Arc 1 - Chapter 113 - Certainty

Everyone was in position, their equipment checked and ready for the assault on the compound, yet Sovereign Alpha 01 had to hold their fire still.

The air inside the little office Thea and Lucas were in was tense, bristling with anticipation; primarily from her side.

“SA02 and HA02 are still en route. They ran into an unexpected dead-end; it seems that some kind of shell went wide and hit a nearby building, collapsing it into the alley they intended to take,” Corvus quietly reported over the squad comms. “They should be ready in around three minutes. Stay vigilant.”

Thea made quick eye contact with Lucas behind her, both nodding to confirm they had heard the orders. She relaxed her stance ever so slightly but remained alert.

Deep down, however, she was practically raring to go.

It had been almost a week and a half since they had taken part in a major firefight, and she was becoming stir-crazy from all the potential Credits, Merit, and CP wasted by having to be part of the main army on their way through the city.

Sure, they had been part of dozens of smaller skirmishes, but when one had a couple hundred thousand Marines pressing down on the enemy position with unyielding force, it wasn’t the same as going up against superior numbers.

Crushing everything in their path lacked the certain feeling of challenge that she craved.

Something about the ease of their victories since breaching the Wall had rubbed Thea the wrong way. While it was good to see that the UHF had the upper hand, for her, it felt more like busywork than anything else.

‘*I guess I shouldn’t really enjoy war this much in the first place,*’ she thought somewhat critically, reflecting on her eagerness for combat. ‘*Especially not the parts where I’m likely to get killed by going up against really bad odds; the difficult parts.*’

Regardless, she couldn’t deny that she was excited for the upcoming assault. It was bound to be gruelling and exhausting, but in some way, that certainty itself made it all the more thrilling for her. The challenge, the danger, and the opportunity to prove herself in the heat of battle were things she simply couldn’t help *but* look forward to.

The building that Thea and Lucas had commandeered for this initial part of their assault was some kind of warehouse/office hybrid.

A large section of it was taken up by a big open hall, filled with sturdy metal shelves and crates stacked up to the ten-metre high ceiling. The last quarter of the building, where Lucas and she were stationed, was more of an office complex, with a large open floor filled with standard-issue cubicles.

It was a strange sensation to be in a place like this, which looked as if it had still been in use just mere hours ago.

Cups of cold coffee were strewn about the workstations of whoever had worked here before, and holo-docs full of company-internal information lay around in the open, ready for anyone to simply pick up and read. The faint smell of old coffee and stale air filled the room, adding to the surreal atmosphere of the abandoned office.

'*The evacuation must have been extremely abrupt, for people to simply leave in the middle of everything. Nobody even bothered to close the windows, much less lock the doors on their way out,*' Thea remarked as her gaze swept over the desolate office space.

The light tapping of her index and middle finger on the Gram's body was the only sound breaking the eerie silence of the room, the restless energy inside of her manifesting in a tick she hadn't really paid attention to in years.

She was posted up, hunkered against the left-most wall of the office area, with her Gram leaning lazily on the top of one of the office cubicles. Lucas was just behind her, Stalwart and Havoc at the ready.

He caught her eyes with his own and gave a reassuring nod, seemingly interpreting her restless and absent-minded glances as nervousness. She returned a simple smile and a nod of her own, her face still fully visible as she wasn't wearing her full mask.

'*Actually, I probably* ***should*** *equip it now. Better to have it on and not need it, than need it and not have it on,*' Thea realised, silently thanking Lucas' presence for reminding her. She quickly pulled it from her backpack and slotted it in, making sure the seals were fastened and secure, before giving Lucas a quick thumbs-up in thanks.

The warehouse briefly echoed with the distant thumps of undoubtedly massive explosions from the main armies fighting dozens of kilometres to the south, a constant reminder of the larger battle raging beyond their immediate mission.

The wait seemed downright endless, anticipation continuing to build inside her as she waited for Corvus' voice to ring through the comms and give her the go-ahead to let loose.

The silence stretched on, every second feeling like an eternity.

Thea was very much aware of *why* this particular assault had her so excited, aside from the obvious: It would be the first time since the very first day of the assessment that she would be part of a full Alpha Squad assault team.

