, but quantity was a quality in its own right, especially considering there were only six of them, including herself, on her side. If they intended to go blow-for-blow, there was absolutely no way they would come out on top in this engagement.

Luckily, however, they didn't need to.

As long as they followed Corvus' plan and got in close, the enemy's numbers would have dramatically less impact than they did right now. There were only so many people that could fit into any given hallway fight, after all.

As she aimed across the compound, Thea also took note of potential high-priority targets aside from the heavy she was looking for: Lightly armoured Soldiers, Medics, Scouts, and those who looked like they were in charge of at least one or two other people—likely squad leaders of some sort.

Making a mental note of each, she planned to kill them as quickly as possible after taking out the heavy, before her position was compromised. She would only get one exchange from this spot, and it was unlikely the enemy would give her another opportunity like this.

By the time her aim reached the designated location, she was delighted to see that Desmond's information had once again been spot-on: She saw a rather broadly built heavy with a rocket launcher on their back and a machine gun in their hands, taking shots at the alley where the rest of her squad were pinned down.

It was clear that this was one of the more experienced members of the Stellar Republic—not just because of the likely cost of their equipment or their likely usage of powerful Abilities, but also because they were clearly well-versed in utilising their Faction Trait.

It wasn't that Thea *knew* this one was a clone, but there was simply no way, in her mind, that this specific Soldier she was looking at was a Duplicator.

They were standing right in the open, with barely any cover except for a bit of white-foam shielding up to their waist, in a giant window. It was the most obvious bait Thea had seen employed in a long time, but what frustrated her even more was that there was almost no way around taking it.

'Dammit... I can't just leave them to keep shooting, especially if they take out that launcher again,' she thought to herself as she frantically searched for any sign of the original. She really did not want to burn her spot on a clone, knowing she wouldn't get another chance like this anytime soon.

She was half-tempted to ask Desmond to keep searching for the original, but they couldn't afford to get bogged down in an extended firefight, just on the off-chance to find one specific enemy.

She had to take out the target and regroup with the rest of the squad to cross the street before the Stellar Republic had even more time to fully dig into their position and reinforce it with more clones and additional squads of Duplicators that were undoubtedly en route.

After another few seconds of searching fruitlessly, Thea made the call.

Taking a deep breath, releasing half of it, and holding the rest, she aimed carefully at the weak spot her [Detect Weak Spots] Passive Ability highlighted: Right underneath the armpit of the heavy's left arm, the one holding the machine gun.

Setting the Gram to maximum power, not confident that the usual mid-power output would be enough to get the kill, Thea pulled the trigger. The very instant she did, she immediately moved on to the next target, already knowing that her first shot had taken out the clone.

She fired again and again, five times in quick succession at different targets in less than a second, before her Psychic Senses screamed of danger, prompting her to disengage the grappling hook.

She let gravity pull her to safety just as a barrage of gunshots, both lasers and ballistic rounds, crashed into the rockcrete where her head had been moments before.

She re-engaged her grappling hook an instant later to slow her descent, landing safely back on the ground in the alley, and reported her findings.

"Target is taken care of, for now. Be careful, they're more experienced than most of the Soldiers we've run into. The target was a clone, but no signs of the original anywhere. I took out four other targets: Two medics, a sniper, and two other lightly armoured Soldiers on the fifth, sixth, and top floors."

Seeing Karania and Lucas running toward her from the street, she added, "We're all coming back to your position now. Let's get into that building."

"Copy that. We're holding the mouth of the alley, but it's getting tough," Corvus' voice came over the squad comms. "Lucas, load your Havoc with all the smoke you've got. We need some serious cover to get across that street."

A non-verbal double-click chimed from Lucas' comm unit to signal understanding.

The three of them, once Karania and Lucas had reached Thea's location, made their way back down the alley towards the rest of Alpha Squad.

With the pressing issue of the auto-turrets taken care of and the hornet's nest thoroughly stirred, crossing the street and getting into the compound was going to be their next major hurdle...