Arc 1 - Chapter 85 - Deception

Continuing their vertical descent, the unit, led by Morin with Viladia providing navigational updates, moved with a palpable sense of urgency. Viladia's continuously waning energy was evident in her slowing movements.

The strain of maintaining the stealth bubble on fumes of her remaining Focus and Stamina was taking its toll. Despite this, she persisted, driven by the mission's critical nature and the need to ensure the safety of the rest of her unit.

Medic Johnsen, too, was at the limits of his endurance.

He too had exhausted his Focus and Stamina through continuous Links with Viladia, having already consumed all the Boosters available to him, both within the safe limits *and beyond*.

He had taken an additional dose of each, a dangerous gamble that put his own life at risk.

It was a decision borne of necessity, a calculated risk in the face of their dire situation. His expertise in assessing and taking such risks, however, had paid off, at least for the moment, as he had managed to get enough Focus and Stamina to provide an additional Link for Viladia.

Within the confines of Viladia’s bubble, the tension was almost tangible, hanging heavy in the air and making each breath seem laborious. The members of the unit, including Thea, were visibly on edge.

Their movements were rigid and their breaths shallow, physical manifestations of their heightened state of anxiety. Eyes moved restlessly, scanning the bubble’s dim, hazy interior for any sign of progress, but found none.

For Thea, this experience was somewhat less disorienting compared to her first encounter with the sensory deprivation of the bubble during the “Strike One” mission. The absence of drugs in her system this time around also made the ordeal a lot more tolerable.

Nevertheless, the descent remained a gruelling challenge, even for her.

Each minute stretched on, exacerbating their collective apprehension.

She found herself silently yearning for the journey to end, longing for a release from the suffocating atmosphere that enveloped them. The heavy atmosphere of anticipation and the disconcerting uncertainty of their current environment merged to create an almost perilous situation.

It felt as if the strain could become too much to bear, pushing any one of them to the edge of their mental endurance. Yet, amid this brewing storm of tension, a breaking point was never reached.

After all, they were not just any soldiers; they were UHF Marines.

And on top of that, members of an elite infiltration squad or an Alpha Squad, who represented the very pinnacle of their respective drive.

Despite the oppressive, almost suffocating tension within the confines of the bubble, exacerbated by the lack of sensory input to guide or reassure them, each member of the unit maintained their composure.

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At last, the moment they had all been anticipating arrived, what felt like an eternity later.

Morin's signal for them to halt was a welcome directive, accompanied by the signalled instructions to prepare for exiting the veil.

This change was immediately perceptible within the unit. There was a tangible shift in the atmosphere as the unit members, who until now had maintained their rigid postures, subtly adjusted their stances. Their bodies, which had been tensed in a prolonged state of high alert, now transitioned into a readiness that spoke of action soon to come.

This shift was more than just physical; it was a mental transition as well, a collective sigh of relief that the challenging phase of sensory deprivation was finally concluding.

The promise of returning to the mission in its more traditional sense, free from the constraints of Viladia's bubble, brought a renewed sense of purpose and focus.

Thea also gave her Gram another thorough check, ensuring it was primed and ready for immediate use.

Despite recognizing the immense tactical advantage provided by Viladia's bubble, she couldn't shake off a certain discomfort that came with prolonged exposure to its sensory-deprived environment. '*Viladia's ability is undeniably extremely overpowered for any stealth operations, but it's not something I'd want to rely on if there were any viable alternatives,*' she pondered internally.

Her eyes scanned the rest of the unit, observing as everyone finalised their preparations for the next, arguably more daunting, phase of their mission.

They were about to venture across a treacherously exposed stretch of land, a daunting task that first involved getting through the military installations adjacent to the wall. Beyond that lay a vast, open asphalted area that resembled a no-man's-land, offering no concealment or protection whatsoever.