It was crazy to think that they had been inside the assessment for almost a full month, with their deadline rapidly approaching, yet they had only really spent a few hours fighting as a full squad—the majority of which had been on the very first day.

While the patrols prior to the eastern-front assault, the main assault, and the skirmishes following their foray into the city had *technically* been full-squad endeavours, they didn't really count in her mind.

There was a big difference between the six of them working together as a tight-knit group to accomplish a specific goal and the six of them simply being together while things just happened around them.

Somewhat lost in her thoughts, she was slightly startled when Corvus' voice sprang up over the comms again.

"SA02 and HA02 are in position. All squads are ready to engage. Confirm your position and readiness," he reported.

Thea immediately clicked her comms twice to indicate she was ready to go, hearing the non-verbal confirmation clicks of the rest of her squad come through mere moments later as well. Lucas also double-tapped her on the shoulder, signalling his position and readiness for their upcoming opening.

The two of them had spent quite some time discussing ways to work together over the past week, especially for circumstances exactly like this.

Corvus had insisted they come up with plans and specific manoeuvres to take out auto-turret emplacements, after hearing their stories from their time inside Nova Tertius' service tunnels during the infiltration.

At first, he hadn't even believed them when they told him they could take out auto-turrets head-on. His training prior to joining the UHF had ingrained in him that such defences were practically unbeatable with a frontal assault.

It had taken the combined efforts of the whole squad to convince him.

The recording from one of Desmond's drones, which happened to capture her and Lucas taking out the first auto-turret together, had been a definite lynchpin in their arguments.

Even *with* the recording, they had to practically beg Corvus to consider them as a viable option. Once they had finally passed that initial hurdle, he gave them a lot of homework.

Corvus asked them to come up with at least five different, viable options for taking out auto-turret emplacements with varying degrees of difficulty. These scenarios included grenade-ADS like the ones they had encountered in the last junction inside the service tunnels, multiple auto-turrets set up to cover each other, varying numbers of Stellar Republic Soldiers defending the turret, and a variety of different layouts and potential cover options.

It had taken the two of them nearly four days to develop manoeuvres that Corvus deemed "satisfactory" enough to consider them viable and add them to his arsenal.

This was going to be their inaugural test, and both of them knew it.

After all that effort and time spent, they really couldn't afford to fumble this opening. It would be hard to regain Corvus' trust if they simply got mowed down by the auto-turrets the instant everything kicked off.

"On my mark," Corvus' whispered commands rang through the comms in Thea's helmet.

“Three…”

Gripping the Gram tightly, Thea inched her fingers towards the trigger, mentally preparing for the next crucial steps. She visualised each movement, feeling her muscles respond subtly with each thought, like a prelude to the imminent action.

“Two…”

Breathing out slowly to calm any errant nerves that might cause her to jitter or not be able to properly follow the path in her own mind, she focused down on the sights of her Gram.

She aimed directly at the corner of the wall in front of her, which was connected to the large windows facing the office complex across the street. It would only take half a step to clear the corner and fire at one of the two auto-turrets aiming in their direction—the same amount of movement that would allow the turrets to see her as well.

“One…”

Taking a deep breath and releasing half of it, Thea's focus reached its peak.

Everything around her turned into a hazy, dream-like state; the only thing in full clarity was the sights of her Gram. The distant echoes of explosions, the ripples and quakes of their existence, and even Lucas’ breathing behind her became utterly and completely silent as she concentrated her entire reservoir of Perception on the upcoming shot.

She felt the warning signs deep inside of her chest rise together with her preparedness, as her Short-Term Precognition warned her of the dangers in what she was about to attempt, but they were not at a level where she was concerned quite yet. Her Psychic Powers warned of extremely tight tolerances, but the certainty provided by her Inheritance made it all a moot point.

Thea already *knew* it was all going to go according to plan.

“Go.”

Corvus’ command hadn’t even transmitted to her helmet yet, before Thea started her movement, stepping out of cover ever-so-slightly, before firing off her Gram; long having confirmed the exact angle required to guarantee a hit.

