

## **Arc 1 - Chapter 116 - Cleanup**

An eerie quiet hung over the squad as they made their way through the first hallway of the compound; the distant explosions to the south and the desperate fighting further into the compound were the only indicators that they were in hostile territory.

Thea had one hand on Lucas' back as they moved, ready to give quick and effective intel on whether or not they had to stop, change routes, or hunker down in preparation for a potential ambush.

Her other hand held the Gram squarely shouldered, ready to fire.

It wasn't as secure as she would like for longer-range firefights, but they were indoors, so the accuracy wasn't as crucial.

A steady stream of hushed intel flowed through the squad comms as Desmond updated them on what his drones saw, what was likely ahead of them from the windows outside, and where blind spots were. It had been an effective setup over the past week of urban combat, one that Alpha Squad had grown fairly comfortable with.

As they moved past another set of offices, Isabella swung to the right while Corvus cleared the left ones that Desmond's drones couldn't fully see inside. Lucas briefly stopped until the two of them returned, giving the all-clear.

Thea felt a mix of comfort and unease with the setup. The past few minutes had been too quiet for her taste, especially after they had cleared the main lobby of the compound.

The fact that they hadn't encountered any enemies set up on the first floor right above it, despite the thoroughly advantageous position it provided for defence, was troubling. Moreover, there were neither Soldiers nor traps in sight in the hallways so far, setting her further on edge.

This kind of slow, gradual clearing was rare when facing the Stellar Republic's forces, she had learned. After all, why allow the UHF to push up into their territory when they had a practically infinite amount of disposable Soldiers to throw at them?

Yet in the past few minutes, they hadn't been assaulted by groups of Soldiers, nor had they heard any kind of nearby fighting that could indicate the enemy was distracted.

As they continued moving further into the building, the tension only grew.

The occasional flicker of a malfunctioning light overhead cast erratic shadows that danced along the walls, adding to the unsettling atmosphere. The faint scent of burning electronics, spent explosives and the metallic tang of blood hung in the air, remnants of their previous skirmish that permeated through the compound.

As they reached another intersection, Lucas held up a hand, signalling them to halt.

Thea scanned their surroundings, focusing on her hearing more so than anything else, but nothing seemed to indicate an immediate threat.

She gave a non-verbal all-clear signal to the rest of the squad after around a minute of complete and utter silence, not wanting to risk missing a potential footstep, the clang of a weapon being shouldered, or anything else that might give the enemy away.

“Desmond, anything on the drones?” Corvus whispered over the comms.

“Negative. Still no visuals on any hostiles. It’s like they’ve vanished,” Desmond replied, a note of frustration in his voice. “I could let my drones rush forward and search for them, but then I wouldn’t be able to do the deep sweeps I’ve been doing. Your call?”

Corvus remained quiet for a moment, weighing the options.

Finally, he answered, “No, let’s stick with what’s been working. I like knowing that we have a drone on our back and we can catch any enemy in a crossfire from outside with your other drones. Best to keep them close.”

Directing his attention back to the rest of the squad, he added, “Stay sharp everyone; they’re up to something and I don’t like it.”

A round of non-verbal affirmations were shared, weapons slightly raised in anticipation.

Lucas and Thea continued leading the squad further into the compound, weapons at the ready. They moved with careful precision, each step carefully placed to avoid making unnecessary noise; something they had all learned on-the-job over the past week of continuous close-quarters engagements.

A few minutes and more than half a dozen cleared rooms later, Desmond’s voice came through the comms with a sense of urgency, “Found some. They’ve set up a sort of checkpoint inside one of the conference rooms up front. Big double doors, there’s an exit on the back.”

The squad halted, poised and ready, waiting for Desmond to reposition his drones for a more detailed assessment.

“They’ve reinforced the walls; I’m not sure even the Devastator could punch through that,” he continued after a short pause. “One auto-turret as well, back and to the right of the room; I can’t get an angle on it with the drone, so that’ll have to be on Lucas and Thea. I count two squads’ worth of targets, but there are definitely some duplicates among them; thinking one original squad, with maybe one or two leftovers.”

Silence followed as Desmond continued his recon, the squad tense and ready, hanging on his every word.