During their brief planning session atop the wall, Morin had outlined the challenging route ahead: A two-kilometre asphalted stretch across open ground, leading into the outskirts of the urban sprawl of Nova Tertius itself. There would be no cover, no objects to use as camouflage, and unlike their ascent, no distractions to divert attention away from them.

The strategy they would employ, while seemingly rudimentary, had been born out of necessity due to Viladia's depleted resources.

The theoretically ideal option of using her veil for this portion of the mission was no longer viable, as they had needed it for the ascent and descent from the wall itself.

Thus, a plan of deceptive simplicity was hatched: Masquerading as Stellar Republic soldiers and casually walking across the exposed, asphalted area.

At first glance, the idea appeared borderline ludicrous, yet Morin and Arrow Squad backed it up with a wealth of real-world examples. They recounted numerous successful missions where this very tactic had been flawlessly executed, with the enemy none the wiser.

Their stories lent credibility to the approach, illustrating how, under the guise of the enemy, they had repeatedly managed to traverse hostile territories undetected, by simply pretending to be part of the military complex itself.

The effectiveness of this ruse hinged on its sheer audacity and the natural tendency to overlook the ordinary. As long as they maintained a convincing military bearing and refrained from drawing any undue attention to themselves, there was a surprisingly more-than-reasonable chance that they would pass undetected.

The key was blending in seamlessly, behaving as typical soldiers of the Stellar Republic might in such a setting, and banking on the element of surprise and the unlikelihood of anyone expecting that exact type of approach.

As they would embark on this precarious segment of their mission, Arrow Squad had introduced yet another ace up their sleeve: Moira's signature Ability.

This Ability, while sharing similarities with Viladia's veil, operated under a different principle.

It generated a subtle field of non-detection around the user.

The effect was less about rendering its subjects invisible and more about manipulating the attention of potential onlookers. Those within Moira's sphere of influence became oddly difficult to focus on, a more subtle yet equally potent form of stealth, given the right circumstances.

The trade-off between Viladia’s and Moira’s Abilities was clear.

While Viladia's veil offered total stealth, it was also a significant drain on her resources, necessitating continuous replenishment of Focus and Stamina. In contrast, Moira's Ability was more sustainable, requiring far less energy to maintain and thus capable of lasting for extended periods without substantial drain.

For Thea the tactical value of such an Ability was immense. It represented a perfect balance between concealment and resource management, like a perfect Ability for a scout/sniper such as herself.

As she contemplated Moira's Ability, Thea couldn't help but envision its potential synergy with her Spectre’s camouflage as well.

The combination of the two could essentially grant her near-invisibility at will, a critical advantage for her role, especially considering her limited resource pool.

'*One day,*' she thought, acknowledging the rarity of such Platinum-level Abilities but also recognizing the importance of keeping an eye out for them. Such an Ability could be a literal game-changer, elevating her capabilities and effectiveness on the battlefield to new heights, far beyond anything she could currently hope for.

The sudden return to verbal communication snapped Thea back to the immediate concerns of the mission. Morin's voice broke through the oppressive silence they had been under, his tone concise and clear, indicative of the urgency and precision required in their next steps.

"We're almost at ground level," he briefed them. "We've chosen a landing spot just behind one of the warehouses we identified from the wall. This should keep us out of direct line of sight initially. Corvus, take your squad around the warehouse's right flank. I'll lead mine around the left. We'll rendezvous near the asphalted area. If you get there first, blend in and wait."

Thea noted Corvus' swift, silent nod in response, a gesture of understanding and readiness.

The same understanding was silently communicated to Viladia, the linchpin of their current stealth operation.

Moments later, Morin took a few steps forward and descended from the wall.

The sight caught Thea off guard, a stark reminder of how their perception of distance and orientation had been altered under the veil. '*We're already this close to the ground? I had thought we were still at least a dozen metres up,*' she thought, surprised yet relieved at their proximity to the ground.

In a swift manner each member of their unit descended from the wall.

