

Arc 1 - Chapter 86 - Payback

Squeezed into the interior of the SUV, the unit found themselves in a situation bordering on comical, if not for the gravity of their mission.

The military vehicle, ordinarily spacious enough for a squad of six to seven fully equipped Stellar Republic soldiers on patrol, was now straining under the unexpected load of eleven marines from Morin's unit, each laden with their long-term infiltration gear.

Thea, wedged uncomfortably between Isabella, whose dislocated body added to the spatial challenge, and Karania partially underneath her, grappled with the reality of their tight quarters.

The SUV's trunk, already filled with the lifeless bodies of the Stellar Republic patrol they had encountered, could accommodate only a fraction of the backpacks, each ranging between 50 to 100 litres. The remaining packs were haphazardly crammed into every available space within the vehicle's interior, some pressing ominously against Thea, adding to her discomfort.

She could feel the suffocating pressure of the equipment and Isabella's weight. *'Morin better not be intending to make this a long-term road-trip, or I ain't gonna make it. What a way to die for the first time on this assessment: Crushed by our own equipment,'* Thea thought to herself ruefully.

Each breath was a struggle, a fight against the encroaching weight, as she endeavoured not only to protect herself but also to shield Karania, whose lower half was pinned beneath her.

In the chaos of their rapid entry into the SUV, the unit had not given much thought to seating arrangements. Lucas, for instance, found himself sprawled in the rear footwell, his form covered by his Stalwart shield, burdened further by a pile of the unit's heavy backpacks. The cramped conditions were far from ideal, but necessity had dictated their hasty organisation.

Viladia, Moira, and Morin, demonstrating a bit more resourcefulness, had secured their backpacks atop the SUV. Using a few of Viladia's climbing ropes, they had hastily but somewhat effectively tied the packs down. This arrangement was far from secure, but in the urgency of their situation, it was the best they could manage.

As Morin skillfully navigated the vehicle, bringing them closer to the urban outskirts of Nova Tertius, Thea marvelled at his adept driving. It was clear he had been weighing their best route options even while concentrating on the precarious situation they had found themselves in.

Killing the patrol had obviously not been part of their initial infiltration plans, but the existence of the comms equipment inside the SUV had necessitated it. It was undoubtedly going to lead some increased heat on them, however, which was the reason they had to get as far away from the military installation as quickly as possible.

Morin's attention briefly shifted to Crusher, who occupied the coveted shotgun seat. "Crusher, figure out the radio. You only have as much time as we can keep this thing alive, you hear me? Make it quick," Morin directed, his voice carrying the weight of urgency.

Crusher's response was a silent nod, his focus already on the radio, having anticipated the need for his expertise.

Thea was somewhat taken aback by this development. Crusher's role as the communication specialist of Arrow Squad was a revelation to her. His silence thus far had been interpreted as possible muteness, a theory even supported by Viladia and Moira. Yet, Morin's instructions made it clear that Crusher's silence was not indicative of his abilities or importance within the squad.

The realisation that he was their communications expert added a new layer of respect in Thea's eyes for the silent but evidently extremely capable member of Arrow Squad.

*'I **did** wonder who their comms expert was... Not that I had expected it to be him, considering that he doesn't seem to speak much, but they had to have **someone**, after all,'* she silently mused to herself, while focusing her entire body on trying to continue to breathe at a somewhat even rhythm.

In the squad-based structure of the UHF's military, the role of a communications expert was non-negotiable, almost a cardinal rule.

The reasoning behind this was clear and practical: In the field, reliable communication was a lifeline, essential for the receipt and transmission of crucial information including new directives, firing coordinates, alerts, and essential mission details.

The absence of this vital link would render a unit effectively rogue, operating in isolation on the battlefield—an outcome starkly opposed to the UHF's strategic ethos of coordinated, elite-level operations, a strong contrast to other factions that might rely on overwhelming numbers over the strategic finesse that the UHF tried to foster in their marines.

“Communication is key” – this fundamental principle of UHF military doctrine had been thoroughly instilled in them since the initial stages of Basic. This doctrine highlighted the crucial importance of maintaining internal communication and the strategic value of counter-intelligence.

The training primarily focused on safeguarding their own comms units against enemy counterintelligence efforts, including protocols for scrambling and irrevocably destroying their radios. However, this knowledge, when inverted, also provided insights into identifying and exploiting certain vulnerabilities of enemy communication systems as well.