“They have a disproportionate amount of heavies; three total. Two defensive, one offensive from what I can tell... Odd. The rest are mediums, no lights,” he muttered, almost as much to himself, as to the rest of the squad.

“They seem aware of our presence to some degree. They’re not relaxed; they’re ready to shoot the moment we come into their line of sight. The doors don’t seem reinforced, so they’ll be the first to go. They might even have it set up as a trap. I can’t see any cameras on the other side, but nothing stops them from having an Ability that could see or hear through it.”

A few more moments passed in tense silence before Desmond added, “Two more mediums on the other side of the conference room, at the back door. Likely to make sure they don’t get ambushed from behind, but they’re bound to join the fight as well. So, fourteen targets, around six to seven originals.”

With a deep nod, Desmond signalled that his intel was complete and he’d only chime in again if anything changed.

Corvus, Karania, and Thea immediately started putting their heads together to come up with a battle plan over the next few minutes.

The three of them had established themselves as the de-facto tactical brains of the squad, with Corvus taking the lead, Thea generally advocating for her Psychic Powers to be used in certain ways, and Karania chiming in to fill any gaps or “obvious” issues that the other two might have missed.

It had proven an effective system in the past, and neither Desmond, Lucas, nor Isabella had wanted to be a part of it, trusting the brains of the squad to devise the strategy.

However, they were always welcome to give their opinions and thoughts.

Five minutes later, the plan was hashed out, and everyone gathered in position, around twenty metres away from the double doors, inside a nearby office in case Desmond’s earlier thoughts were accurate about the enemy potentially having someone capable of seeing through the non-reinforced doors and using them as a trap.

Visually confirming everyone was ready to go, Lucas stepped out with Thea behind him and slightly to the side, so the barrel of her Gram could peek out from behind the Stalwart. They approached the double doors, but once they managed to clear the offices on the left and right, now around ten meters in front of the doors, they veered off to the left, moving a couple of meters sideways.

“Stop,” Desmond’s voice came over the comms, and the two of them halted immediately.

Thea tapped Lucas’ shoulder twice, signaling her readiness, and took a deep breath before focusing on the weapon in her hand.

In the next moment, a dull thump rang out as Lucas’ Havoc launcher fired a grenade at the double doors. The resulting pre-impact detonation ripped the doors apart in a conflagration of debris, the shockwave shattering the windows in all the surrounding offices and the conference room ahead.

Simultaneously, a single, high-intensity laser cut through the fire and smoke, impacting the far right end of the conference room. Almost at the same time, the low-pitched whine of

Isabella's Devastation spinning up turned into a cacophonous roar as she blanketed the entire doorway in high-caliber bullets, the airborne remnants of the explosion being ripped apart and creating chaotic swirls of smoke and fire.

Two grenades, thrown by Karania and Corvus, made their way through the smoke mere fractions of a second later. Gunfire erupted from the left and right sides of the conference room as Desmond's drones repositioned, now firing in from both sides and taking out priority targets the moment the glass shattered by Lucas' explosion.

Lucas pushed forward, the Stalwart absorbing a hail of bullets and lasers, its surface sparking and denting under the relentless assault as he positioned himself closer to the doorway.

The smoke from the explosion that had covered the entrance was now dissipating, allowing Thea to rapidly take out three medium-armoured Soldiers back-to-back as she advanced alongside Lucas.

Another explosion erupted from the conference room as two grenades detonated, obliterating the massive hardwood conference table and sending wooden shrapnel flying in every direction. The air filled with splinters and debris, adding to the chaos of the ongoing battle.

The remnants of the enemy squads did not break easily, however.

A barrage of grenades was thrown from their position, the explosive blasts forcing Lucas and Thea to take cover behind the Stalwart, removing them briefly from the equation. High-calibre weaponry from the Stellar Republic forces, likely the offensive heavy, Thea assumed, answered Isabella's own, their heavy rounds tearing through the walls and cover she had hidden half of her body behind, sending shards of rockcrete and metal scattering.

Isabella, Karania, and Corvus had to rapidly change positions to escape the counter-fire, moving closer to the conference room while keeping parallel to Thea and Lucas.

Their movements were swift and coordinated, each member covering the others as they manoeuvred through the debris-laden battlefield.

