

Arc 1 - Chapter 84 - Nova Tertius

Medic Johnsen's authoritative tone left no room for hesitation. "Give me your hands, both of you," he commanded, his expression stern and focused.

Thea and Karania complied without delay, each grasping one of his outstretched hands. As they did, Thea couldn't help but feel a mix of confusion and anticipation. Her gaze met Karania's, her own bewilderment evident on her face, only to see Karania respond with a reassuring wink, as if she were privy to some unspoken secret about what was to come.

Thea's ears caught the faint murmur of "**Hippocratic Exchange**," a phrase that sent a shiver down her spine, even before she fully understood its implications.

The next moments were surreal; a series of sharp, wet cracks sounded from Johnsen's direction. The medic's face twisted in pain, a grunt escaping his lips as he endured an influx of abrupt and sudden agony.

Simultaneously, Thea experienced something extraordinarily strange.

It was an indescribable sensation, unlike anything she had ever felt.

Her broken bones began to knit together, mending themselves with an unnatural speed. The damaged tissue around the breaks, along with the punctured parts of her lung, healed as if by magic, leaving no trace of the previous trauma.

This rapid healing took Thea by surprise, the sudden rush of air into her fully restored lung catching her off guard, almost causing her to fall into a coughing fit.

The shock of the moment was overwhelming. In an instant, the pain that had been a constant companion since her fall mere minutes ago had vanished completely, replaced by a feeling of wholeness and vitality.

Thea's gaze fell back onto the medic of Arrow Squad and quickly turned to horror as she took in the extent of his abruptly manifested injuries.

The hand she had held only moments ago was now grotesquely misshapen, bones jutting out at unnatural angles. His arm and the entire right side of his body bore the brunt of the transferred trauma—Thea's trauma and then some.

It was a chilling visual proof of the grave consequences of his [Hippocratic Exchange].

Medic Johnsen, now bearing the injuries he had absorbed from both Thea and Karania, grunted in agony. He lowered himself to the ground, cradling his right side as best he could, the pain etched deeply into his features.

"Fuck me..." he muttered through gritted teeth.

His stern admonition to Thea was laced with both irritation and a raw edge of suffering. "Watch your spacing from now on, you hear me? I won't do this for you every single time."

His voice was a harsh reminder of the cost of her survival and where she had gone wrong.

This time, it had simply been a body propelled at her, but what if instead, it had been a bullet? Or even worse, a grenade or a rocket? Her being hit would not only have caused her trouble, but the entire squad as well.

As Thea vowed to remember this lesson for the future, she watched as Karania quickly knelt down beside Medic Johnsen. She began to assess his wounds with a professional eye, her movements as swift and precise as always, as if her previous injury had never even existed.

Much to Thea's surprise, Johnsen offered no resistance to Karania's intervention, a silent acknowledgment of his current vulnerability. His normally extremely capable hands were now incapable of tending to his own injuries, especially given the severe damage to his right side and the transferred injury of Karania's severely damaged shoulder on the left.

Despite his evident agony, Johnsen tried to seemingly reassure them, speaking through a grimace of pain. "Don't worry too much about this whole thing," he managed to say, his voice strained but determined. "My build is geared towards self-regeneration, to counterbalance the effects of [Hippocratic Exchange]. I should be good to go again in about half an hour or so."

His words, though comforting, couldn't fully mask the severity of his condition.

Johnsen then turned his attention to Karania, wincing as he spoke, "Just hit me with a painkiller, if you would be so kind?" Karania, already prepared, held an injector filled with pain medication, her expression a mix of professionalism and empathy. She met Johnsen's request with a knowing smile and another one of her characteristic winks, her readiness proof of her medical expertise.

"Good to see that the medic in your squad knows—ouch, careful, girl!—knows how to properly do their job," Johnsen continued, his tone a mix of pain and praise as Karania administered the painkiller.

Medic Johnsen's reflection on their previous mission interrupted any of her further thoughts, "Considering the injuries you had last time, it's impressive you were even able to move. I'd imagine it was thanks to her efforts, yeah? I wouldn't have dared use [Hippocratic Exchange] then; the backlash would've definitely killed me straight out."

His words painted a vivid picture of the fine line he walked with his Abilities.

