

Arc 1 - Chapter 93 - Plans

"Plan B? I wasn't aware there even was a plan B... What the fuck did that one entail? Blowing up a fusion reactor you happened to find nearby?!" Desmond whispered pointedly, still clenching his eyes tightly.

"Let's move back inside. With them on high alert now, staying out here isn't smart. I'll explain everything once we're secure," Thea instructed, her voice steady but low, as she led the retreat into the apartment complex, her movements cautious and deliberate to avoid detection from any potential observers below.

Her squad trailed behind her, equally cautious, as they navigated their way to the building's interior rooms, far from the prying eyes that might be searching from outside.

Gathering her team, Thea began, "Plan B involved Corvus triggering an overload in the Caliburn, causing it to self-destruct. Normally, the Caliburn dissipates heat with each bolt action, but if it's operated without doing so, the build-up becomes critical, eventually melting the weapon itself and everything around it."

She raised her cybernetic hand, a tangible reminder to the risks involved with her weapon.

They all knew how she had lost it during the 2nd ambush on the first day, as a result of her rapid firing the Caliburn to take out the heavy weapons emplacements that had pinned down the rest of the squad.

"If the Caliburn has been fired repeatedly and the Solarium within it—the source of its energy—has been sufficiently agitated already, the additional heat on top of that will overwhelm the containment mechanisms and safety features. The outcome, as we've just witnessed, is a fusion explosion, triggered by the Solarium reacting violently with its surroundings," she concluded. Thea's explanation was very matter-of-fact, her tone masking the gravity of their situation as the squad absorbed the reality of Corvus's last act, signalled by the blinding light they had witnessed.

A moment of stunned silence washed over them, until Desmond broke it with a question, "Are you telling me, you've been running around with a fusion bomb like that, ever since we started the assessment...?"

"Only if misused," Karania interjected. "As Thea said, the Solarium needs to be sufficiently riled up first. Just firing the Caliburn a couple of times without venting the heat wouldn't lead to that kind of catastrophic failure. There's no chance the UHF would've allowed such a suicidal weapon into production otherwise."

"That's fucking *awesome*," Isabella suddenly threw into the room, her voice laced with a certain level of awe. "I didn't know something like that was possible at T2 tech already! I can't fucking wait to get my hands on a heavy weapon like that!"

Her enthusiasm, as usual, managed to lighten the room's heavy air, drawing smiles and chuckles from the squad. Isabella's genuine fascination with such destructive capabilities somehow made the direness of the explosion's implications feel momentarily lighter.

“Moving forward,” Thea picked up the conversation after a light moment, “we will continue as planned. Corvus won’t be joining us again until we get this mission done and the UHF can break through that wall, so we best not let our squad leader wait.”

She directed her focus to Desmond next, “Desmond, it’s time to put your drones to work again. Scout out those cameras and auto-turrets for us. Best if we can get through them without them ever knowing we were there, but prepare a quick-and-dirty option as well, should we need to get out fast for whatever reason. I’d rather we be prepared for every eventuality.”

She then turned her attention to the squad’s heavies, “Isabella, Lucas, I’m going to need you both on high alert tonight. I know we’re all running on fumes, especially Lucas with the extra load, but Desmond needs to recharge for tomorrow, and honestly, I’m not far from hitting my limit too. It pains me to ask more of you, but your roles might be lighter in the coming days. Can I count on you?”

Isabella and Lucas, understanding the truth behind her words, gave their affirmation without hesitation. Their commitment was commendable and took a heavy load off Thea’s shoulders.

After all, if they did end up becoming important over the next day or two, it was unlikely their encounters would last a long time either way.

Their best possible outcome of being caught was to quickly dismantle any pursuers and hide again, as any elongated fighting would inevitably end up with their death.

They were deep inside of enemy territory, so an extended firefight was not something that would go in their favour, regardless of how rested the two heavies of the squad were.

Acknowledging the dire need for readiness, she turned her attention to Karania, “Kara, we’re going to need every advantage we can muster. Hit us with any stims you’ve got and think will help us; they might just give us the edge we need to breach the border-wall by tomorrow night.” Her request was met with an immediate nod, almost as if Karania had been anticipating that exact course of action.