One by one, they stepped off the massive rock-crete barrier, still shrouded in the protective embrace of Viladia's veil. Thea watched as the members of Arrow Squad, followed by her own squadmates, transitioned from the vertical descent to standing on solid ground.

Inbetween, Thea herself made the transition, feeling the solid ground under her feet as a welcome change from the disorienting experience of walking down a vertical surface.

As Medic Johnsen, the last in their line, set his foot down and signalled their readiness, Viladia acted. With a subtle, almost imperceptible movement, Viladia released her hold on the veil.

As Viladia's veil dissipated, a rush of sensations flooded Thea's senses, akin to waking from a deep slumber to find oneself in an unfamiliar room. The sudden exposure to the stark reality of their surroundings was disorienting.

She blinked rapidly, trying to adjust to the vividness and clarity that now surrounded her.

They were huddled behind a massive military warehouse of the Stellar Republic's army, its imposing structure casting a long shadow over them and against the monolithic structure behind them. The wall loomed just a stone's throw away, its sheer size even more daunting up close, now that Thea had traversed its height up and down.

The air was filled with the distant hum of military activity, the sounds of machinery and orders being shouted resonating in the background. Thea's nostrils filled with the scent of oil and metal, typical of any military installation, be it UFH or Stellar Republic in origin.

Around her, crates and various military equipment were stacked in orderly fashion, creating a labyrinthine environment that was both a hiding spot and a constant reminder of the enemy's very presence around them.

This immediate post-veil environment was a harsh reminder of the precariousness of their situation—hidden in plain sight, mere metres away from the enemy, with only their wits and the shadows to shield them.

As Morin silently issued a series of hand signals, there was a palpable shift in the demeanour of the unit. With military precision and unmistakable confidence, he led Arrow Squad forward, their movements deliberate and purposeful.

They strode out into the open, their posture upright, exuding an air of authority and intent.

The members of Sovereign Alpha exchanged brief, uncertain glances.

The contrast in approach—from the extremely covert operation just moments ago, to this bold, overt movement—was startling. But as they observed Arrow Squad's assured movements, a sense of understanding dawned upon them.

Corvus, reading the situation with his typical squad leader-based acumen, turned to the rest of Sovereign Alpha. His voice, though low, carried a weight of authority as he instructed, "Well… Let's take a page out of their book. They're the experts here, so move with purpose. We are Stellar Republic soldiers and we have places to be. Move it, Recruits!"

His words galvanised the team, instilling in them the confidence needed to emulate the assured strides of Arrow Squad. Mimicking their demeanour, the members of Sovereign Alpha stepped out, adopting the guise of Stellar Republic soldiers, each stride an act of conviction, blending seamlessly into the militaristic environment that surrounded them.

As Sovereign Alpha cautiously navigated through the enemy encampment, the tension among them was palpable. Thea, positioned just behind Lucas, focused intently on maintaining a confident posture, emulating the assured strides of her squadmates.

Around her, the military installation bustled with activity.

Soldiers moved with purpose, their boots thudding against the hard ground, their voices a blend of commands and brief exchanges. The clanking of metal and the distant hum of machinery filled the air, creating a symphony of martial life.

Thea's eyes scanned the surroundings, taking in the countless details.

Barracks lined neatly in rows, supply trucks parked in orderly fashion, and command tents stood strategically placed amongst the myriad warehouses.

The layout was remarkably similar to UHF installations, prompting a brief introspective thought in Thea's mind. '*Is there some kind of universal principle of military efficiency that guides the design of such installations? There must be. Otherwise it would be really odd to see this exact layout in two entirely separate factions…*'

Despite the familiar structure, the enemy's presence was an unceasing reminder of the precariousness of their situation. The uniforms and equipment of the Stellar Republic soldiers bore distinct differences from UHF's, yet at a glance, these disparities were subtle.

She realised that their disguises hinged on this superficial similarity; as long as no one scrutinised them too closely, they could likely move through undetected.