The delicate balance between healing others and preserving his own life was a constant challenge for him, one that undoubtedly required both skill and immense courage. For Thea, this continued insight into Johnsen's role and the risks he took every time he used his Ability deepened her appreciation for his dedication and skill.

It was a stark reminder of the sacrifices made by those who willingly chose to heal and protect, often at great personal cost.

The medics of the UHF were not something to be taken lightly.

As Thea observed the interaction between Karania and Medic Johnsen, and listened to his continued praise for her friend, a familiar feeling of inadequacy crept into her thoughts.

She couldn't help but feel overshadowed by Karania's brilliance once again.

It seemed that every time they encountered seasoned professionals in their respective roles, Karania not only held her own but often *surpassed* them in capability and understanding. She possessed a scary, seemingly innate ability to sync up with experienced individuals, effortlessly matching their expertise and, in many instances, even outperforming them.

In stark contrast, Thea felt her own progress lagging behind. She often found herself grappling to keep pace with more experienced counterparts in her role, especially considering her recent talks with Kar'Al and Moira.

This disparity was not just about skill or knowledge; it was the *ease* with which Karania seemed to adapt and thrive in challenging environments that made Thea feel as if she was constantly trying to navigate through an unlit path.

It was both a frustrating and equally motivating thought for Thea.

Determined to overcome her feelings of inadequacy, Thea recognized the need to intensify her efforts in mastering her own role. She understood that to achieve her goal of securing the #1 spot on the leaderboards, she could not afford to continually fall short of Karania's exceptional standard.

This realisation ignited a competitive fire within her, a resolve to push her limits and strive for excellence even more than before.

Her newfound resolve was evident in her voice as she turned to Medic Johnsen. "Thank you, Medic Johnsen," she said, her tone firm, reflecting her inner determination. There was a newfound intensity in her words that even caught herself by surprise. "For your advice and healing. I'll be sure to not waste this second chance you've given me. And I promise: No more spacing mistakes."

Thea's pledge was more than just words; it was a commitment to herself and her squad.

As if on cue, the remaining members of Sovereign Alpha and Arrow Squad, along with some members of Field Squad, gathered around the full-cover shields of Crusher and Lucas.

Morin, displaying his leadership, swiftly took charge of the operation again. His voice, clear and authoritative, cut through the tension, "Alright. This should wrap up our infiltration in this sector. We have about five minutes or so before the enemy forces swarm this location. Let's move quickly. Johnsen, we need you to boost Vi's Focus. We'll rely on the bubble for the initial descent, at least for the first several dozen metres."

Despite his recent injuries, Medic Johnsen rose immediately.

He stood up, albeit with evident discomfort, and initiated a [Focus Link] with Viladia.

Thea watched with a mix of concern and admiration as Medic Johnsen, seemingly undeterred by the pain and physical limitations, focused on aiding Viladia. His resilience and dedication to the mission, even in the face of personal injury, were nothing short of impressive.

Morin then turned his attention to Thea, Lucas, and Karania.

His tone conveyed a mix of regret and professionalism as he explained the mishap with the body. "Field Squad wanted to extend their apologies for the incident earlier. An errant shot struck one of the enemy soldiers at the edge of the wall, leading to the unfortunate accident. It was an unforeseen circumstance, and they assure it was not intentional. I trust you understand this, yes?" His words sought to provide some context and closure to the unsettling event they had just experienced.

Lucas, despite his stoic nature, had clearly been impacted by the recent events.

While the falling body had only glanced off his shield, the implications of the incident weighed heavily on him. As a defensive heavy, his primary role was to protect his squad, and the thought that he might have failed to shield Thea, inadvertently leading to injuries for her, Karania, and Desmond, troubled him deeply.

Although Lucas remained silent about his feelings, Thea could sense the change in his behaviour. Her keen Perception allowed her to perceive the subtle shifts in Lucas's demeanour quite easily.

He had become even more protective than usual in the aftermath of the incident.

As they had topped the wall, his vigilance had noticeably increased. He stayed closer to the team, particularly to Thea and Karania, ensuring he was within immediate reach should another unforeseen danger present itself.

So being included in this apology like that, and seeing that Thea and Karania had both been returned to full health, visibly seemed to relax him—much to Thea's own elation.