As the squad set about preparing for the next phase of their operation, Thea found a moment of solitude, the weight of leadership pressing heavily on her. *‘This whole leading thing is not my style, Corvus... I’d have much rather seen the Caliburn’s end up-close than do all of this here. Damn you and your logic...’*

Her thoughts were a mix of frustration and anxiety, a silent curse for the circumstances that demanded she step up in ways she never anticipated nor wanted.

Karania moved through the squad over the next ten minutes, carefully administering stim doses tailored to each member’s immediate needs.

Lucas and Isabella were given focus-enhancing stims combined with a modest amount of wakefulness enhancers, a necessary boost considering the extended watch they were tasked with. Thea, Desmond, and Karania herself received focus stims as well, but theirs were paired with a mild sleep aid to maximise the restorative quality of the sleep they were going to get—they would need to be as rested as possible for the next day.

Thea could only grasp the basics of Karania's detailed explanation about the biochemical interactions and expected outcomes of these stims—her expertise was far, far beyond Thea's own understanding, even after a thoroughly technical explanation from her.

Exhausted, Thea decided it was time to rest, confident in her squad's capability to handle their responsibilities. She had pushed herself to the limits, her focus unyielding as she navigated the squad through the day's challenges. Anticipating another demanding day ahead, she hoped the short respite would be enough to renew her strength and resolve to continue leading the squad to their mission objective...

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Thea was woken up by Karania the next morning, after a thoroughly dreamless sleep. It almost felt like she had just gone to bed and immediately heard Karania's gentle nudging to get up for the day ahead.

Thea quickly got up and prepared herself, eating a portion of her rations, drinking some of the water from the still-running appliances of the apartment and getting a sit-rep from the rest of the squad.

As expected by the fact that she hadn't been woken up in the middle of the night, instead getting to "sleep in" until just before the sun would start to rise, nothing dramatic had occurred over the course of Lucas' and Isabella's double-shift watch.

During the night, Desmond was deeply engrossed in creating a hack for the surveillance and defence mechanisms lining the border-wall, utilising his drones for the task. However, he encountered significant obstacles due to the heightened security measures that had been rapidly implemented.

"The security's been ramped up significantly," he reported, the frustration evident in his tone. "Patrols and guard numbers have skyrocketed—at least three times as many, if not more; hard to gauge properly. We might need to reconsider our approach if this level of security persists past the early morning."

Acknowledging the complexity of the situation, Thea offered a measured response, suggesting a temporary pause in their efforts. "Get some rest, Desmond. We'll reassess after I get a better idea of the situation," she advised, her gaze then shifting to Isabella and Lucas. "You two should rest as well. With the current state of heightened security, we're going to need every advantage we can get, including being fully rested."

Isabella, Lucas, and Desmond found makeshift beds within the confines of the apartment, seeking comfort wherever they could—Lucas, with his towering frame, made do with the floor, leaning against the wall as he quickly succumbed to sleep.

Left to their own devices, Thea and Karania were tasked with the daunting challenge of revising their strategy. Recognizing the need for more precise information, Thea ventured back to the rooftop under the cover of the early-morning darkness herself.

With the Gram's scope in hand, she aimed to gather detailed observations of the border-wall's defences, hoping to identify any potential vulnerabilities or changes in patrol patterns that could be exploited.

Her meticulous observation over the next ten-or-so minutes of the border-wall revealed a significant increase in the number of patrols and guard posts, confirming Desmond's earlier reports. They moved with a clearly heightened sense of alertness, their behavioural patterns vastly more attentive to any ongoings in the deserted outskirts of the city.

Where before, Thea could spot quite a few patrols and guards simply slacking off or sharing stories with one another during their, likely long-winded, paths and shifts, they were now properly paying attention to the deserted buildings close to the wall; often times even veering off of their supposed path to check out a potential noise or sighting.

However, despite this drastic increase in personnel, Thea did note that the structural and automatic defences of the wall had remained completely unchanged—likely due to time constraints; something that might be changed over the course of the day, should the Stellar Republic feel that the border-wall was in danger.

The auto-turrets stood sentinel as before, their menacing twin-barrels scanning the deserted no-man's land before the wall. Cameras, equally spaced and vigilant as before, offered no new angles or coverage that she hadn't already accounted for in their initial plan.