Every step was a calculated risk, each movement a carefully orchestrated part of their charade. Sovereign Alpha, now disguised as enemy soldiers, moved with a practised rhythm, blending into the flow of the encampment.

Thea's senses, however, remained heightened to their utmost, acutely aware of the enemy soldiers around them, knowing that their mission's success—and their very survival—depended primarily on maintaining this delicate masquerade.

As Thea moved cautiously through the enemy encampment, her role as the squad's vigilant lookout was critical. Her cyan orbs scanned the surroundings with an intense focus, adeptly picking out details and movements that could spell danger for her and her squadmates.

Her gaze was sharp and unyielding, rapidly assessing each new soldier they encountered.

Her internal thought process was a whirlwind of swift, tactical evaluations. '*Not a threat. He's just going about his duties. That one's too preoccupied to notice us. And that one... well, he seems more interested in Ela's ass than in us as potential intruders,*' she thought, her observations taking mere seconds but proving invaluable in maintaining their disguise.

Each fleeting glance and subtle shift in body language was meticulously noted and processed. Thea's heightened state of alertness allowed her to effectively differentiate between harmless passersby and those who posed a genuine risk of exposing them.

On several occasions, her sharp eyes caught glimpses of potential threats or individuals who might pose a problem. Without hesitation, she subtly alerted Corvus, using discrete signals they had agreed upon all the way back during their patrol days, before the assault on the wall had even started. Corvus, in turn, adeptly guided the squad along alternative routes, skillfully avoiding any potential confrontations or arousing suspicions.

Their journey through the installation was executed with precision and care.

Thea's vigilant gaze, scanning every corner and scrutinising every soldier they passed, ensured their passage remained unnoticed. Despite the constant tension and the weight of the situation, they managed to traverse the entire installation without drawing any undue attention.

However, as they finally emerged on the other side, stepping out towards the vast asphalted expanse, Thea’s sharp senses immediately registered a new concern.

She scanned the area quickly but thoroughly, her eyes searching for any sign of Arrow Squad. But there was no trace of them. They had seemingly not arrived yet, leaving Sovereign Alpha momentarily isolated at the edge of a dangerous and exposed no-man’s-land.

Karania's quick thinking kicked into gear as she noticed their precarious position at the edge of the installation. She gestured towards Lucas, who instantly understood her silent command and knelt down.

Karania began weaving a convincing cover story, speaking just loud enough to be overheard by anyone nearby. "Patrik, you’re in pain again? Didn't I just administer painkillers to you a while ago?" she said, her tone a mix of concern and mild frustration, perfectly playing the role of a medic attending to a whining soldier.

Lucas, understanding the intent of their squad medic immediately, grimaced and clutched his side, doing his best to convincingly portray a soldier in discomfort. Thea, meanwhile, remained vigilant, her eyes darting across the area, monitoring anyone who might become suspicious. Her focus was intense, missing nothing in her surroundings.

A group of Stellar Republic soldiers, busy with the mundane task of moving equipment, cast a cursory glance towards their group. They observed the scene for a moment, likely deducing it as a routine medical check.

Satisfied with the mundane explanation, they quickly turned their attention back to their work, dismissing any potential concerns about Thea and her squad. Karania's impromptu act of deception, combined with Lucas's convincing performance, had bought them precious time, allowing them to remain undetected and gather their bearings amidst the sprawling military installation.

Recognizing the improvisation initiated by Karania and Lucas, Corvus quickly adapted and issued a new command to further their cover. "Everyone on the ground now!" he barked authoritatively. "Patrik's delay means extra training for us. Fifty push-ups to stay sharp. Move it, let's go!"

Corvus, exemplifying the role of a dedicated leader, was the first to hit the ground, setting the pace for the push-ups. Isabella, Desmond, and Thea exchanged quick glances, their expressions a blend of surprise and mild irritation at the sudden change in plan.

Despite her inner reservations, '*Is this the best approach?*' Thea wondered, she swiftly followed suit, understanding the need for their actions to appear natural and routine.