Having the defensive heavy be too mindful of the rest of his squad was not a good thing. It was like having the tank in a raid trying to micro-manage the damage dealers and healers as well—just not something anyone would really benefit from.

"Now then, with that out of the way, gear up. We're heading down in 60 seconds. Grab your stuff, leave nothing behind," Morin announced, before turning and walking towards the far-side of the wall.

Thea and Karania quickly grabbed their stuff, which they had placed nearby when Medic Johnsen had started checking their injuries, and grouped up with the rest of Sovereign Alpha for the next part of their mission.

It was finally time to enter Nova Tertius proper.

—

The instant Thea approached the edge of the wall, facing the city, she was momentarily breathless, struck by the awe-inspiring view that unfolded before her. The vast cityscape of Nova Tertius, in all its sprawling glory, lay stretched out beneath her.

The sheer scale and complexity of the urban expanse were overwhelming, far surpassing anything she had previously glimpsed during the landing or her initial ascent of the wall.

Perched at the furthest edge of the wall, Thea's view of Nova Tertius transformed dramatically. No longer confined to mere segments, her gaze now encompassed an almost boundless urban expanse. The city stretched beyond the limits of her vision, disappearing into the distant horizon like an endless, intricately woven tapestry.

This comprehensive perspective revealed the vastness of the city in its full grandeur, showcasing a metropolis that seemed to meld seamlessly with the far-reaching skyline.

The city, a sprawling mega metropolis of unfathomable size, was a testament to architectural prowess and urban planning on a scale she had never before witnessed or even thought possible.

The megabuilding complexes, colossal structures of glass, rock-crete and plasteel, towered over the landscape. Each of these behemoths was large enough to dwarf entire sections of the undercity Thea had known as her home, their looming forms casting vast shadows over the streets below.

Interspersed among these giants were even more colossal conglomerates of interconnected megabuildings. These clusters were linked by an intricate network of skybridges, creating a vertical maze that rose high into the air. Tramlines weaved through these structures like metallic vines, their paths winding and looping around the buildings in a complex dance of transportation and engineering.

Far, far below, the streets of Nova Tertius seemed almost miniature in comparison, despite their considerable breadth. Each avenue, likely dozens of metres in width, was dwarfed by the enormity of its surroundings. They cut through the city in neat, linear patterns, segmenting the endless urban expanse into somewhat more comprehensible sections.

From Thea's elevated vantage point, the city appeared both awe-inspiring and thoroughly intimidating. The sheer scale of it all—the towering buildings, the vast distances, the complex network of connections—was almost beyond comprehension.

It was a city that embodied both the pinnacle of human achievement and the overwhelming challenge that lay ahead for Thea and her squad in the coming hours and days.

Shifting her focus from the distant, towering megabuildings, Thea's gaze swept over the more immediate urban landscape that sprawled closer to the wall.

Here, the colossal structures gave way to a more conventional cityscape, yet still on a scale far grander than anything she had known in Lumiosia's undercity. The proximity to the wall meant these areas lacked the towering megabuildings, likely a strategic choice to make them less vulnerable to attacks from outside.

This part of Nova Tertius was a dense tapestry of residential areas, a sea of houses and apartment complexes stretching as far as the eye could see.

The buildings, while smaller than the distant megabuildings, were still massive in their own right. Each apartment complex was a labyrinthine structure, likely encompassing hundreds, if not thousands or tens of thousands, of individual homes.

Thea could almost imagine the thrum of life within each—countless stories and lives unfolding in the maze of corridors and rooms.

Interspersed among these residential areas were larger, communal structures that stood out due to their unique designs and sizes.

In Thea's mind, these were probably malls, arcades, or community centres—hubs of social and commercial activity that served as focal points for the surrounding neighbourhoods.

From her elevated position, these buildings, though substantial in size, seemed almost quaint compared to the monolithic megabuildings in the distance.

As Thea gazed upon this vast urban sprawl, a part of her marvelled at the sheer density of life and activity it represented. And yet, from her vantage point atop the 200-metre-tall wall, these sprawling structures were reduced to miniature models in a grand diorama, a stark reminder of the scale of the city she was about to delve into.

The contrast between the towering megabuildings in the distance and the densely packed, yet comparatively smaller, urban landscape near the wall only added to the surreal nature of the scene before her.