It was a relief, in a way, to see that their primary route—through one of the many quick-access doors and the service tunnels that snaked beneath, and subsequently through, the wall—remained a viable, albeit now more challenging, option.

The real complication lay in the sheer volume of personnel and their heightened alertness.

Every guard post was fully manned, with soldiers rotating in shifts, based on Desmond's reports, that ensured no lapse in their vigilance. The quick-access doors, once considered a relatively low-risk entry point due to their obscurity and the guards' previously predictable patterns, now seemed like bottlenecks waiting to ensnare them.

As the sky began to lighten with the first hints of dawn, Thea retreated from her vantage point, her mind racing with the implications of her findings. Their approach would need to be more cautious and even more calculated than ever.

The increased guard presence meant that timing and stealth would be critical; they would have to exploit the smallest window of opportunity to slip through undetected, as a full-on assault against a fortified position with their current numbers was completely out of the question.

Back inside, she shared her observations with Karania, who listened intently, nodding in understanding. Together, they began to refine their plan, incorporating the newfound challenges into their strategy.

The task ahead appeared daunting, practically insurmountable, but Thea knew that they had to get through this wall, one way or another. Not just because their mission hinged on it, but also because she had *promised* Corvus that she would.

As Thea and Karania delved deeper into strategizing, Karania's brilliance shone through once again, illuminating their conversation with creative solutions and unconventional strategies.

Time and again, she proposed ideas that initially seemed improbable, yet upon closer examination, unfolded as ingenious approaches to the challenges Thea had laid out for them to tackle.

'To have her cognitive prowess for even a day...' she mused silently, a mix of admiration and wonder colouring her thoughts. Karania's medical expertise was already a known asset, but her strategic acumen, often manifesting in the most unexpected and effective of ways, was something to behold. It was as if her mind operated on a different wavelength, effortlessly weaving through complexities to find pathways that others might overlook or might take hours to stumble upon naturally, in mere moments.

In these instances, Thea couldn't help but compare Karania's strategic insights with Corvus', the only other person inside of Alpha Squad that she often felt vastly inferior to, when it came to the strategic side of things.

While Corvus excelled in leadership, his intuitive understanding of people and the grand-strategy type of planning, Karania's approach was more unorthodox and micro-level, oftentimes bordering on the realm of a true strategic genius. Her suggestions weren't just outside the box—they were often on a level where the box didn't even exist.

They weren't always feasible, but her uttering them would many times lead to more do-able alternatives that nobody had even thought of before.

'How does she manage to contain such a vast reservoir of knowledge and creativity in that brain of hers?' Thea pondered, struck by the sheer depth of Karania's intellect. It was as if her brain was a labyrinth of ideas, each turn revealing a new, unexplored avenue of thought.

Using her friend's genius and acumen in out-of-the-box thinking, as well as her own more traditional understanding of strategy and planning, Thea managed to come up with a potential feasible plan in the next two hours, by putting together whatever little resources and manpower they had to hopefully provide enough of an opening to get through the wall and into Nova Tertius proper.

By the time she had finished planning and running the whole thing past Karania to get another pair of eyes on it, who ended up giving her the all-good, the early-morning sun had already risen past the horizon and started making its way higher into the sky.

Feeling the drain of intense planning on her energy levels, she quickly consumed another portion of her rations, wanting to be as ready as possible for the challenging day ahead.

Once satiated again, she moved to rouse the rest of the squad, prepared to share the details of their newly crafted plan...

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Following a brief period for the squad to awaken, organise their gear, and partake in a simple breakfast from their ration packs, Thea initiated the briefing on the strategy she and Karania had devised during the early hours.

In the meantime, Karania distributed modest doses of stimulants to Isabella and Lucas to compensate for their abbreviated rest. Their superhuman Vitality would help, but even for them, a mere 2-3 hours of sleep was insufficient for the coming day's exertions, especially after their exhaustive trek and double-shift of watches the day prior.

Once Thea concluded her explanation and elaboration of the plan, a pause ensued as the squad members contemplated the plan's details, evaluating its feasibility and potential flaws.