Desmond and Isabella joined in almost simultaneously, their bodies hitting the ground with a unified thud. The group began their exercise, with Corvus leading the count, his voice resonating with the clarity and volume of an experienced drill sergeant.

The physical activity, though unexpected, served as a surprisingly effective cover, blending their presence seamlessly into the military environment around them.

By the time Thea felt the burn of the push-ups intensify, her arms aching under the weight of her backpack and the Caliburn, her vigilant eyes finally spotted the first members of Arrow Squad approaching. Each of them carried crates of various sizes, some hefting them solo, others with the assistance of a squadmate, all efficiently moving towards a nearby warehouse under Morin's leadership.

Viladia, part of the approaching group, exchanged a subtle, knowing wink with Thea, signalling their readiness. They then swiftly vanished into the warehouse, blending seamlessly with their surroundings.

Corvus, catching Thea's discrete signal, smoothly transitioned from their exercise ruse.

He rose, stretched briefly, and turned his focus to Lucas and Karania. "Medic, how's Patrik doing? We can't be loitering here all day. We're expected elsewhere," he said, his tone a mix of urgency and command.

Karania, playing her part, packed away her medkit, which she had been using for a convincing performance of medical attention. "Sir, we're almost ready. Patrik had some circulatory issues, but I've just administered a stabiliser. He'll be operational shortly," she reported with professional assurance.

"Patrik, make sure you get a thorough medical examination after this mission. We can't have these kinds of delays during operations. Understood?" Corvus added, firmly addressing Lucas as part of their ongoing charade.

As Arrow Squad emerged from the warehouse, their approach was methodical, maintaining a calculated distance from Sovereign Alpha to avoid any appearance of affiliation. Their movements were discreet yet purposeful, until Morin emerged and confidently positioned himself at the forefront of the entire unit.

"Attention, we've received orders from the Corporal to proceed to checkpoint Beta immediately for a specialised assignment. No delays," Morin declared with an air of authority.

His command initiated a fluid integration of Arrow Squad into Sovereign Alpha's formation, merging them into a single cohesive unit. With both squads now unified, they commenced a brisk march towards the expansive asphalted highway, their steps synchronised and deliberate.

At that moment, Thea experienced an odd sensation wash over her—a wave of subtlety that briefly heightened her alertness. Her darting gaze, searching for the origin, quickly found Viladia’s, who subtly gestured towards Moira.

Realisation dawned on Thea, ‘*This must be the effect of Moira's Ability*.’

A sense of cautious relief mingled with the mounting tension as they advanced into the open, vulnerable and exposed at the heart of enemy territory.

Their unit maintained a brisk, unified pace across the vast asphalt expanse, every step bringing them closer to the urban threshold of Nova Tertius.

Thea, ever vigilant, scanned the surroundings, her eyes sweeping across the landscape.

Despite their exposed position, it seemed their ruse was effective; no one appeared to pay them any undue attention.

As they approached the urban outskirts, Thea's gaze drank in the details of the cityscape.

The transition from military austerity to urban complexity was stark, with residential and commercial buildings gradually taking over the landscape, right behind the last urban-side warehouses that were clearly delineated for military use. The towering structures of the city's heart loomed in the distance behind, an urban jungle of unfathomable size awaiting them.

Everything seemed to go well, until approximately four-fifths of the way to their destination, Thea's keen observation caught a grav-vehicle approaching them from the east.

Her instinctive alertness kicked in, and she quickly signalled Morin. His reaction was immediate and direct, a muttered curse escaping under his breath, a clear indication of the unexpected complication this vehicle presented.

Morin's next instructions were clear and concise, indicating the importance of the upcoming encounter. "Stay calm, and let me handle this," he said with a steady tone, signalling the group to stop and await the approaching vehicle.

His eyes briefly met with Viladia's, a silent communication passing between them. "Be ready for anything, Viladia. You got enough for a step, I trust?" he asked in a low voice.

