

Arc 1 - Chapter 74 - Twins

The following minutes for Thea were a blur, her senses overwhelmed. She leaned heavily on the last surviving defensive heavy, who was now more than her protector—he was her only lifeline, half-dragging her through the sweltering trenches that had become an oven.

The Spectre armour, while adept for scouting, was not built for such extreme conditions. It was designed to withstand moderate environmental challenges, providing some resistance to water and cold, but not the extreme heat they now faced. The IgT-compound's fiery onslaught had far exceeded the Spectre's heat threshold, turning the very air around Thea into an invisible enemy that scorched her with every laboured breath.

Her vision was blurred, tears drying out almost as soon as they formed, desperately trying to protect her eyes from the relentless heat. Each breath was a battle, her lungs feeling as if they had been put to the torch. The trench walls blurred past her, the world reduced to a disorienting, suffocating tunnel as she was ushered further into the fiery labyrinth.

As Thea continued to stagger through the trenches with the help of the last heavy, her mind relentlessly replayed the last clear memory she had—the moment Lucas, with a burst of desperate strength, had thrown her to safety. His figure, etched against the backdrop of a fiery apocalypse, remained the last image she had of him and the other brave heavies who had shielded her with their lives.

The realisation hit her hard; without their selfless actions, she would have perished under the first rain of IgT-Shells. There was no doubt in her mind about this reality.

The magnitude of destruction wrought by the IgT-Compound, a concept she had only academically understood from Lt. Jorvik's, at the time an excruciating detailed lecture, was vastly different when experienced firsthand.

The horror of the IgT-Compound's destruction, its capacity to dissolve and incinerate everything in its path, was something she clearly had never fully grasped through words alone. The raw, instinctual fear that had settled in Thea's mind, now that she had experienced the reality of it, was mind numbing.

The knowledge that a mere, singular droplet of the IgT-Compound, not even necessarily propelled by intention but even just by the fickle whims of fate, could have spelled her immediate and violent end was a thought she simply couldn't shake off.

The randomness of it, the lack of control, the sheer inevitability of such an occurrence in the midst of the previous chaos, had left a deep imprint on her psyche.

The tales James had shared about his time in the UHF, sparse as they were, had always painted a vivid picture of the true nature of war.

Thea had *thought* she understood what he meant, her experiences in virtual games giving her a sense of familiarity with conflict. She had navigated countless digital battlefields, facing off against hordes of opponents in the virtual realm.

But she now realised that nothing in those simulated encounters had truly prepared her for the raw, visceral reality of the war she was now experiencing. The war that James had always talked about; *warned* her about.

In the arcade, war was a game—a series of challenges to be overcome with skill and strategy. But the war under the auspices of the Allbright System was something else entirely.

There was no skill that could save her from an indiscriminate bombardment of IgT-Shells that blanketed an entire battlefield. There was no strategy she could employ to evade the compound's fiery vengeance should it even just as much as graze her armour.

Furthermore, this was a war that transcended the traditional notions of planetary conflicts bound by governments and geopolitical complexities, the kind of war that Thea had come to know from the virtual reality of the arcade, on so many levels.

It was a war augmented and intensified exponentially by the Allbright System, a conflict of unimaginable scale and ferocity.

The contrast between the war of her games and the war she was now part of left her reeling, her sense of understanding and her place within it all fundamentally shaken.

It was a feeling akin to the disorientation she had experienced when her Psychic Gate first opened—a profound sense of insignificance and bewilderment, a questioning of her role and purpose in the midst of this vast, System-sanctioned turmoil.

Yet, despite all this, she kept on going.

Supported, pushed on and partially carried by the last remaining defensive heavy, she trudged through the trenches, each step a battle in itself to stay semi-lucid and continue onwards. The covered trenches, once a line of defence, as well as a place to return fire from, had succumbed to the relentless fury of the Ignium-infused rain, their protective plasteel domes now nothing but molten ruins.

Emerging from the initial trench lines and stepping into the underground tunnels beneath the battlefield, Thea and the heavy encountered an unexpected transformation.

In the span of less than an hour since the infantry had advanced onto the ashen battlefield, the UHF's specialised squads had worked wonders. The trench diggers, combat engineers, and fortification experts had collaborated to turn the subterranean world into a network of bunkers and strategically positioned chokepoints, as if anticipating such a turn of events, way ahead of time.