This understanding was particularly relevant for conducting operations like their own, where intercepting and manipulating enemy comms could provide a significant tactical advantage.

Securing a functioning enemy communications unit was a coup of considerable magnitude for their infiltration mission, specifically. In the hands of a deft communications specialist, such a device was a goldmine of strategic opportunities.

It offered more than just the ability to eavesdrop on enemy chatter; it was a window into their operational framework. From identification and order codes to, in a best-case scenario, high-level clearance codes, the intelligence gathered could be transformative.

While the specific applications of these codes might not be immediately clear, possessing them was akin to holding a keyring for unknown doors of the enemy's operations, allowing you to potentially unlock critical advantages in unforeseen circumstances, much like the one they had just navigated with the Stellar Republic patrol.

"Time is against us. Once the patrol's absence is noted, which is not gonna take them long, they'll start piecing things together," he explained, his hand firmly on the accelerator. "We need to reach the outskirts fast. Once there, it might be wise for us to part ways. Sovereign Alpha should take a different route. Our collaboration has been fruitful, but now that we're inside the wall, we have to break off.."

Thea felt a pang of regret at the thought of parting ways with Moira and Viladia already.

In the brief time they had spent together, she had formed a connection with them, one that she felt might extend beyond mere professional collaboration. Considering that this next stretch inside Nova Tertius itself was likely going to be the finale of the assessment for her and the rest of Alpha Squad, the possibility of not crossing paths with them again weighed heavily on her.

However, she understood the necessity of Morin's plan.

Arrow Squad had been an invaluable asset, but the nature of their mission demanded independence now. She made a mental note to herself, *'I'll reach out to Vi... and the Old Man, of course, once I'm on ship duty with the rest of Alpha Squad. I can't let these connections fade like I did with Selene.'*

She reflected on her promise to stay in touch with Selene after the Cube Trial, realising she hadn't pursued that intention as actively as she could have. *'There's always a way to keep in touch, even amidst the chaos of training and missions,'* Thea mused, recognizing the importance of maintaining relationships in a life often dominated by uncertainty and danger.

As the city's outskirts loomed closer, she silently committed to not repeating the same oversight, resolving to make more of an effort to stay connected with those she encountered on her journey going forward.

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Within a mere ten minutes, their SUV had navigated its way to the initial fringes of the urban outskirts. The journey had taken them past the monotonous backdrop of warehouses and the isolated military structures that were scattered along the far side of the vast asphalt highway.

The urban outskirts of Nova Tertius presented a stark contrast to the military installations they had just left behind. The area was a mosaic of residential buildings, ranging from modest six to eight-story apartment complexes to larger, more ornate homes of families. Each structure seemed to possess its own character to a degree, yet shared a similar design ethos, reflecting both the diverse nature of the city's inhabitants as well as the Stellar Republic's attempts at rapid expansion for the city itself.

Shops, cafes, and other typical urban establishments lined the streets, their once colourful facades and neon signs likely having injected a vibrant energy into the landscape during their prime.

Now, however, the stores, streets and apartments were devoid of any such life. The war that had been brought to Nova Tertius' doorsteps had likely forced the entire population in the outskirts of the city to move in, towards the centre, further away from the wall and the encroaching fighting that was happening.

The streets themselves began to narrow as well, meandering in slightly more unpredictable patterns that spoke of a more organic, less planned growth rather than the rigid, strategic layouts of military zones.

As the military SUV navigated these streets, it began to feel increasingly out of place. The vehicle, designed for the broad avenues and open spaces of military installations, now seemed bulky and cumbersome, its utilitarian design a sharp contrast to the civilian vehicles that dotted the sides of the street.

This shift in environment did not go unnoticed by the squad inside the SUV either.

They were all acutely aware of the need to blend in, despite the incongruity of their vehicle.

The crowded streets and close proximity of the buildings offered both advantages and challenges for their mission, providing cover and potential hiding spots, but also increasing the likelihood of drawing unwanted attention.

As if to underscore that part of Thea's observations, they quickly realised that their abrupt entry into Nova Tertius's outskirts had not gone unnoticed.

This became evident when Morin, with a sudden and deft manoeuvre, swerved their SUV into a narrow alleyway squeezed between two looming apartment buildings. His voice was both urgent and resolute as he informed them, "We've got company. Two SUVs are tailing us, about two to three minutes behind. They've been tracking us for the last five-or-so minutes. Sovereign Alpha, it's been an honour. I'll let you off here and lead them away. From here, you'll need to navigate your way into the heart of the city on your own."