As Corvus’ voice echoed through her helmet, she was already mid-way through kicking off of the cubicle in front of her to get away from the second auto-turret’s line of fire and behind Lucas’ Stalwart, the first auto-turret’s barrel and firing apparatus melted by her Gram’s laser at the same time.

Lucas’ full-cover shield slammed down in front of Thea just as the first bullets from the second auto-turret tore through the window, shredding the cubicle they had hidden behind and sending debris flying in all directions.

The rhythmic prattling of high-calibre rounds impacting the Stalwart echoed through the office, creating a cacophony of destruction. Thea quickly got back into a crouched stance, having flung herself onto her back after the jump to minimise her profile.

She wasted no time, shouldering the Gram once again, and lightly tapped Lucas' right foot twice.

'*Three, two, one,*' she counted down in her head, following their pre-established timings and trained responses, trusting both her Psychic Powers and Lucas' capabilities to make sure that their movements and actions were synchronised perfectly.

'*Now.*'

She leaned hard to the right just as Lucas pulled the shield to the left, and fired immediately.

The laser from her Gram singed the right side of the Stalwart every so slightly as it cleared out from behind the cover, racing towards the auto-turret almost at the speed of light.

The beam found a minuscule opening in the turret's armoured casing, burning through the barrel and firing mechanism in an instant, neutralising the last major hurdle for Sovereign Alpha 01 to cross the street towards the compound.

Thea ducked behind the adjacent cubicle, letting herself fall to the ground without trying to stay upright.

The Stellar Republic's counter-fire, courtesy of the two squads of Soldiers tasked with overseeing the auto-turret setup atop the compound's roof, began ripping through the office.

The noise levels and sheer firepower levelled against them rapidly mounted as the Stellar Republic forces began to duplicate atop the building.

The two squads turned into four, then six, all firing into the office with rabid abandon.

Lasers and bullets transformed the previously serene interior into a scene of pure chaos, with glass, rockcrete, plastic, and myriads of other materials inundating the air.

Thea rapidly crawled towards Lucas, keeping her head down as much as possible as the debris turned into potentially deadly shrapnel, who stepped closer to cover her with the Stalwart's impenetrable bulk.

Once she was safely behind the shield, Thea immediately commed through to the rest of the squad.

"Both priority targets down. We're pinned," she reported, double-checking the digital compass on her HUD. "Two enemy squads atop the building, positions 178 and 194 from our location. They're duplicating!"

While they could likely attempt a careful retreat or even return fire from behind cover, they had already decided against risking it. After all, why risk potentially getting shot when you had another four Marines ready to help from a different angle?

Lucas and Thea shared a quick high-five, both relieved that their opening had gone almost exactly according to plan, the slight singeing of the Stalwart's right edge notwithstanding.

At that moment, the roar of Isabella's Devastator rang out from the alley to their left. The return fire prattling against the Stalwart ebbed significantly as the Stellar Republic's forces were ripped apart by the high-calibre rounds of her rotary machine gun or scrambled for cover.

"Let's clear them out," Thea commed to Lucas, feeling that the amount of fire focused on them was now more manageable. A quick nod from him was all she needed to start moving.

Briefly ducking out from the right-hand side of the shield, Thea fired off three quick, consecutive shots into the first enemy Soldiers that came into her sight.

She immediately ducked down again, her Psychic Senses screaming of imminent danger.

Bullets and lasers ripped past her, mere centimetres away, striking the right-side edge of the Stalwart, but Thea was already in cover and moving towards the left-hand side.

'*Damn, I didn't get a single Duplicator on that try! I wonder if they're already completely in cover and only letting the expendables fight…?*' she thought to herself in frustration, realising that her previous shots hadn't landed any critical kills.

While cutting down the horde of enemies was always beneficial, if they couldn't kill the original Duplicators, they'd be bogged down in this firefight for quite some time.

Thea herself was likely to be fine, even with an hour-long back and forth, as she didn't have any real risk of getting clipped by random enemy fire, but the rest of her squad didn't have this luxury.

A single misstep was all it would take for them to be out for the count, while the enemy Soldiers could stay in hiding and let their expendable duplicates do all the work until they got a lucky hit—all it took was one to severely limit the firepower on Alpha Squad's side.