The underground realm was a stark contrast to the inferno above.

Here, amidst the labyrinthine tunnels and reinforced chambers that featured ammunition printers, supply depots and first-aid stations, there was a semblance of order and strategy.

The hustle and bustle of marines and engineers, all working in unison, created a sense of purpose and direction amidst the chaos—something that felt profoundly grounding for Thea's frayed mental state.

The journey through the underground tunnels was nevertheless a disorienting experience for Thea. With each turn and passage, her sense of direction grew more muddled.

She relied entirely on the heavy, who moved with seemingly brisk, purposeful strides, suggesting a certain level of familiarity with the subterranean maze. Thea's trust in her fellow marine's navigation was her only anchor in this labyrinth, hoping that the more experienced Private had undergone some level of orientation about the UHF's underground setups in the past.

Much to her relief, she found herself proven right to trust the heavy once again.

Eventually, their path led them to a bustling med-station, a haven amidst the chaos. The heavy paused briefly at the entrance, engaging in a quick but evidently important exchange with a staff member who clutched a data-pad, likely relaying information about Thea's condition and the urgency of her situation.

Guided forward, Thea was gently ushered onto a field-bed in the med-station.

The environment was a flurry of activity; medics hurried between beds, attending to the myriad wounded with efficiency and speed. The sounds of the med-station, the beeps of machinery, and the voices of medical staff were the last things Thea registered.

As she lay down on the bed, her body, pushed to its utmost limits, finally succumbed to the overwhelming exhaustion and shock. Darkness enveloped her, a merciful respite from the relentless tension and terror she had endured, drawing her into a deep, much-needed unconsciousness.

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As consciousness slowly reclaimed Thea, her senses were abruptly assaulted by the piercing screams of another patient nearby, jolting her back to the grim reality of the med-station.

Her instinctive use of her heightened Perception gave her a quick but comprehensive assessment of her surroundings, confirming she was still under the chaotic battlefield of Nova Tertius' wall, a safe distance from the inferno above.

Gradually opening her eyes, she was immediately met with discomfort.

Her eyes stung fiercely, a sensation that felt like countless grains of sand were scraping against her pupils. Despite this, her vision remained frustratingly blurred, and she could feel the dampness of her cheeks, suggesting a continuous flow of some liquid.

Initially, she reasoned they might be tears, but the sheer volume suggested otherwise.

It dawned on her that in the time she was unconscious, the medical staff must have applied some sort of hydrating or healing solution to her eyes, possibly to counteract the effects of the extreme heat she had endured.

As Thea's vision gradually began to clear through persistent fluttering of her eyelids, the makeshift med-station came into focus.

The hastily excavated chamber, carved beneath the ashen wasteland, revealed an interesting contrast. The walls around her were an amalgamation of vibrant, fertile dirt, seemingly untouched by the devastation above, and sections shored up with prefabricated plasteel and rockcrete.

It was as if she had descended into a different realm, a stark juxtaposition to the apocalyptic surface she had just escaped.

The existence of the med-station itself, though clearly assembled in haste, was also abundantly clear piece of evidence that this was not the UHF's first time implementing such a strategy in the midst of conflict. Not only had the heavy's purposeful gait told Thea that this was more of a standard setup than she might have otherwise assumed, but the sheer organisation within this one med-station alone spoke for itself.

Every inch of space was efficiently utilised, the makeshift nature of the station belying its effectiveness. The beds around her, uniformly arranged in neat rows, were all occupied by similarly wounded marines as well, likely in order to make triage and supply easier on the auxiliary personnel.

The victims of the battlefield's horrors, like Thea, were being tended to with a mix of urgency and precision. Some patients bore the ghastly signs of severe burns, their skin a tapestry of reds and charred black. Others were missing limbs, the stumps neatly bandaged or under treatment, silent testimonies to the ruthless choices the marines and their comrades had to make when faced with the brutal efficiency of the IgT-Compound.

The medics and doctors moved among the beds with a practised ease, while auxiliary staff could be seen briskly stepping into and out of the med-station with various boxes of supplies that the medical professionals required at any given moment.

It was clear that in this underground enclave, a different kind of battle was being waged—not with guns and artillery, but with bandages, medicine, and the unwavering spirit of those who refused to let their fellow marines succumb to their injuries.

As Thea gingerly began to explore her own condition, she quickly discovered that her body was swathed in bandages, the material clinging to her skin with a peculiar stickiness.