The urgency of the situation was palpable, allowing no room for discussion or delay, as much as Thea wanted to protest as she wouldn't even get a chance to give Moira and Viladia a proper goodbye. As Morin brought the vehicle to a jarring halt, everyone in the cramped SUV scrambled to exit, their movements hastened by the pressing need to evade their pursuers.

Arrow Squad members quickly began unloading gear to create room for those like Lucas, who was buried beneath a heap of backpacks and his Stalwart shield in the rear footwell.

Thea watched, a mix of concern and relief in her eyes, as Lucas struggled to extricate himself from his confined position. His grunts and curses filled the air as he worked his way out of the tangle of equipment.

Thea couldn't help but think, *'If we'd encountered any trouble along the way, Lucas would've been helpless, trapped in there. He'd have been completely vulnerable.'*

This thought lingered in her mind as they all stepped out into the alley, grabbing any nearby packs of equipment—regardless of who it belonged to from their squad—and hiding behind whatever they could.

Thea's fleeting interaction with Viladia and Moira was limited to a brief, yet meaningful nod, as the two of them swiftly reentered the SUV. The vehicle accelerated away with an urgency that resonated through the alley, propelled rapidly by its anti-grav mechanism and Morin's intent to drag the enemy as far away from Sovereign Alpha as quickly as possible.

As the SUV disappeared from sight, Thea experienced a twinge of loss, a feeling swiftly replaced by determination, as Corvus uttered a decisive command. "Let's support Arrow Squad. We have an ideal chance to ambush the SUVs in pursuit. Our true assessment begins *now*. So we might as well start it off with a bang, don't you think?" he declared with a mischievous grind.

Isabella, unfazed by the cramped conditions of their recent ride, responded with her characteristic fervour, her face alight with a manic grin. "Sounds good, boss!"

Thea found herself embracing the immediacy of their new task as well, a welcome diversion from her brief sense of loss. She quickly began searching for her bag amidst the haphazardly scattered equipment. The urgency of their disembarkation had left their belongings in disarray, with everyone's gear jumbled together.

Locating her backpack, however, proved surprisingly straightforward.

Among the pile, one bag stood out with a distinctive marker—a clear indication it was hers. It also just so happened to be the exact thing Thea was looking for: Her Caliburn.

As Thea carefully unlatched her T2 heavy railgun from her backpack, the familiar heft of the weapon in her hands brought a sense of steadiness to her unsettled emotions. With a confident pat on her formidable weapon, she looked towards Corvus and asked, ready for action, "I'm ready, Corvus. Where do you want me?"

Corvus glanced at her, a look of realisation dawning on his face.

"Huh," he murmured, eyeing both Thea and the Caliburn. "You know, I completely slipped on remembering you had that. I was all set to devise an elaborate ambush, bait and all. But perhaps with the Caliburn in play, we can keep things straightforward, just... shoot them, right? No need for intricate setups?"

Thea responded with a nonchalant shrug.

While the intricacies of complex strategic ambushes were beyond her training, she had a clear understanding of her own role. She was not versed in the detailed tactics typically reserved for squad leaders and strategists like Corvus.

"I'm fairly certain their SUVs won't match up to the resilience of those anti-armour cannons on the wall, so shooting them should do the trick just fine," she replied, her tone laced with a hint of uncertainty yet underscored by confidence in her shooting skills. "I know my job: To take aim and ensure each shot counts. I'm just a bit worried about whether or not I should use the Caliburn. It's not exactly a silent weapon, after all."

Corvus detailed their strategy outlining the plan for the impending ambush. "I don't foresee a problem with reinforcements. Once we're in the city, we'll have plenty of hiding spots, and remember, they're the ones searching for us. Not the other way around," he said, setting the tone for their approach.

"Here's the plan," Corvus continued, his tone turning more tactical. "Isabella, you take a position across the alley. Your job is to open fire as soon as they turn into our alley. Given our less-than-subtle approach so far, they're likely to be on Arrow Squad's tail. I want you to grab their attention immediately, especially if anyone makes it out of those vehicles alive."

He shifted his focus to Lucas, "Lucas, stay close to Thea. We need your protection in case things escalate."

Addressing Desmond and Karania, he added, "You two, along with me, will be our backup from behind cover. Be ready to intervene if necessary."

