

Arc 1 - Chapter 90 - Damnatio

The squad's strategy quickly evolved after Isabella's insightful observation and the realisation that their initial approach was deeply flawed. Now, they pivoted towards a more direct and potentially impactful strategy—leveraging the destructive capabilities of Thea's Caliburn to neutralise the technology concealed within the Mativ at the hidden outpost.

This new approach simplified their planning considerably.

Within an hour, they had crafted a straightforward yet potent plan for the next day. It hinged on precise reconnaissance to establish the ideal timing and a coordinated effort between Lucas and Thea to identify the most effective firing position for the Caliburn. The key objective was to ensure maximum impact with minimal risk to the squad.

However, a significant concern remained unresolved: Their escape strategy post-attack.

"Even if we position ourselves over a kilometre away, the moment we shoot that thing. They will absolutely come and hound us with *everything* they got, the moment we reveal ourselves like this," Isabella pointed out, her extensive urban warfare expertise evident. "I have no idea how we will get out of this alive..."

This critical aspect of their plan needed urgent attention, as the success of their mission hinged not just on the attack, but also on their ability to safely withdraw from the area.

The group's discussion took a sober turn as they confronted the harsh realities of their mission. Karania, visibly concerned, contributed her thoughts: "I agree with Isabella. Only she and Thea have the necessary skills to navigate through the industrial sector and urban outskirts to even have a chance at successfully evading any pursuers. The rest of us... we wouldn't stand a chance. Even *if* we find a place to hide, it's only a matter of time before we're discovered."

Lucas, echoing the group's growing apprehension, added his perspective: "Considering the cost of a Mativ Beta... Whatever tech's in there, is worth a fortune in credits. It might even be System-tech, for all we know. There's no chance they will *not* hunt us down to the last, if we actually manage to destroy it. Drones, search parties, armoured vehicles—they'll throw everything they have at us. I can't see a scenario where they wouldn't pull out all the stops to find us."

The mood in the office had shifted to one of sombre realisation.

They had identified an ideal target and had the means to strike effectively. However, the crux of the problem remained unresolved: A viable escape plan.

Each proposed strategy they discussed inevitably hit the same snag—how to safely extract themselves after the attack. The realisation that their plan was incomplete without a feasible means of escape weighed heavily on them all.

Their temporary refuge in the office was secure only because they had yet to draw attention to themselves.

However, launching an attack on the Stellar Republic's secret outpost and obliterating the Mativ, along with its precious cargo, would instantly turn the tides against them. In the aftermath of such a high-profile assault, they would undoubtedly become the targets of an intense manhunt.

Lacking the ability to blend into the bustling crowds of the city's populated areas, their options for concealment were limited to the deserted industrial zones and outskirts of the city. In such desolate environments, their chances of successfully evading pursuit were beyond slim.

Corvus, bearing the heavy mantle of leadership, let out a deep, burdened sigh. His next words carried the weight of the difficult choices they faced. "We're left with two paths ahead of us," he began, his voice tinged with the strain of decision-making. "Firstly, we could opt to bypass this opportunity and report our findings to UHF as soon as we're able. Hopefully, the intel can be leveraged effectively in time, before the outpost serves its unknown purpose. Or..."

He paused, visibly struggling with the gravity of the second option he was about to present.

It was unusual for Corvus, always so composed and decisive, to exhibit such hesitancy.

Thea watched him, a sense of foreboding growing within her as she anticipated his next words. Her concern deepened as she saw him grapple with the thought, clearly finding it difficult to even voice the alternative. When he finally did, however, her fears were confirmed.

Gathering himself, Corvus continued, the gravity of his words hanging in the air, "Or... we take a more direct approach. One of us could stay back, take the critical shot, and ensure the outpost is dealt with. Meanwhile, the rest of the squad would press forward towards our primary objective in Nova Tertius proper." The implication of his suggestion was clear, and its potential cost starkly apparent.