Underneath, her skin felt unusually damp, as if she had been submerged in a pool of some viscous substance before being wrapped up. Slightly bewildered, she began to shift her position on the bed, attempting to get a better look at herself.

At that moment, a medic approached her bed with a data-pad in hand.

The medic, wearing a look of composed professionalism amidst the chaos, began to explain her situation. "You've been covered in a skin-regenerative gel, as the heat had practically cooked your skin to the point of nearly falling off your bones," they said, their voice calm and informative, yet their words, strangely and gruesomely detailed.

"It's done its job, so you're free to remove the bandages when you're ready. You might see some scarring, but overall, you are cleared to leave whenever you feel ready or we require your bed, whichever comes first."

Thea's mind briefly lingered on the mention of scars and couldn't help but think of James' disfigured, scar-ridden face. She seriously hoped that this was not her future.

Then, she inquired about her Spectre armour and the rest of her equipment, only to learn that the armour had been irrevocably damaged. "We had to cut you out of it," the medic continued, "The armour was completely melted and fused. Even with the vibroblades, it was a challenge due to the disruptor module inside. Unfortunately, we had to dispose of it entirely. As for the rest of your equipment, we put everything you had on you into storage. Talk to one of the auxiliary staff and they'll take you there."

Feeling a pang of loss for her armour, Thea asked if the medic knew who had brought her to the med-station. The medic shook their head, explaining, "We don't keep that detailed a record of people being brought in. Everything's too hectic. We focus on treating and saving lives as fast as we can." The response made sense to Thea, yet she felt a twinge of gratitude for the unknown heavy who had carried her to safety.

'I'm sure that Lucas will know who that heavy was. It felt like all the defensive heavies knew each other, somehow. Maybe there's a club or something...?' Thea thought to herself, chuckling slightly at the thought of the hulking, intimidating forms of multiple defensive heavies hunched around a tiny desk eating pancakes with tiny forks.

Simultaneously however, she also felt a pang of regret, that Lucas and the rest of the defensive heavies that had tried to get her and Lucas to safety had perished in the way that they did. They never could have anticipated what was going to happen, of course, but Thea couldn't help but feel some serious survivor's guilt.

Without all of the heavies she definitely would not have been able to survive, after all.

As Thea watched the medic's figure disappear amidst the flurry of activity in the bustling med-station, she turned her attention to the task at hand.

She began to carefully peel away the bandages, layer by layer, revealing the skin beneath. She had managed to find a standard UHF uniform in a supply crate nearby, a necessary replacement given the state of her Spectre armour.

To her astonishment, her skin appeared remarkably unblemished, belying the severity of the recent events. She wasn't particularly vain about her appearance, but the thought of bearing scars similar to those James carried wasn't something she was ready to embrace just yet.

She pondered the possible reasons behind James retaining his scars as well, as she took a closer look at her downright pristine skin.

Perhaps the medical advancements of the UHF had significantly progressed since his time, or maybe there were limitations to what even their technology could achieve. Alternatively, James might have chosen to keep his scars for reasons more personal and profound.

Nevertheless, Thea was grateful for the advanced regenerative treatments she had received, sparing her from carrying such physical reminders of her first foray into this harsh reality. She wasn't quite prepared to bear the visible marks of battle, at least not this early in her journey.

As Thea waved over one of the auxiliary staff members that kept rushing in and out of the med-station, she was guided to a small area where her personal effects had been hastily stored. Rifling through the items, she recognized her Icicle, the Throatcutter, and an assortment of grenades—standard gear that she always carried on her Spectre.

However, her heart sank as she realised the Caliburn, her reliable companion through the chaos, was missing. The likelihood was high that it had slipped from her grasp during Lucas' life-saving throw, a small but significant casualty in the grand scheme of their survival.

Thea couldn't help but chide herself internally. '*Losing a Tier 2 weapon... that's not just a blunder, that's a logistical nightmare,*' she thought, recalling Lt. Jorvik's Warfare 101 lecture, which had briefly touched upon the intricate logistics of modern warfare under the Allbright System.

The System had revolutionised the way wars were fought, simplifying many aspects of military logistics. The convenience of equipment and ammunition printers, along with Abilities that could conjure necessities seemingly from nowhere, had largely replaced the traditional, micro-level supply chain management.