"Watch out, more grenades incoming!" Desmond's voice crackled through the comms, just as another series of explosive devices were hurled out of the room.

Thea easily anticipated the trajectory and managed to shoot two of them mid-air, their explosions further obfuscating the inside of the conference room, but a third one had been lobbed low and bounced over the floor before landing dangerously close to Lucas.

"Down!" she yelled, grabbing Lucas by the back of his armour and pulling him to the ground, further towards the reinforced wall to their left, just as the grenade went off. The Stalwart shielded them from the worst of the blast, but the shockwave still rattled their senses.

"Fuck! They got one of my drones!" Desmond reported, annoyance and frustration clear in his voice. "They're duplicating, but I can't get a clear shot on the originals. They're further towards the back of the room."

A moment passed as Thea and Lucas got themselves back into fighting position.

“The two soldiers behind the room have started duplicating too, sending in additional soldiers to hold you off. I can probably take one of them out, if needed, but I can’t get both,” he added with a hint of expectation for orders.

“We’re a bit stuck here,” Corvus replied. “Let’s switch to plan B. The reinforced walls are making it impossible to really do anything here. We can’t just run into this chokepoint and if we get bogged down, we lose.”

Affirmative clicks rang out from everyone’s comms as the squad seamlessly transitioned into position.

Corvus and Karania pulled out two white-foam grenades each, while Isabella sent a last burst of gunfire through the open doorway before rapidly switching to her Decimator.

Plan B, or as Isabella had coined it, plan “Get in their faces,” involved a much more personal connection with the enemy.

Taking out two more cloned soldiers with a quick peek before her psychic senses told her to back off, Thea let the Gram drop into its sling, pulling out her Icicle and one of her Throatcutter’s knives.

She turned and moved away from the doorway, closer to the shattered, large-pane windows on the left side of the building.

“Three, two, one...” Corvus counted everyone down before he and Karania threw in the white-foam grenades in staggered intervals; two to the left, two in the centre.

Simultaneously, dull thumps rang out from Lucas’ position as he lobbed smoke, white-foam, and concussive grenades into the conference room with his Havoc launcher.

The white-foam grenades exploded, rapidly expanding and filling the room with several makeshift rock-crete walls that cut the room into smaller segments. Lucas’ smoke grenades added a thick, obscuring layer, making visibility nearly impossible for the enemy, while the concussive grenades sent massive shockwaves through the room, disorienting anyone caught in the blast radius.

“Move, now!” Corvus ordered.

Isabella rushed into the doorway and turned right, pushing towards the far side of the conference room to confront the soldiers disoriented by the smoke and concussive grenades.

Meanwhile, Thea jumped out of the window, her grappling hooks latching onto the other side of the reinforced wall, allowing her to swing around and crash through the shattered windows into the conference hall.

Before even crossing the threshold, Thea began firing her Icicle at any soldiers she could see. The crystal-like projectiles pierced straight through her opponents as if they were unarmored.

By the time she landed inside the conference room and her grappling hooks retracted back into her armour, her Icicle's magazine was empty. All 24 rounds had found their marks, decimating the rattled soldiers on the left side of the room.

Wasting no time, her Psychic Senses screaming at her to keep moving, Thea dropped the Icicle where she stood and pulled out the second blade of her Throatcutter.

She rushed towards the remaining quintet of soldiers in a crouched stance, zigzagging past the white-foam barriers that had shielded them from her earlier shots. Bullets and laser fire whizzed mere inches past her, crashing into the reinforced wall behind her.

As she closed the distance to the first two soldiers, her Psychic Senses alerted her to an attack from her left.

Without breaking stride, she twisted her body hard, allowing a chainsword to slice through the air where her head had been a moment before. The soldier wielding the chainsword stumbled forward, off balance from the quickly thrown, missed strike.

Thea took advantage of the opening, lashing out with one of her vibroknives. The blade hummed as it sliced through the soldier's armour like paper, cutting deeply into his side and disembowelling the soldier in one strike.

He dropped to the ground, clutching the wound as he screamed in pain.

The second soldier, armed with a chainaxe, lunged at her at the same time.

Thea sidestepped the wild swing, the chainaxe tearing through a nearby piece of hardwood—a leftover from the earlier explosions ripping apart the conference table—, sending splinters flying.