Viladia responded with a firm nod, her expression resolute as her hand subtly hovered near her waist, where Thea knew the stealth expert kept her abyss-black blades. The tension was palpable, and Thea felt her muscles tighten in anticipation.

As the grav-vehicle drew closer, Thea's mind raced with potential scenarios. '*If they get a good look at us, this close, we're bound to be exposed,*' she thought anxiously.

The vehicle, resembling an SUV in size and design, came to a stop about ten metres away from their group, its presence adding to the gravity of the moment. The vehicle was large enough to transport a squad of marines, indicating it was likely carrying a team on patrol or on a specific mission.

In those few seconds, Thea prepared herself for any outcome, ready to act on Morin's cue while hoping their cover wouldn't be compromised.

As the passenger doors of the SUV sprang open, a group of Stellar Republic soldiers disembarked with an air of casual authority. Their rifles were slung leisurely over their shoulders, a sign of routine patrol rather than immediate combat readiness.

The soldiers fanned out slightly, their movements disciplined and coordinated but unhurried.

The apparent focal point of the group, a woman, emerged on the opposite side of the SUV and confidently walked around the back of the vehicle, taking the lead.

She stopped a short distance in front of Morin, who boldly stepped forward to meet her gaze.

The tension in the air was tangible as the two faced off, an unspoken challenge hanging between them.

This woman was clad in an officer-type armour, lighter and more streamlined than that of her companions, signifying her leadership role. Her presence commanded attention, her demeanour exuding both authority and experience, much like Morin's facing her.

In addition to the officer, four other soldiers of various builds and roles accompanied her.

One was unmistakably a heavy, his armour bulkier and more fortified, while the remaining three were in medium armour, their stance and equipment suggesting versatility and rapid response capability.

The atmosphere grew thick with suspense as the two groups confronted each other.

Thea and her squadmates, under the guise of Stellar Republic soldiers, were acutely aware of the scrutiny they were under. Every glance, every gesture, was potentially critical in maintaining their ruse. Thea's eyes darted between the Republic soldiers, assessing their positions and readiness, while remaining alert to any signal from Morin.

"I find myself puzzled by the unfamiliar designs of your unit's armour, Corporal. They look very much unlike our usual designs," the woman began, her tone laced with suspicion as she interrogated Morin. "Moreover, I'm not detecting any standard identification signals from your unit..." she observed, her eyes narrowing while she scrutinised a digital display embedded in the armour on her left forearm.

Morin, seemingly well-prepared for such an interrogation, responded without hesitation. "With all due respect, Corporal, I'm under no obligation to explain, given our equivalent ranks. However, as a gesture of cooperation, let me clarify: We are here on a specialised infiltration mission, aimed at neutralising a large section of the undead threat outside our city. The gear is strange, because it's UHF design. Helpfully supplied by a few of their "*marines*", complete with active UHF markers. This explains the absence of familiar signals on your equipment—it's not supposed to," he explained, taking a confident step closer to the woman, allowing her a better view of his armour and its make.

Thea, a silent observer, was astounded by Morin's audacity in openly admitting the use of UHF armors. Despite the rising turmoil within, she managed to maintain a facade of calm, internally chanting in desperation, '*Please let this work, Morin. Please!*'

The woman's sharp gaze lingered on Morin, her expression sceptical. "UHF armour, you say? In the heart of Stellar Republic territory?" she queried, her tone laced with disbelief. "That's quite an unusual choice for a supposedly covert operation starting within our own lines. And this special infiltration mission you speak of—why haven't I even heard *anything* about it?"

Morin didn't miss a beat. "Look, we both know how these operations work. Need-to-know basis only. The less you know, the safer it is for everyone involved," he countered smoothly.

“Our orders came directly from higher up. I’m sure you understand the delicacy of such missions. Trust me, we’re as surprised as you are about these armours, but they serve a purpose.”