Yet, this technological boon came with its own set of complexities. Complexities that Lt. Jorvik had described as “awfully pointed”, as they all seemed to aim towards inciting more desperate and larger fights over less and less particular areas—almost as if the System was trying to create less numerous, yet more pronounced points of conflict.

The UHF, with its vast resources and personnel, often grappled with these broader, more macro-level logistics.

These encompassed strategic allocation of resources, deployment of troops across different theatres of war, and managing the immense supply and demand cycle amplified by the System's capabilities. The loss of a Tier 2 weapon like the Caliburn wasn't just a personal loss for Thea; it was a minute, yet significant, cog in the larger machine of war logistics—one that the UHF meticulously tried to maintain control over, yet often ended up lacking on.

Where before, having all kinds of ammunition types produced, stored and transported, now, it was System Materials that were the main culprit of logistical issues in any given sector. Any piece of equipment that required specific T1 or higher System-Materials, required that *exact* material to be present at the time of printing.

This evolution in logistics marked a significant shift from traditional methods, where the civilian sector predominantly handled resource harvesting, processing, and ammunition production.

Now, these critical aspects were fully integrated into the military operations of the UHF, underscoring the vastly increased strategic importance of controlling and managing System

Materials than simple ammunition and more old-school logistics issues had ever come close to.

That meant that the UHF's military now had to face the daunting task of not only conquering territories to source these rare materials but *also* the intricate process of harvesting, transporting, and safeguarding them on the battlefields themselves.

This intricate logistical puzzle explained why scenes like the devastating IgT-Shell bombardment Thea had just endured were not everyday occurrences on the battlefields of the galactic conflict.

The scarcity and high volatility of materials like Ignium and Tenaxium, coupled with the logistical nightmare of transporting and safely storing them, made such indiscriminate artillery barrages a less common, albeit more impactful, event.

It wasn't just about firing shells; it was about the careful orchestration of resources, from acquisition, over transporting and safeguarding them on the field itself, to deployment; a balancing act that could tip the scales of a battlefield if a single thing were to go wrong.

Now, Thea's Caliburn, on the other hand, was several more magnitudes of problematic in terms of logistical issues.

As the Caliburn required two specific T2 Materials called Alacritum and Ektrikum, printing it in the middle of a T1 battlefield was not an easy task whatsoever. While the UHF's logistics and supply departments made sure that every piece of equipment was theoretically printable, the precious nature of T2 Materials made them vastly more restricted in terms of physical availability on the ground itself.

Typically, re-printing a weapon like the Caliburn would be feasible only at major HQs or heavily fortified forward operating bases, making its loss in the field particularly problematic.

It was a definite lesson she intended on internalising and learning from for the future.

To make matters even worse however, she was very well aware of the fact that, in a real-world scenario, the consequences of losing a T2 weapon on a T1 battlefield could extend far beyond her immediate ability to fight.

An enemy combatant could have potentially retrieved the weapon. Although it was biometrically locked to her and the rest of the UHF marines on the same section of the battlefield, there were many known methods to circumvent such security measures, involving specialised tools, System Abilities, or sufficient time.

These considerations weighed on Thea's mind as she stepped out of the med-station and started navigating the maze-like complexity of the underground tunnels. *'I doubt I'll have to worry about anyone getting their hands on it though, considering the absolute inferno up there, but it's still worth bearing in mind.'*

Determined to reconnect with her squad, or whatever was left of it, Thea's next move was to locate the nearest supply depot. She quickly intercepted another auxiliary staff member, requesting directions.

As she made her way through the underground network, she couldn't shake off a sense of vulnerability.

Devoid of her Spectre armour, she felt exposed, almost bare, despite being clad in the standard UHF uniform. The absence of the armour, which had become a second skin to her over recent days, left her feeling incomplete, as if an integral part of her identity had been stripped away.

This feeling was exacerbated by the fact that her time in the armour had far outweighed her time out of it recently, coma notwithstanding.

As she hurried towards the supply depot, her steps were imbued with an urgency driven not just by the need to regroup with her squad, but also by a desire to regain a sense of security, even if it was likely not going to be a replacement for her Spectre quite yet.

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Upon reaching the supply depot, Thea was immediately drawn to the equipment racks.

Her eyes scanned over the available gear, eventually settling on a set of standard UHF light-armour. It wasn't the sophisticated Spectre armour she was accustomed to, but it would provide a much needed layer of protection in the hostile environment she was expecting to navigate again soon enough.