Desmond, seeking clarification on a particular aspect, finally broke the silence. "Just to be clear," he started, attempting to grasp the full scope of their approach, "your plan involves utilising three of my drones to deploy white foam grenades as a diversion. This would enable us to blend in with the incoming response forces as though we're part of them, correct?"

"That's exactly it," Thea confirmed, her response underscored with approval. "It's largely Kara's idea, but we took a page from Morin's playbook as well. If we aren't looking like we're enemies ready to fight, they have no reason to suspect that we are."

The approach they were considering was undeniably fraught with risk, yet it required only a brief period of deception, perhaps just a couple of minutes. During this window, they needed to convincingly merge with the Stellar Republic's forces, moving close enough to the wall's quick-access entry points to slip through unnoticed.

Desmond, though, expressed his reservations about their ability to convincingly impersonate the Republic's soldiers. "The patrols seemed quite consistent in their gear, Thea. I'm not sure how we could convincingly pass as one of them... Do you really think this is feasible?"

Thea had been prepared for this line of questioning, however.

"Initially, I shared your doubt. But after closely observing the patrols this morning, it became clear that not all of them are uniformly equipped. About three-fourth are in standard gear, but it appears they've reinforced their numbers with troops from other sectors of the battlefield momentarily," she detailed.

"These extra guards and patrols are kitted out in various types of Tier 1 gear, much like ours. Their designs have some distinct features, but in the midst of confusion, such details are likely to be overlooked, just as they were when we initially crossed the wall with Arrow Squad."

Desmond took a brief moment to reflect on his own observations, before slowly nodding. "I guess you are right... Now that you mention it, I do remember some of them wearing different gear. I just didn't really think it would be quite that many, I guess."

He ended up agreeing with the plan, much like the rest of the squad, but brought up an important point towards the end of their briefing, "I can't use three drones for this distraction. The most I can give you is two, as we need at least one to deliver the camera and auto-turret

hacks. I doubt the auto-turrets would be fooled by visual differences, as they mostly work with pings and markers, last I checked.”

This was something Thea had not considered before, as she didn't have the technical knowledge yet to understand how military-grade hardware worked, but in hindsight, it made complete sense to her.

She had only really interfaced with old arcade machines in terms of technology, after all. It was something she was highly anticipating to learn more about, after this assessment was over.

Thea had already started making a mental list of Skills she wanted to pick up from the System Store, once she had some Credits to spend, and military hardware like this, was definitely part of what she wanted to learn about—partially to avoid exactly this type of situation in the future.

With a slight alteration to the plan, which involved one less drone to be used as the distraction, as per Desmond's recommendation, Alpha Squad prepared the corresponding white foam grenades.

They set the timers to be very generous and linked them together, so the drones would have enough time to get into position before the grenades detonated in sequence.

They wanted to make it seem like at least 3-4 squads were trying to create some rudimentary cover to assault the wall, in order to cause enough of an incident to prompt nearby patrols to head further north to help out.

That would create a small gap in their perimeter, that Alpha Squad would hopefully be able to use to slip in and get to the quick-access doors.

Isabella had brought a few small-scale lock-explosives with her over the wall, which would come in handy to blow open the quick-access door. Hopefully without causing too much of an audible or visual incident, so they could maintain their ruse until they slipped into the service tunnels underneath the wall.

Per the detailed briefing in the data package Corvus had entrusted to Thea, the service tunnels running beneath the Stellar Republic's border-wall promised a covert path deep into enemy territory, potentially delivering Alpha Squad directly to the very doorsteps of Nova Tertius itself.

They would come out just a few hundred metres outside the city, depending on the path they took, with very likely minimal resistance, if any, in their way.

Given the infrequency of permanent security details within such service channels, or guarding the exits thereof, the likelihood of Alpha Squad encountering minimal, if any, opposition as they navigated this subterranean route was surprisingly high.

The decisive factor that convinced the entirety of Alpha Squad to adopt the current strategy, as Thea had proposed, was rooted in a stark realisation after a bit of back-and-forth: Their options were severely limited by the resources and manpower at their disposal.

Despite thorough brainstorming that explored both more confrontational and covert tactics, none of their alternative strategies could withstand any level of rigorous cross-examination.

The option of a direct assault was quickly dismissed due to their inadequate arsenal.