Corvus then turned to Thea, his tone a mix of assurance and instruction, "Thea, your role is straightforward but crucial. Use the Caliburn to its full potential and take out those vehicles. Don't worry about the specifics—just shoot as you normally do. Lucas will be there for your protection, so you can fully focus on your shots."

Finally, addressing the entire squad, Corvus concluded with an encouraging grin, "Let's kick off the *real* assessment on a high note. Sovereign Alpha, it's time to show what we're made of!"

The rest of the squad responded with a collective "ooh-rah," a sound that always seemed to visibly lift Isabella's spirits as she flashed a confident grin. With only a minute to set up their ambush based on Morin's estimate, time was of the essence.

Thea, without hesitation, sprinted to a nearby nook adjacent to a metal backdoor of an apartment building. This spot offered her both partial cover and an unobstructed view of the entire alley, ideal for her role in the ambush.

Acting quickly and efficiently, Thea dropped to the ground, going prone.

She positioned her Caliburn carefully, ensuring it was grav-locked securely in place, and then signalled to Lucas to take his position beside her. "I'm all set," she informed him, her voice focused. "Just keep about half a metre's distance from me, and whatever you do, stay clear of the front and sides of the barrel when I fire. The last thing we need is an accident; I don't know how bad it would be, considering your armour, but the manual was pretty clear about this."

Thea, having experienced the sheer force of the Caliburn's discharge multiple times by now, fully understood why the manual emphasised maintaining a safe distance from the barrel during firing so much.

Each time the heavy railgun was fired, it unleashed a devastating shockwave, powerful enough to resonate through the immediate vicinity and cause some serious harm. The impact of the shockwave was indiscriminate; it didn't matter how robust the armour was, the blast was still likely to cause substantial harm to anyone unlucky enough to be in its path.

Positioned behind the weapon, Thea was largely protected from the full intensity of the shockwave it unleashed. Yet, despite this relative safety, the experience was far from comfortable. With each shot, it felt as if her very organs were being jostled, a forceful pressure that seemed intent on pushing them out of her body.

This sensation, unsettling as it was, also served as a stark reminder of the weapon's raw power. *'To be on the receiving end of that... I'd rather not imagine what that feels like,'* she thought, a shiver running through her at the mere idea. *'No, definitely not something I'd want to experience or subject anyone else to. Unless they're freaks, of course.'*

In their chosen positions, ready for the impending ambush, Sovereign Alpha remained motionless, each member acutely aware of their critical role.

Lucas, ever the protector, had strategically positioned his Stalwart shield just half a metre away from Thea. Partially extended from their hiding spot, it was poised to offer rapid cover if the situation demanded. Thea, lying prone, had a clear line of sight down the alleyway, thanks to her positioning approximately seventy metres from its entrance.

Isabella, a mere ten metres further ahead than Thea, was stationed across the alley, effectively flanking the anticipated path of their targets. Corvus, Desmond, and Karania, about ten metres behind Isabella and directly opposite Thea, were equally prepared.

While Corvus and Karania had their weapons at the ready, Desmond was engaging with his last functional drone, providing a crucial aerial perspective for early detection of their pursuers.

He had ended up having to rapidly disassemble two of his three stored up drones when they had decided to commandeer the SUV, as there had been not enough space for the more delicate parts of his drones to go without being smushed together or broken somehow.

Luckily, the Forge allowed him to disassemble drones, just as it could assemble them—and a lot faster too. So at least he hadn't lost any resources, merely a lot of time, that, hopefully, they would have in spades as they tried to navigate through the urban expanse over the next coming days and weeks.

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The anticipation in the air was palpable as they waited, their eyes fixed on the alley's entrance. Thea's fingers rested lightly on the Caliburn, her focus razor-sharp through the scope.

The moment Desmond's subtle hand signal indicated the enemy's approach, Thea felt her senses heighten. The world around her seemed to shrink, distilled to the singular focal point of her scope. Every sense honed in on the distant end of the alley, where the first signs of their pursuers would appear.

The quiet of the alley was suddenly pierced by the low hum of anti-grav engines.

The first Stellar Republic SUV glided into view, its sleek military design marked by sharp angles and a robust frame built for urban combat. Its dark grey body was interspersed with blackened armour plates, giving it an intimidating presence. As it turned into the alley, Thea could see the glint of reinforced windows designed to withstand most gunfire.