Thea felt a chill run down her spine as she realised the full implications of what Corvus was proposing—a sacrifice for the greater good of the mission.

The profound silence that enveloped Alpha Squad in the wake of Corvus' suggestion was almost tangible.

Each member, in their own way, had likely contemplated this stark reality, but hearing it vocalised by their leader lent it a sobering concreteness. The logic was clear and unassailable: Sacrificing one member of the squad to neutralise a high-value target was undoubtedly strategically sound, yet the moral weight of such a decision was immense.

Corvus, burdened with the responsibilities of leadership, gave voice to this difficult choice.

His tone was subdued, the characteristic energy of his speech noticeably dimmed by the gravity of the situation. "The Caliburn's use is not exclusive to Thea. Its potency as a weapon is undeniable, we've all witnessed it multiple times by now—a single shot could achieve our objective. This task doesn't require specialised expertise either, as it has enough power to completely evaporate the Mativ regardless of where it's hit. Thus, anyone here, with the exception of Karania, could potentially do this."

His eyes briefly met each squad member's gaze, acknowledging the heavy decision they faced. The squad absorbed Corvus' words, each member lost in their thoughts, the air heavy with unspoken emotions.

The reality of what was being proposed—the use and sacrifice of the Caliburn and one of their own in such a final, decisive act—was a lot to process. It was not just a strategic consideration; it involved a sacrifice that none of them had anticipated at this point in the assessment.

All members of Alpha Squad were acutely aware that a '*death*' in this assessment like this was not permanent; they would return. However, they also understood the stark reality: Whoever undertook this mission would be isolated from the squad until the UHF fully breached the wall.

This meant being effectively out of the assessment until the final stages of their objectives, an unavoidable certainty.

As they weighed their options, a heavy, unspoken agreement formed among them. Despite being the only feasible strategy, the decision was laden with a deep, poignant sorrow. The notion of deliberately leaving a comrade behind clashed fundamentally with their strong sense of unity that had been developing between them over the past days and weeks, yet they were also well-versed in the ruthless demands of warfare.

Thea found herself reflecting on the "Strike One" mission, where a similar fate had befallen their small team of elite marines to neutralise a key target. Logically, she recognized the necessity of such tactics in the UHF's strategic playbook when circumstances required.

Nonetheless, the concept was a hard pill to swallow.

She felt a crushing sense of responsibility, almost as if she were *personally* condemning one of their own to a lonely fate. Despite her relentless efforts to find an alternate escape route through the recordings Desmond provided, and recalling every structure they had passed, no viable path emerged. As the scout of Sovereign Alpha, she felt the weight of this failure acutely.

It was her role to chart their course, to ensure safe passage, yet in this instance, she had hit an impasse. A route that would lead to nothing but death.

Deep down, Thea knew that the blame was not hers alone to bear.

None of them, despite their combined efforts, had been able to devise a better plan. This was one of those rare, grim situations where a '*good*' solution simply did not exist. Yet, this rational understanding did little to assuage the guilt that gnawed at her, leaving her feeling as though she had let her team down.

Ultimately, however, after a series of solemn exchanges, with each member voicing their thoughts and concerns, they collectively decided to shelve the final decision until the morning. Desmond's input was going to be crucial for this; his technical expertise potentially offering another perspective or, at the very least, help them come to terms with the plan's stark reality.

As they dispersed, the unresolved question hung over them like a dark cloud.

Who would remain to ensure the mission's success? It was a decision none wanted to make, a burden that weighed heavily on their hearts. The plan was clear, its execution meticulously laid out, but the emotional cost of this sacrifice was yet to be fully reckoned with...

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Restless and troubled, sleep had eluded Thea throughout the night.

As dawn broke and the squad convened for their final briefing, the mood in the office was heavy, each member weighed down by the impending decision.