Thea watched the exchange intently, her heart pounding in her chest. Every word, every gesture was critical. Morin’s confidence was convincing, but she knew the slightest misstep could unravel their carefully constructed facade. The Republic officer’s scrutiny was intense, her eyes darting between the members of Sovereign Alpha, searching for any sign of deceit.

“Infiltration mission or not, I need confirmation of your orders,” the officer insisted, still examining the display on her armour. “Protocol dictates that any unusual activity be reported and verified. I trust that *you*, similarly, understand?” Her voice had taken on a certain edge that spoke more of rivalry than outright animosity.

It seemed that Morin’s attempt at appearing as a capable Stellar Republic Corporal was somehow working out for them, making sure that her attention was more on the possibility of her being uninformed about an important, upcoming mission, than them being real UHF marines.

Morin nodded, maintaining his composure with professional ease. “Naturally, Corporal. I’ll forward you the relevant clearance codes, immediately. Just give me a moment. The UHF interface is a bit strange, it will take a second,” he said, reaching for his own arm display and beginning to swipe away at it.

Thea held her breath, hoping against hope that Morin’s bluff would hold. The tension was almost unbearable, each second stretching out as they waited for the officer’s response.

Only moments later, a visible change overtook the woman's expression as her eyes narrowed, betraying a mix of confusion and scepticism. She appeared to be processing some unexpected information displayed on her arm's device.

The tension in the air was almost tangible, creating a heavy silence as both the Stellar Republic's squad and Morin's team held their breath, anticipating her next words.

"I... I need to verify this with our headquarters. The code you've provided isn't aligning with our records. It’s also not exactly showing up as a violation, so I don’t know what to make of it. There's a comms-unit in our SUV; I'll cross-check this immediately," she stated, her voice taking on an almost imploring tone as she turned to address Morin, a marked shift from her earlier all-out suspicion.

Thea, silently observing the unfolding scene, couldn't suppress her curiosity. '*What on earth did Morin send to elicit such a reaction from her?*' she wondered, her mind racing with possibilities.

Unfazed, Morin intensified his approach, "Corporal, I must stress the urgency of our situation. Time is a luxury we *cannot* afford. Our tech-experts have miraculously gotten these armors operational, but their functionality might be fleeting. We *need* to execute our mission swiftly, move beyond the wall, and take care of the undead before these suits fail us. You're aware of the clandestine nature of their technology. This mission might be our *only* shot at

turning the tide in our favour. You most likely know yourself how dire it looks on the eastern front, don't you?"

The woman's eyes widened, a clear sign that Morin's revelation had caught her off guard.

Sensing her lack of awareness, Morin leaned in, adopting a tone laced with concern and urgency. "You *weren't* informed? That's concerning," he began, his voice heavy with the weight of their dire circumstances. "Our situation is critical. We've lost all anti-armour capabilities on the wall. The enemy has deployed some kind of specialised team that's systematically taking out our defences. We've resorted to indiscriminate artillery fire with IgT-shells, but our munitions are depleting rapidly. If they attack our defences with more heavy units, that section of the wall won't hold."

The impact of his words was immediate and palpable.

The Stellar Republic soldiers exchanged looks of deepening worry, downright terror for some, the gravity of the situation dawning on them. The female Corporal, visibly shaken, took an involuntary step back, as if Morin's words were a physical blow. "No, that can't be..." she murmured, her voice trailing off in disbelief.

Morin, recognizing the moment's critical nature, advanced the narrative with a sense of solemn resolve. "Now you see the urgency of our mission, Corporal, I imagine. We're racing against time here. This isn't just about a single battle; it's about the survival of the entire city. We need to act swiftly and decisively." His eyes locked with hers, conveying a silent plea for understanding and cooperation.

In that critical juncture, the delicate equilibrium between doubt and trust hovered on the brink, influenced heavily by Morin's adept handling of the situation. Thea was struck by his proficiency in navigating the encounter, transforming an initially dubious standoff into an opportunity for the Corporal to feel part of a greater cause.