The absence of the Caliburn, in particular, left a gaping hole in their offensive capability. With the Caliburn at their disposal, they might have entertained the possibility of swiftly eliminating the nearest guard positions and forcefully accessing the service tunnels, relying on Lucas' Stalwart for cover against retaliatory strikes.

Conversely, the notion of a purely stealthy infiltration was also ruled out due to their lack of advanced stealth Abilities. They lacked access to potent concealment techniques such as Viladia's bubble or Moira's veil, which would have facilitated a mostly unnoticed passage past enemy lines without much trouble.

Faced with these limitations, the squad recognized the necessity of a creative yet feasible plan that leveraged their available tools and skills.

The decision to utilise a distraction, coupled with the guise of responding patrol units, emerged as the only viable course of action given their constrained circumstances, despite the obvious issues and potential downfalls with the plan presented.

Finishing up their planning session, they fitted two of Desmond's drones with a handful of sequenced and linked white foam grenades each.

He took a few minutes to fly the drones around the apartment, getting used to the new weight and aerodynamics they now had due to the added weight, before guiding them out the door, down the staircase and out the back of the apartment complex to avoid any potentially spying eyes from seeing the drones emerge from their exact apartment.

While Desmond was busy getting the distractions in place, the rest of the squad also prepared their gear for the upcoming mission.

They divided up Corvus' supplies, so Lucas wouldn't have to run around with two backpacks slung over his shoulders, allowing him more freedom to use his Stalwart and Havoc, should things go south, as well as lightening the load on him. He might be extremely robust and strong, but carrying an extra 50-60 kg for an entire day was not something that anyone wanted to do, if there was a way around it.

Instead, they each packed around 5-6 kg into each of their packs, mostly ammunition, first-aid supplies and grenades, leaving a lot of the less-useful or overly redundant supplies in the apartment, such as Corvus' rations, his sleeping bag and similar.

Before setting out, the squad took one final opportunity to inspect their equipment, ensuring that the previous day's journey through the urban outskirts hadn't compromised their gear or allowed any debris to interfere with their mission.

Heeding Thea's suggestion, they opted not to remove the dirt and grime accumulated on their armour. This choice was intended to blend their T1 armour with the rest of the rarer

patrols, reducing the likelihood of being distinguished by Stellar Republic soldiers at first glance.

They hoped the layer of grime would effectively disrupt their silhouettes and obscure the specific hues of their gear.

Desmond signalled that the drones were strategically positioned, with the countdown indicating a mere ten minutes until the white foam grenades would activate. Following this cue, the squad quickly, yet quietly descended the stairs and exited from the rear of the apartment.

They trailed behind Thea, who navigated with precision around the building, guiding them closer to the border-wall. Their positioning was crucial; they needed to be near enough to seamlessly merge with any passing reinforcements yet distant enough to avoid premature detection.

Striking this balance was critical, resting heavily on Thea's leadership. It was a fine line to walk, but it represented their best chance at infiltrating the city undetected, leveraging the chaos they hoped to create as their cover.

Thea cautiously approached the line of buildings adjacent to the border-wall, meticulously checking each door and corner for potential traps and alarms. This diligence soon paid off. As anticipated, the structures nearest the wall were extensively rigged, a clear deterrent for anyone attempting a quick breach through this area.

Foreseeing such defensive measures, and acknowledging it as a strategy they themselves might employ in defence of the wall, were they in the Stellar Republic's boots, Thea guided the squad away from these fortified positions. They detoured around the buildings, navigating into a narrow alley nestled between two structures close to the wall.

Here, although they encountered additional, and very similar, security measures, the traps and alarms were significantly less cramped than those within the buildings, making them easier to circumvent.

This allowed the squad to moderately easily progress toward the alley's end, all the while making sure they didn't accidentally step out too far from the walls of the alley, which would have quickly landed them into line of sight from the camera and auto-turrets atop the wall.

Now, concealed in the darkness of the alley, they were perfectly positioned and ready.

The squad waited with bated breath for the detonation of the white foam grenades, which would serve as their crucial diversion. This moment of anticipation was critical; the impending explosion would provide the cover they needed to spring their audacious and undeniably risky plan into action...