It was immediately apparent that these SUV's were of a more robust make than the one the patrol had used. They were likely meant as a first-response unit for any potential problems inside the urban districts, where larger military vehicles would have a harder time getting to.

Almost in tandem, the second SUV followed, mirroring the first in its ominous design. It was in this precise moment that Isabella sprang into action, her Devastation roaring to life with a thunderous cacophony of bullets.

Thea, with practised precision, zeroed in on her target—the engine block of the first SUV.

She steadied her breathing, her finger gently squeezing the trigger. A deafening blast erupted, the noise reverberating from the apartment walls on either side as the Caliburn discharged its slug, the payload leaving a fluorescent trail of ionised air behind it as it tore through the space between Thea and her target in an instant.

The slug struck the first SUV's front with a violence that was almost surreal. Thea's intention to disable the engine was surpassed by the sheer destructive force of the impact.

The SUV, caught in the ferocious grip of the Caliburn's power, crumpled as if it had hit an invisible plasteel barrier at supersonic speed.

The explosion that followed was not just a burst of flame and smoke; it was an eruption of sheer kinetic energy that transformed the SUV into a mangled wreck. The front half of the vehicle folded in upon itself, metal shrieking as it bent and tore under the tremendous force.

The explosion echoed down the alley, a shockwave of sound and fury that rattled windows and shook loose debris from the surrounding buildings.

Thea, watching through her scope, felt a moment of disbelieving awe at the devastating effect of her shot. The SUV had been transformed into a twisted sculpture of metal. It was her first time firing on a target that wasn't what she'd considered a "hard" target, such as heavy weapon positions, anti-armour cannons or stealth generators multiple kilometres away, and the results were staggering.

Around her, the alley was shrouded in a cloud of dust and debris, the air filled with the acrid scent of burning metal and the residual energy of the railgun's discharge. The remaining SUV, struggling to navigate through the thick dust, made a desperate attempt to veer away.

However, its efforts were futile.

It crashed into the wreckage of the first vehicle, its momentum abruptly halted as it collided with the twisted, partially molten metal sculpture.

Moments later, it became the target of Isabella's relentless Devastation. High-calibre rounds tore through its frame, shredding metal and glass with ruthless efficiency. Lucas, not missing a beat, joined in with his Havoc, unleashing a series of explosive rounds that turned the vehicle into a fiery inferno.

In mere moments, the alleyway, once filled with the cacophony of gunfire and explosions, fell back into an eerie silence. The squad, following Corvus' command, ceased their assault.

They quickly set about scavenging anything useful from the wreckage, all the while aware of the urgency to move deeper into the city proper, away from the outskirts that bordered the Stellar Republic's military installations.

The ambush, successful as it had been, had undoubtedly drawn attention to their location.

Corvus then turned to address Thea, raising his voice to be heard over the ringing in their ears left by the Caliburn's discharge. "Thea, that gun of yours needs a leash from here on out. It's too much for city limits. I don't want you using it unless I explicitly say so, alright? We have to be mindful of over-penetration and stray shots. We can't afford civilian casualties or unnecessary destruction. That's not what this assessment is about, and we'll definitely get penalised for it." His words were firm, underscored by the seriousness of their mission and the potential risks posed by such a powerful weapon in an urban environment.

Thea, while slightly sad that she likely wouldn't get much more use out of her T2 weapon during the assessment, understood very well where Corvus was coming from.

Her own ears were ringing from the shockwave as well and likely would be for a few minutes at the very least. Shooting the Caliburn in between walls like this was definitely not something she would repeat, if in any way avoidable.

And while she doubted she'd miss any shots, considering her Psychic Powers made sure that she knew if she was about to, overpenetration was definitely something that could be possible with a weapon like the Caliburn.

'Best to avoid that, for sure,' she thought, as she gave an affirming thumbs-up to Corvus, wanting to avoid speaking while her ears were still ringing.

After raking the bolt and releasing the pent-up heat of the Caliburn in a miniature fireball, Thea secured it back to the side of her backpack and got herself ready to move on. The rest of Alpha Squad, Karania, Isabella and Desmond, specifically, had meanwhile approached the wrecks of the leftover SUVs, to see if there was anything worth taking.

It was unlikely that anything had survived the encounter with the Caliburn, but the second SUV might still offer some kind of supplies, ammunition or intel for them to use during their trek through the city...