It was a deft manipulation that left Thea both awed and slightly unnerved. '*Morin's not just a skilled infiltrator; he's a downright* ***master*** *at manipulation,*' she realised, her estimation of him climbing significantly. She was certain that none among her team, not even the usually socially proficient Corvus or the brilliant Karania, could have matched his performance even remotely.

The response from the Stellar Republic Corporal was a mixture of relief and newfound respect. "I understand, Corporal. Forgive my earlier hesitation. May the Emperor watch over you and guide your shots true. Give those undead hell, you hear?" She conceded, her demeanour shifting to one of cooperative understanding. She motioned to her squad, signalling them to stand down.

Morin's strategy had succeeded.

As he reached out for a handshake, Morin's smile conveyed gratitude and camaraderie.

"Thank you. Your assistance here is invaluable," he said warmly. The Corporal returned the handshake, a gesture of mutual respect and understanding.

Then, Morin's attention pivoted back to his own unit. "Prepare yourselves, Arrow Squad, Sovereign Alpha," he commanded with an unexpected urgency.

Thea's muscles tensed instinctively, her mind racing. '*Prepare for **what** exactly?*' she wondered, a sense of unease creeping in. This deviation from a simple order to move out suggested something more was at play, something potentially risky or unforeseen.

“Vi, if you please,” he addressed Viladia, who gave him a terse nod, just as Thea understood: ‘*Oh. So **that’s** what we're getting ready for.*’

The sequence of events that unfolded next was a blur of swift and decisive action.

Morin's command to Viladia was the catalyst for a sudden, violent turn. Thea's realisation dawned just in time to witness Viladia's lethal efficiency.

In a flash, Viladia disappeared from the middle of the unit and materialised amidst the unsuspecting Stellar Republic soldiers. Her movements were a blur, each one precise and fatal.

The first to fall was the heavy, his head cleanly severed in a single, fluid motion. The two medium soldiers barely had time to register the threat before Viladia's dark blades found their mark, swiftly ending their lives as they sunk deeply into their eye sockets.

Simultaneously, Morin capitalised on the element of surprise with the female Corporal.

His quick grab pulled her off balance, and the brutal force of his punch that followed was unmistakably lethal. The sound of her skull shattering under the impact was chilling, and she collapsed lifelessly to the ground, his fist still embedded halfway inside of her skull.

Reacting with remarkable speed, Thea drew her Icicle. Knowing that using her Gram might draw unwanted attention, she opted for a more discreet but equally effective response. Her Icicle sent a barrage of shards hurtling towards the SUV's driver-side window.

The windows may have been designed to withstand typical bullets, but they were no match for the Icicle’s armour-piercing shards. They pierced the glass, and the muffled sounds of agony from within were quickly silenced.

In the immediate aftermath of the swift and ruthless confrontation, Morin issued his orders with clear urgency. "Take them, throw them in the SUV. We’re taking the whole thing. Move it," he directed, his voice brooking no delay. Crusher, Moira, and Johnsen sprang into action without hesitation, efficiently executing the orders.

Sovereign Alpha, still reeling from the sudden violence, struggled to keep pace with the rapidly unfolding events. As they tried to process what had just happened, Morin offered a brief but compelling rationale for their swift brutality. Approaching the driver-side of the SUV, he explained, "The second she mentioned there’s a comms unit inside, they needed to die. We are taking it. It will be absolutely invaluable behind enemy lines."

Thea was momentarily caught in a whirlwind of shock and realisation. Her grip tightened around the Icicle, which hummed slightly with residual energy.

It had been an instinctive action, devoid of premeditation, driven purely by survival instinct. '*He is extremely frightening when he puts his mind to something…*' she mused, the weight of Morin's calculated ruthlessness settling in her mind.

As the unit crammed into the now cramped SUV, she steeled herself for the next phase of their perilous mission…