With a flick of her wrist, Thea threw one of her knives as she ducked down to put herself squarely behind the approaching soldier, so his squad mates would be unable to shoot at her.

The blade embedded itself deep in the soldier's shoulder, causing him to howl in pain.

Before he could react further, she yanked the nearly unbreakable chain connecting the knives, pulling the blade back into her hand, dislocating his shoulder in the process and unbalancing him, making him stumble towards her.

With a quick, back-gripped slice of her other knife, she cut off his head.

The last two remaining soldiers began to duplicate, creating additional bodies to overwhelm her with. The confined space of the conference room worked against them, however, as they struggled to find room to manoeuvre and shoot at her.

Thea used this to her advantage, ducking and weaving through the clones, using them as human shields against each other as she reaped one after another with quick, precise thrusts and slices.

Plan B had relied exactly on this downside of the Stellar Republic's Faction Trait: Clones, when created, were wielding exactly the same equipment as the original.

As a result, none of the clones that were being thrown her way were ready for her, as they were all wielding their ranged weaponry.

If the originals had instead been wielding their swords, axes or other melee weapons, Thea would have ended up in a lot tighter of a situation—but that was exactly why they had decided to rush in like this, to make sure the enemy didn't have the time to adapt.

One of the duplicates finally managed to equip and swing a chainsword at her, but her Psychic Senses had long warned her of the attack before it could happen.

She absent-mindedly parried the blow with the chain that connected her two knives together, before swinging it around the weapon's head and turning, disarming the duplicate in a fluid motion.

Another soldier with a vibroblade closed in, attempting a series of precise thrusts as Thea jammed one of her knives into the eye of the duplicate she had just disarmed.

But once again, she was prepared.

She deflected each thrust with her knives, diverting them away from herself before headbutting the soldier, causing him to reel back in surprise. Twisting the chain around the soldier's wrist, she yanked hard, causing him to drop his weapon.

In the same motion, she brought her other knife up, slicing across his throat.

The final remaining soldier, realising the futility of trying to shoot her, pulled out his own vibroblade and charged. Thea met his attack head-on, blocking the first swing with her left knife while slashing with her right. Her blade cut through the soldier's thigh, dropping him to one knee.

She finished him off with a quick, precise stab to the heart.

Thea stood amidst the fallen soldiers, her chest heaving from the exertion, taking heavy breaths in an attempt to recover. The room around her was surprisingly silent, save for the distant echoes of battle elsewhere in the compound. She quickly scanned the area, ensuring there were no more immediate threats, before nodding to herself in satisfaction.

Lucas, Desmond, Corvus, and Karania had pushed through the centre of the room and out the back door, already having taken care of the two originals that had protected the back exit. Isabella had created an abstract painting of gore on the other side of the conference room, her Devastator leaving a trail of destruction in its wake.

The floor was littered with the bodies of soldiers, both duplicates and originals, their weapons scattered amidst the debris of the once pristine conference room. The shattered remains of the massive hardwood table lay strewn across the floor, splintered and broken from the earlier grenade explosion.

Thea's attention returned to her surroundings, her senses still heightened from the battle.

The air was thick with the smell of ozone, smoke and blood, mingling with the acrid scent of burnt metal and plastic. Her muscles ached from the intensity of the fight, but she felt the earlier surge of adrenaline keeping her focused.

Moving back towards the front of the conference room, Thea picked up her Icicle and reloaded it, before putting it back in the holster. Fully re-equipped and a bit recuperated from the earlier extensive fight, she grouped back up with the rest of the squad, meeting Isabella's eyes on the way back.

"You're really getting the hang of this whole CQC bit, Thea," the mountainous woman offered with a nod. "Glad to see you're finally learning the true way of fighting. It was about time."

Feeling an unmistakable hint of pride at the compliment, Thea retorted, "I still prefer my Gram or Caliburn, but I'm glad I committed to getting the shit beat out of me by you in the run-up to the assessment. It helped. Thanks for the lessons, Ela."

With an unmistakably toothy smile, even if the woman's mouth was hidden behind her helmet, Isabella replied, "Ha, I'll beat the shit out of you whenever you want; no need to thank me! Though you can *definitely* praise and thank me some more, if you really want!"