Directly below her, at the foot of the wall, the landscape took on a decidedly more militaristic character.

This area was dominated by a series of sprawling barracks, enormous warehouses, and vast hangars. Each structure, with its utilitarian design, spoke of a singular purpose: Military efficiency and readiness. These installations, with their stark, no-nonsense architecture, formed a stark contrast to the more vibrant urban landscape further away.

A vast expanse of asphalt stretched from the base of the wall towards the closest residential buildings.

This area, Thea surmised, served dual purposes.

It acted as a strategic buffer, a sort of no-man's-land that separated the wall from the urban areas, and also provided ample space for military personnel, machinery, and equipment. The sheer expanse of this open area was staggering, offering enough room for large-scale military manoeuvres and assemblies, if necessary.

Within this expanse, Thea noticed several massive artillery installations as well.

These powerful weapons were strategically positioned and heavily fortified, nestled within protective arrays of bunkers and auto-cannons.

Their presence was a clear indication of the city's formidable defensive capabilities, that Thea and the rest of the UHF had already felt first-hand. From her vantage point atop the wall, these installations appeared formidable, but it was only when she peered through her Gram's scope that their true scale and the intricacy of their defensive positions became apparent.

Through her scope, Thea could see the details of these military installations: The robust construction of the artillery, the readiness of the auto-cannons, and the disciplined movement of miniscule personnel around these structures.

It was a sobering reminder of the military might she and her squad were up against. The installations were not just defensive mechanisms; they were a statement of power, a clear deterrent to any who dared to challenge the city's sovereignty and the Stellar Republic's claim to it.

As she took in this last section of the landscape, Thea slowly started to fully realise the enormity of the task ahead. She had expected something like a Lumiosa, when she had first heard about Nova Tertius being a megacity. But what she had just seen from atop the wall dwarfed anything she could have possibly imagined prior to this assessment.

The megacity was not just a sprawling metropolis, that might as well have stretched the entire planet, for all Thea could see; it was a similarly giant, fortified stronghold, bristling with military strength and preparedness as well.

The juxtaposition of the densely packed residential areas and the stark military installations underscored the complexity of the environment they were about to enter, a mix of civilian life and military fortitude.

—

Thea intently observed the first group, now familiar in their formation but notably missing her own presence, as they seamlessly stepped over the wall's edge with confident strides. The use of their GravS equipment ensured their adherence to the, now once again, vertical surface.

As they descended, they quickly disappeared from her view, yet she felt an inexplicable sense of dissonance, a subtle cue from her Psychic Powers hinting at the hidden presence of her squadmates beneath Viladia's stealth veil.

This sensation reinforced the critical role she was about to play. Thea was acutely aware that her squad's safe navigation through the complex urban terrain of Nova Tertius hinged primarily on *her* heightened Perception and Psychic intuition. *'The challenges of urban warfare are daunting enough,'* she mused, *'but navigating a megacity like this, with its ridiculous size, blend of civilian and military zones, and who knows what else is lying in wait? No wonder this assessment was rated at the difficulty it got...'*

As she prepared to follow the first group, Thea activated her GravS gear with a quick swipe of her hand. Positioned at the forefront of the second group, she was keenly aware of the importance of her role in leading them safely through the city.

Alongside her were the medics, Karania and Johnsen, as well as Desmond, whose minor injuries had been quickly addressed by Johnsen with a regenerative injector.

That only left Medic Johnsen and Viladia being below 100%, each indispensable in their own rights, yet visibly strained from their exertions. Viladia, during a brief interaction while traversing from the wall's crest to the far edge, had confided in Thea about the gruelling nature of their current mission.

It was, according to Viladia, the most taxing operation she had ever faced, with an unprecedented drain on her Focus and Stamina. She admitted that without Medic Johnsen's sustained support through [Stamina Link] and [Focus Link], she would have succumbed to fatigue much earlier.

Thea's thoughts lingered on this revelation for a brief moment. *'Medics really are the cornerstone of any squad, aren't they?'* she mused internally.

Whether the focus was on stealth, direct combat, or any other tactical approach, the medic's role was pivotal. Their ability to sustain and replenish key resources of their teammates was what kept a squad cohesive and operational.