Desmond, having been briefed on the previous night's discussions already, shared in the squad's sombre contemplation. He had meticulously reviewed his drone recordings, paralleling Thea's efforts from the day before, in search of any overlooked detail or alternative. Despite his thorough analysis, his findings only reinforced the inescapable conclusion: Their current strategy was the only viable path forward.

Corvus initiated the meeting, his penchant for leadership evident in these times more than ever. He methodically outlined their plan for the day. "We'll diverge at this point," he began, pointing to a location on the data-pad, displaying Desmond's drone footage. "The designated shooter, yet to be determined, will proceed to the spot marked Alpha, equipped with Thea's Caliburn. They'll set up there, in a position identified by Thea and Lucas as optimal for sniping. The goal is to target the Mativ, and the tech within, from the most advantageous angle available. The shooter will remain on standby, ready to take the shot either when the Mativ is opened and the tech exposed, or by sunset, whichever comes first."

His words were clinical, detached, yet the gravity of the task at hand was not lost on any of them. Each member absorbed the details, their faces reflecting a mix of resolve and the unspoken burden of the sacrifice they were about to make.

"In parallel, the remainder of the team will rapidly advance towards the heart of Nova Tertius. They must cover a minimum distance of 50 kilometres to stand any chance of staying ahead of the search teams before they reach the city's more populated sectors and can hide their presence amongst them. This means no breaks and minimal time for selecting the safest routes. Each of them must be at their utmost alert, constantly on the lookout for potential traps, ambushes, or alarm triggers. Their vigilance in this phase is critical to avoid detection and ensure everyone's collective safety."

With the plan fully laid out and everyone in agreement and understanding about it, Corvus, his voice tinged with gravity, opened the discussion about the real topic of their plight. "We need someone to stay behind for this. Any volunteers?"

Immediately, Isabella, Desmond, and Thea spoke in unison, "I'll do it."

Isabella, with a firm tone, quickly took control of the conversation, overpowering the other two of them. "Look! My role in close-quarter combat isn't needed for stealth operations. I'm an offensive heavy, I do fucking nothing to assist in any kind of stealth operation. Desmond's drones and Thea's urban expertise are far too valuable to lose. Fuck, without them, we

wouldn't have even found this stupid outpost to begin with. There's no shot they'll be less valuable than me going forward!"

Desmond responded, his face etched with a mix of frustration and urgency. "Isabella, you're not seeing the full picture, here! The effectiveness of my drones is *really* limited. What we achieved here with the outpost was more luck than anything else. In the dense urban setting of the city, they'll be way less effective and vastly more noticeable, especially to Stellar Republic patrols or civilians. Plus," he added, emphasising his point, "in a situation where we're cornered or ambushed, your skills in close-quarters combat are indispensable. They could very well be our only way out. You're the ace up our sleeve in those scenarios, so you definitely cannot stay."

Thea, not wanting to be sidelined, asserted herself. "It should be me! Sniping is my responsibility, and this is part of it. I've used the Caliburn the most, know the urban environments the best, when it comes to getting around quickly, and might even be able to escape them! I think it only makes sense that I stay behind for this. Both Isabella and Desmond are—"

Her suggestion was abruptly cut off by a united front from Isabella and Desmond. "That's *not* an option!" they exclaimed together, their voices ringing with determination. Lucas and Karania quickly joined in, reinforcing the sentiment, "You're *not* staying behind, Thea."

Taken aback by the vehement opposition from her entire squad, Thea could only gaze at each of them, her initial resolve faltering under their collective disapproval. The depth of their conviction left her momentarily speechless.

Lucas, his voice tinged with a hint of regret, added, "I'd volunteer myself if it weren't for my role as the defensive heavy. My place is with the main group..."

Karania, throwing her hands up in a blend of frustration and jest, remarked, "And here I am, wishing I could do the 'cool' stuff for once. Being the medic sometimes feels so damn limiting!"

Thea, absorbing their words, thought to herself, '*I don't really think this is about who gets to do the "cool" thing, Kara...*'

The grim reality of their conversation was far from a contest for excitement. They were debating who would make a significant sacrifice, effectively sidelining themselves for a major part of the assessment, to ensure the rest of the squad could advance.