Taking advantage of the nearly three-metre wide cover that the deployed Stalwart provided, Thea broke into a sprint before throwing herself on her back and sliding across the ground as she crested the shield's leftmost edge.

The smell of burnt material, blasted-off rockcrete and ionised air filled the room, in stark contrast to the almost sterile office environment it had been just moments before.

The office's air was completely inundated with smoke and debris from the ongoing gunfire by now, making it nearly impossible for her to see the enemy, but ultimately, she didn't *need* to.

As she slid across the office floor towards the nearest wall on her left, Thea simply fired into the smoke, fully relying on her Psychic Senses to provide her with the necessary information to hit the enemy soldiers on the opposite side of the street.

With each shot she took, the incoming fire ebbed away, one enemy weapon silenced after another. It was the very enemies' return fire itself that gave her the confidence she needed to

take each shot, as they were a guaranteed, sure-fire giveaway of whether or not she was hitting her targets.

Her Short-Term Precognition did the heavy lifting, as she simply relied on the fact that firing into the smoke would result in either one of two consequences: She *wouldn't* hit and the Stellar Republic's fire would continue as before, or she *would* hit her target and remove their return fire from the equation.

With only two possible outcomes for each of her shots, her Psychic Powers were in full control, regardless of whether she could actually see the enemy or not.

Each successful hit brought a brief moment of reprieve, the cacophony of gunfire momentarily dipping as one enemy after another fell silent.

In the roughly two seconds it took for her to reach the office wall on the left and take cover in the doorframe, she fired off seven shots—the return fire having ebbed away quite significantly being a testament to their efficacy.

The Stellar Republic's forces did not relent, however, as the fire into their office became more concentrated once again. The duplicated Soldiers tried their best to follow the trails of her Gram's laser, now slowly ripping into the wall that Thea was seeking cover behind.

Simultaneously, dull thumps sounded out from her right side as Lucas had seemingly found a way to get his Havoc launcher deployed at an angle that could fire out without hitting the ceiling of the office.

It was an issue they hadn't fully considered before choosing this particular building, but fortunately, it hadn't become a significant detriment to their operation so far.

Explosions started echoing out from the opposite side of the street, although their efficiency was limited as Lucas was firing blind into the debris and smoke.

"Higher by about three degrees," Desmond's voice over the comms suddenly cut through the cacophony. Further thumps went out after Lucas adjusted his aim, followed by additional explosions ripping across the street.

Without wasting a moment, Desmond continued to give targeting information over the comms, "Fire for effect, you're on target. Swing left around fifteen degrees for the second group after your next four to five shots."

Listening to the feedback and watching Lucas adjust accordingly without a second of hesitation, Thea realised she had a massive grin on her face, the exhilaration and adrenaline of the firefight rushing through her, combined with the knowledge that the rest of her squad was performing at their best.

Having Desmond jump in and immediately provide targeting information, even before Lucas or she had to mention they were blind, was *exactly* the kind of elite-level coordination she had always sought in her teammates but had never found before.

‘*Truly Alpha Squad reactions and behaviour,*’ she mused as she waited for the gunfire around her position to die down enough for her to move again. Stuck in the narrow door frame as her only means of cover, she relied on the rest of her squad to bail her out.

As she glanced around the office, she could see rapidly mounting results of Lucas's blind fire guided by Desmond's precise instructions: The enemy's return fire had significantly slackened, indicating their forces were being effectively suppressed or blown apart entirely.

The remnants of the enemy's firepower sporadically pinged off Lucas's shield and past or into the wall Thea was seeking cover behind, but it was clear the tide was quickly turning in their favour.

"Thea, we’re pinned down by sniper fire from the fourth floor at around 154. Can you do something about that?” Isabella’s voice rang out over the comms, tinged with a slight undertone of pain and annoyance.

Taking that request as her cue to get back into the action, Thea ducked around the left-hand side, past the door frame, and into the second, smaller office section that had not seen too much combat yet.

This room contrasted starkly with the one Lucas was currently in, which was filled with smoke, debris, and the acrid smell of burning materials. Shattered glass, bits of rockcrete and the broken remnants of the cubicles and their interiors littered the floor, creating an environment of utter chaos.