Shaking her head in amusement, Thea pulled up the Gram from its sling and shouldered it, stepping past the rest of the squad to take her spot next to Lucas once again.

"Alright, let's continue. We have to get up to the roof, but clear out the remaining floors until then, to make sure we don't get caught in a pincer," Corvus ordered, his eyes already set on the path ahead, not even spending a moment to talk about the fight they just went through.

"Lucas, Thea," he turned towards them. "You guys take the lead again, but be wary; Desmond's down to one drone. The next one's up in four minutes, so up until then, we're running mostly blind. Keep an even sharper eye out."

The two of them gave their affirmations, readying themselves for the task ahead.

Moving with careful steps, they headed towards one of the staircases deeper inside the compound.

Lucas moved ahead, his Stalwart raised to shield them from any sudden attacks. Thea kept her Gram at the ready, her eyes scanning every shadow and corner for potential threats, while keeping a keen focus on her hearing in order to make sure she wouldn't miss any obvious tells, especially now that they couldn't rely on Desmond's drones to forewarn them.

Their boots thudded softly against the floor, the only other sounds the quiet hum of Desmond's remaining drone hovering just slightly behind them.



After a few minutes of tense movement and careful clearing of offices and hallways, they reached the staircase, a grand structure of “marble” steps leading up to the next floor.

The open design was similar to the one in the main lobby, leaving them vulnerable to attacks from above. Thea’s senses were on overdrive, listening for the slightest hint of movement.

Step by cautious step, they ascended in the same formation as before, with Lucas up front and Thea back-to-back with him to clear any potential attackers from behind. Her finger rested lightly on the trigger of her Gram, ready to react.

Just as she thought they might ascend scot-free once again, she heard the unmistakable creak of armoured boots on rockcrete above them. Immediately, she signalled the rest of the squad for a retreat, pushing her elbow into Lucas’ back to alert him.

The second they started their hasty retreat, all hell broke loose.

More than a dozen Stellar Republic soldiers peeked out from various positions above, firing down towards them with everything they had. Bullets and lasers rained down, turning the staircase into a deadly gauntlet.

Thea’s psychic senses screamed at her, and in a moment of panic, she grabbed Lucas and threw herself off the staircase, back towards the rest of the squad. The very moment she did, an explosion ripped through the spot Lucas and she had been just an instant before, the shockwave and heat washing over them and throwing them through the building like ragdolls.

Thea collided painfully with a nearby office wall, her armour taking the brunt of the impact but still sending a sharp pain through her side. Lucas got caught on a nearby pillar, the Stalwart clattering to the ground beside him.

Thea’s ears were ringing, and her vision was blurry, but she knew she had to find cover first and foremost. Pushing herself up as fast as she could, she stumbled towards the nearest corner that was hidden from the staircase.

Each step sent a jolt of hot, searing pain through her body.

Before she could access her comms and ask for Kara’s help, the squad medic was already at her side, jamming the first auto-injector into the quick-access port of her armour. A warm feeling of bliss replaced the searing pain in mere moments, and Thea shouldered her Gram, aiming towards the staircase in preparation for any potential pursuers as her vision finally returned to normal.

Looking over, she saw that Isabella had grabbed Lucas and pulled him into cover behind the left side wall leading up to the stairway. The defensive heavy was similarly out of it as Thea herself was. They were undoubtedly on the back foot, with two of their members injured and the squad in a suboptimal position, but now the enemies’ element of surprise had been spent.

“Desmond, give us that second drone; go for kills as fast as you can,” Corvus’ muted voice came over the comms, almost overpowered by the ringing in Thea’s ears.

“Isabella, give them hell. Don’t let any of them come down the stairs, we need time for Lucas and Thea to recover.”

Thea almost wanted to say that she was good to go, but before she could do so, Karania gave her a look that told her in no uncertain terms that if she did so, the wounds she had sustained from the explosion would be the least of her issues.

Instead, she decided to simply bide her time and let the squad medic do her job.

She held the angles she could, while Karania worked on fixing her up with injectors and quick check-ups for any larger issues. All she could do for now was wait for the rest of the squad to finish their preparations and jump back into action...