The debate raged on like this, with Isabella and Desmond vehemently advocating for their own stay, each attempting to sway Thea, Karania, and Lucas to their perspective.

The conversation gradually became more heated, as Lucas and Karania began to offer their insights, transforming the dialogue into a fervent exchange of personal convictions rather than a focused strategy session.

As opinions clashed and emotions ran high, the discussion strayed further from its intended purpose.

It seemed to morph into an outlet for airing personal insecurities and frustrations, particularly from Isabella and Desmond, who both felt their skills were less useful than others despite their clear importance to the team.

Amid the cacophony, Thea struggled to steer the conversation back to a productive course. She could tell they weren't getting anywhere, but didn't know how to intervene and manage to get the discussion back to where it needed to be.

As she mulled over this problem, however, her keen perception allowed her to pick up on a deep sigh from Corvus amidst the noise, followed by his calm but firm voice cutting through the din, "I'll do it."

Thea's eyes widened in shock at his declaration.

The rest of the squad, caught up in their heated exchange, didn't seem to notice. '*Corvus? You can't! You're the squad leader!*' she thought frantically, desperate to intervene. Yet, the resolved expression on Corvus' face gave her pause, his steadfast demeanour reflecting a decision made not in haste, but with the weight of leadership.

"I'll do it," Corvus reiterated, his voice rising above the others, instantly quieting the room. "I'll stay behind and take the shot at the outpost." A profound silence enveloped the squad, each member staring at him, their expressions a mix of shock and disbelief. Seizing the moment of stillness, Corvus continued.

"It comes down to simple logic: We can't spare Isabella, Desmond, or Thea for this, at all. And Lucas and Karania aren't even in the running for this, as they're both completely irreplaceable in all aspects and not suited for the task either way. That leaves me as the logical, and only, choice," he spoke with a gravity that underscored the weight of his decision.

"Each of you has a unique and irreplaceable skill set that is crucial for this squad. Something that is downright irreplaceable. Losing any one of those capabilities could make the upcoming parts of our mission completely impossible. My role as the squad leader is to amplify your strengths. I'm a force multiplier, nothing more."

With a self-deprecating chuckle, he continued, "My *unique* skills? Leadership, tactical oversight and social skills. But in this phase of the assessment, those skills are neither as critical as what each of you brings to the table, nor actually of much use to begin with at this stage. Lastly, Thea here has already demonstrated she can step up in the leadership department when needed, as long as it's primarily about manoeuvring the squad through an urban environment. This decision, while difficult and potentially unorthodox, is the most strategic one for our squad's success."

Thea, unable to contain her frustration, burst out, "That's *bullshit*, Corvus! I can't just take over for the whole assessment. I'm not a squad leader, and I don't want to be one! Every time I have to make a call like this, I feel completely out of my depth. There's no chance I can do this!"

She was adamant, her voice laced with a mix of desperation and conviction. "You're just as irreplaceable as any of us! I should be the one to stay behind. In terms of urban navigation, Isabella can take over, and Desmond's drones can handle the scouting just as well as I can, if not better. I don't bring any unique skills to this squad, certainly less than you think *you* do."

Corvus gave her a stern look, halting her mid-tirade.

His expression was an intricate blend of authority, empathy, and frustration. "I'm staying and taking this shot. You'll become interim squad leader until I return to the squad, there's no arguing about this."

As Thea opened her mouth to retort, Corvus added forcefully, "That's an order, Thea!" And with a more sombre tone, "My last one." His words left no room for further debate, underscoring the finality of his decision.

Thea, momentarily taken aback by his commanding tone, fell silent.

The room resonated with the gravity of his words, and the responsibility now placed upon her shoulders. Despite her protests, Corvus' decision was made, and his role as leader was evident, even in choosing to step away for the greater good of the squad.