In contrast, the smaller office section was relatively untouched.

It had likely once been the office of a manager or someone important, as it was devoid of cubicles and instead featured a large, natural-wood desk in the centre of the room. Behind the desk was a comfy-looking, cushioned chair, and a large shelf filled with all manner of statues, diplomas, and even the occasional rare book.

The air in this room was significantly less polluted as well, lacking the heavy, burnt ozone odour and rockcrete dust that permeated the rest of the building. The dim lighting and intact decor gave it an almost eerie, undisturbed feel amidst the chaos outside.

For Thea, however, none of that mattered, except for the untouched windows.

She was glad that the firefight hadn’t quite managed to break the windows on this office yet, as the blackened exterior of them provided enough cover for her next moves.

She quickly flipped the massive desk over, straining and lifting with both hands at the considerable weight, before shoving it toward the large window as a form of makeshift cover. While most of the enemy’s fire would likely be able to penetrate it after a few shots, any cover was better than none; even if only as a form of line-of-sight inhibitor.

Positioning herself behind the desk, Thea steadied her breathing and focused her senses.

The relative quiet of the room allowed her to zero in on the faint sounds of high-calibre sniper fire from outside. She adjusted her Gram, taking a careful aim through the window, her eyes scanning for any hint of movement on the fourth floor of the opposite building.

The moment she spotted the muzzle-flash of the enemy sniper's rifle firing, Thea pulled the trigger. The laser from her Gram pierced through the window, leaving a perfectly round, molten hole behind, before instantly hitting the Stellar Republic's sniper.

She didn't need to wait to confirm her hit; her Psychic Senses told her she had struck true even before she pulled the trigger.

Swiftly, Thea fired off another three shots in rapid succession.

Each laser beam sliced through the slightly smoky air, creating small trails of vapour as they exited the room. The beams connected with their targets in the blink of an eye, causing them to fall where they stood.

Without pausing, Thea immediately ducked behind the desk and inched closer towards the left-most wall. Her heart pounded in her chest as she slid along the cool, rough surface of the wall, trying to make herself as small a target as possible.

She managed to press herself flat against it just in time, before retaliatory fire from the second and third floors, as well as from some of the remaining Soldiers atop the building, ripped through the window and began pelting the wooden desk.

The once-sturdy desk was no match for the barrage of bullets and laser fire. Splinters flew in all directions, the sound of wood cracking and splintering filling the air. Within moments, the desk was reduced to a pile of shredded and smoking timber, its contents scattered across the floor.

The room, once a semblance of calm amidst the chaos, was now as much of a war zone as the one Lucas was still residing in.

The diplomas and statues that had lined the shelves were obliterated, fragments of glass and ceramic mixing with the rest of the debris, and catapulted across the room like shrapnel from uncountable grenades. The smell of burning wood, evaporated ozone and the sharp tang of hot metal filled her nostrils.

Pressing herself even tighter against the wall, Thea took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing heart before activating her squad comms once more. "Four snipers down at the designated location. I'm pinned down in the left-most office by enemies on the second and third floors, as well as the roof. Give me some cover to reposition."

Thea's voice was steady, despite the chaos around her and her rapidly beating heart.

The sounds of bullets and laser fire echoed through the small office, mixing with the distant rumble of explosions and firefights that had kicked off all around the compound by the rest of the advance squads. The air was thick with dust, smoke and debris, the once-pristine office now a battlefield of shattered glass, splintered wood, broken ceramic, and scorched metal.

It was time to rely on the rest of her squad to provide the opening she needed.

She pressed herself harder against the wall, feeling the rough texture against her back as she minimised her profile. For the first time in her life, she had no doubts about her teammates' ability to handle the situation; they were *her* squad, after all.

The rest of Alpha Squad would come through.

As she patiently waited for the covering fire, Thea’s mind, instead of worrying about the rest of her squad, raced with potential strategies. She visualised her next moves, thinking about possible angles and potential opportunities she could take advantage of.

She was distinctly aware that she and the rest of the squad needed to turn the tide of the firefight more and more in their favour over the next few exchanges, before the Stellar Republic’s forces had the time to bring their vastly superior numbers to bear…