As Thea observed Medic Johnsen applying yet another crucial Link-type Ability to Viladia, the final members of their unit consolidating within the confines of the stealth bubble, her thoughts returned to the plan outlined by Morin during their brief walk.

The strategy for the imminent phase of their mission was clear, yet fraught with uncertainties and potential risks.

Field Squad was assigned to maintain their position atop the wall, serving as a continuous diversion until Arrow Squad signalled their safe arrival on the ground. This ruse was designed to mislead the Stellar Republic's forces into believing that the disturbance was solely due to a highly skilled flanking team attempting to break through to the main battlefield.

The aim was to buy time and maintain the element of surprise for as long as possible.

In the meantime, Arrow Squad and Sovereign Alpha, shrouded by Viladia's veil, would descend to the ground level behind the wall. Their immediate goal was to find temporary refuge within the military installations near the wall. Maintaining stealth was crucial during this phase; any premature engagement with the enemy could alert the Stellar Republic's military to the breach and compromise the entire operation.

Thea found herself grappling with doubts about the plan's viability.

It seemed riddled with potential pitfalls and lacked a certain depth in strategy. The most pressing concern in her mind was the likelihood of the Stellar Republic deducing the presence of infiltration squads accompanying Field Squad.

This possibility seemed glaringly obvious, yet there was no explicit mention of countermeasures in the plan. Despite her reservations, Thea chose to trust in the expertise and experience of Morin and the other seasoned infiltrators.

She decided to hold her concerns, mindful of the strain any unnecessary communication could place on Viladia's already taxed resources. With cautious optimism, she prepared to follow the plan, ready to adapt to whatever challenges lay ahead as best she could.

—

During their descent behind the wall, the atmosphere within Viladia's veil was noticeably more tense compared to their ascent. The seasoned members of Arrow Squad, despite their experience, exuded a palpable sense of anxiety.

The stakes were high, and any mistake, however minor, could jeopardise the entire mission. Their unease was not so much due to their own potential errors but stemmed from the responsibility of guiding Sovereign Alpha, whose relative inexperience added an unpredictable element to the operation.

Viladia, the key to their continued concealment, was noticeably more active during this phase as well. Unlike the ascent, where she had maintained a near-statuesque composure to conserve her Stamina and Focus, she now frequently communicated with Morin, relaying critical information about their surroundings through a myriad hand gestures and signals, that seemed understandable for only the two of them.

Her ability to see beyond the veil made her the de facto eyes of the group, and her guidance was indispensable in navigating the perilous descent. Morin had to adjust their course repeatedly, based on Viladia's signals.

Each alteration in their path was likely a response to potential threats or obstacles that Viladia detected below them. Her quick and efficient communication allowed Morin to steer the group away from danger, ensuring their stealthy progression remained uninterrupted.

Amidst this tense operation, Medic Johnsen's physical state was a cause for concern.

Although his physical injuries were healing at a remarkable rate, the continual use of his Link-type Abilities was taking a toll on him. The visible improvement in his physical condition was overshadowed by his increasingly haggard appearance.

He had long reached the limit of Focus and Stamina Boosters that he could safely administer, meaning his current energy reserves were all that remained to sustain Viladia's crucial veil.

As Thea quietly observed the scene unfolding around her, the enormity of their mission sank in with profound clarity. Witnessing seasoned and highly skilled marines like the members of Arrow and Field Squads being pushed to their absolute limits during just the infiltration phase of the mission, she gained a new perspective on the true nature of their assessment and its difficulty rating.

*'I see... Assessments aren't just for yourself, but also your ability to find the right kind of situation and personnel to tackle the mission with. Without Arrow and Field Squads, we would **never** even have gotten **into** the city to start our assessment, much less have any potential of succeeding in it,'* Thea thought, a sense of enlightenment washing over her.

The idea that they were not expected to face such monumental challenges alone was oddly reassuring. It reframed the difficulties they had encountered so far, making them seem less like insurmountable problems and more like steps in their journey toward becoming adept marines.

But it also pointed out once more, just how much more difficult this next part of their assessment would truly be: Behind enemy lines, with nobody for support except their own squad.

The moment they parted ways with Arrow Squad, it was just the six of them, hailing from the Sovereign, against the entirety of the Stellar Republic's forces within the city, as they attempted to remain as hidden as possible and finish their assigned missions...