"When I mentioned earlier that any one of us, barring Karania, could undertake this task, I was serious. My position as squad leader doesn't exempt me from making tough calls like this," Corvus stated firmly. "What kind of leader would I be if I allowed crucial, irreplaceable skills to be sacrificed, just because I hold slightly more authority than the rest of you? I'm not doing this out of vanity or to avoid squad disagreements, Thea. This decision is about logic, not ego."

He let out another heavy sigh, one that seemed to momentarily alleviate the gravity he carried. "Now, I do need a quick tutorial on the Caliburn. It would be quite the irony if, after all this big talk, I ended up botching the shot due to my unfamiliarity with the weapon." His words carried a hint of wry humour, subtly lightening the tense atmosphere.

The rest of Alpha Squad, each of their faces etched with a tapestry of complex emotions, slowly began to pack up the remnants of their intense discussion. Their faces reflected a blend of resignation, respect, and unspoken concerns as they returned to their preparations for the day ahead. Corvus' decision, though heavy, was accepted as an order, and the team moved forward, albeit with an air of sombre acceptance.

Thea, meanwhile, found herself caught in a whirlwind of internal conflict.

Thrust unexpectedly into a leadership role, she grappled with feelings of reluctance and unpreparedness. Part of her desperately wished for Corvus to stay, to spare her the burden of command. Yet, another part, more rational and grounded, recognized the truth in his words. His logic was sound, and his decision, while difficult, was strategically apt.

Swallowing down a surge of emotions and unsaid arguments, she acknowledged the futility of further resistance. With a quiet resolve, Thea retrieved her Caliburn and began the task of instructing Corvus on its intricacies. As she detailed the weapon's mechanics and nuances, she did so with a newfound sense of responsibility.

It was more than just teaching him about a weapon; it was an unspoken passage of trust and duty, a moment marking her transition into a role she never sought and found herself utterly unsuited for but now had to embrace for the next while...

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Thirty minutes later, the squad was fully geared up and ready to depart. Lucas, taking on additional responsibility, carried two backpacks—one his own and the other Corvus's, now unnecessary for the remainder of his mission.

Corvus, distinct and solitary from the group, had the Caliburn slung over his shoulder.

He held his AR-303 in one hand as he addressed the squad. "Alright then, this is it... Alpha Squad, I have *complete* faith in you. Follow Thea's directions, no matter how unorthodox they may seem. She might not see it, but we all know she's more than capable of keeping us all safe and on track."

He then turned to Thea, his gaze locking onto hers, and to her astonishment, she heard his voice resonating in her mind. She was startled for a moment, until she remembered that he had picked up [Private Communication] before the assessment had started. "*And you, Thea: Use this opportunity to confront some of your self-doubt. This is a trial by fire, granted to you by the circumstances. I have no doubt about your capabilities; it's time for you to see them too.*" His words, internal and profound, were a mix of encouragement and challenge, urging her to embrace the leadership role she had reluctantly accepted and find her self-worth within it.

Flashing a broad grin at his assembled squadmates, Corvus rallied them with a playful yet determined tone. "Let's go all out, shall we? Give them everything we got at every opportunity. Make sure I don't end up regretting this decision. Ooh-rah?"

A robust and spirited "Ooh-rah!" echoed back, igniting smiles across the faces of the squad members, except for Thea. She was still grappling with the gravity of Corvus' parting advice and the weight of leadership now resting on her shoulders.

Sensing her hesitation, Corvus turned to her and prompted, "Well then, Interim Squad Leader, your turn to lead."

Startled, Thea initially responded with a timid "Ah. Right..." But quickly correcting herself, she adopted a more assertive tone, "Alright, Alpha Squad, let's move out. We've got a long distance ahead, and we need to ensure Corvus doesn't get us all killed in the process. So, let's pick up the pace!"

With a newfound determination, she led the squad out of the office building, the rest of the members following her lead, leaving Corvus standing alone, ready to play his final part in the mission...