Her attention then shifted to the weaponry, and a wave of relief washed over her as she spotted a Gram among the assortment.

The realisation dawned on Thea that the Gram had probably become the standard issue model, replacing the older Mjollnir. The Mjollnir had been a favourite among UHF snipers due to its reliability and effectiveness throughout its years of service, so it made sense that its successor would take its place.

This shift suggested that the Gram was now widely available, likely stocked at any supply depot in the field—a definite positive realisation in her eyes. Knowing that she wouldn't have to queue for the specialised supply stations if she wanted to replace her Gram in the future was a pretty sizable discovery.

Thea couldn't help but feel a sense of familiarity as she picked it up, even though it wasn't her personalised weapon. She noted the absence of her custom attachments—the handstop, the IR-laser, and the variable IR-capable scope—which made her own Gram distinct. Despite these omissions however, the weight and balance of the rifle in her hands brought a comforting sense of readiness.

She made a mental note to acquire the missing components at the first opportunity, but for now, this would more than suffice. She had feared she might have to make do with the AR303 or similarly short-medium ranged weaponry, but luckily, this had not been the case.

Clad in the light-armour and with the Gram in hand, Thea felt a renewed sense of purpose.

The gear might have been standard issue, but it was a step towards regaining her lost sense of completeness. With each piece of equipment she secured, Thea felt more prepared to face whatever lay ahead, ready to rejoin her squad and continue the fight, wherever it might take her.

Thea quickly donned and adjusted to her new armour and synced up with the local communications network using her biomarker. Once connected, she accessed the Sovereign Alpha squad comms and transmitted a brief, urgent message, "Thea here. Anyone still alive? Lucas didn't make it."

To her relief, but not without a tinge of sorrow, Corvus's weary voice crackled through almost immediately. "Ha, Thea. If only I could've wagered on your chances of surviving yet another impossible scenario... Listen, it's just you, Karania, and me now. Desmond and Isabella were targeting the anti-armour cannons, using Desmond's drones to get eyes on 'em. They were incredibly effective, but they got caught in the worst of the bombardment. None of the offensive heavy teams made it back."

Corvus's voice carried a mixture of relief and weariness, "I'm glad to hear you're okay. Find Karania in ward 34; she's wrapped up in her usual medic duties. Once you're both set, come join me in command room 11. We've got new orders. No rush, but let's not dawdle—I'm about to lose my mind down here." His last words betrayed an uncharacteristic strain, a hint of underlying distress.

Thea couldn't help but note this subtle change in Corvus's tone.

'Is Corvus claustrophobic? Interesting. I always saw him as this fearless leader, almost too perfect. It's somewhat refreshing to see he's human after all,' she mused internally, allowing a small chuckle to escape before she clicked her comms in acknowledgment.

Making her way to ward 34, asking her fellow marines for directions, Thea was slowly getting back into the swing of things, the horrifying memories of the bombardment receding into the back of her mind as she could finally focus down on another set of orders.

She could practically hear James' words echo in her ears as she mused on the topic.

"Always remember, Missy. Golden Rule #11: 'If you're feeling lost, unsure of what to do, follow your squad leader's orders. Fuck the brass' orders, but always trust your SL.' Your SL will be the most likely person to have your best interest in mind, so keep that rule close to your heart, will ya? Don't go losing your mind out there."

Having spent quite a bit of time with Corvus by now and having overheard his discussions with Karania the very same morning, she couldn't help but once again agree with James' words. When compared to Staff-Sergeant Venn's or Legate Kuan's orders, Corvus' were definitely on a more personal level, more intent on making sure they all made it through, rather than trying to go for the big-ticket wargoes.

Thea's thoughts were still swirling when she reached ward 34. Spotting Karania wasn't hard; her friend was buzzing around the place like a cracked-up transport drone. In a rare moment of stillness, as Karania paused to consult her data-pad, Thea approached.

"Kara! I'm so glad you're—" Her words halted abruptly as Karania shifted, revealing part of her right side. Thea's eyes widened in shock at the sight.

Before she could process the revelation, Karania's voice cut through, bright and buoyant as ever. "Theaaaa! You made it out alive! Again!"

She then noticed Thea's gaze on her arm and, with a wide grin, pulled back her sleeve to fully display her new cybernetic limb. "Look at this, bestie! We're twins now!" she exclaimed, her tone a mixture of pride and excitement...